

Wednesday Research Seminar

12:30-2pm, CON 7.03

2025-26

The International Development Department's Wednesday Research Seminar meets 2-3 times a month to showcase cutting-edge, multidisciplinary research by visiting scholars and LSE researchers. A light lunch is served – please bring your own drink. All welcome, especially PhD students!

Seminar convenors : Lydia Assouad & Jean-Paul Faguet

AUTUMN TERM 2025

1 Oct Nathan Lane (LSE), “Measuring industrial policy: A text-based approach”

Since the 18th century, policymakers have debated the merits of industrial policy (IP). Yet, economists lack basic facts about its use due to measurement challenges. We propose a new approach to IP measurement based on information contained in policy text. We show how off-the-shelf supervised machine learning tools can be used to categorize industrial policies at scale. Using this approach, we validate long-standing concerns with earlier measurement approaches that conflate IP with other types of policy. We apply our methodology to a global database of commercial policy descriptions and provide a first look at IP use at the country, industry, and year levels (2010-2022). The new data on IP suggest that i) IP is on the rise; ii) modern IP tends to use subsidies and export promotion measures as opposed to tariffs; iii) rich countries heavily dominate IP use; iv) IP tends to target sectors with an established comparative advantage, particularly in high-income countries.

15 Oct Mahreen Mahmud (Exeter), “We’re All in This Together: Addressing Poverty in Village Economies” [CON 7.05]

Most anti-poverty programs target only the poorest households, but this is costly and often error prone. We ask whether a universal program delivered to all households in a community can improve welfare. Using a clustered randomized controlled trial with 4,000 randomly sampled households from 335 villages in rural Uganda, we study a universal livelihoods program that provided agricultural and livestock inputs, training, and support for health, savings, and entrepreneurship to all households. Households in treated villages experienced significant gains after three years: monthly income increased by USD 40 PPP (26%), wealth by USD 389 PPP (31%), and monthly consumption by USD 59 PPP (10%).

Impacts are positive throughout the distribution, with no evidence of concentration among better-off households, suggesting that the program improved welfare for all. The benefit–cost ratio exceeds 350%, demonstrating that a universal program can be a highly effective approach to alleviating rural poverty.

29 Oct Ken Shadlen (LSE), “Contesting Commodification: The Political Economy of ‘Generic’ Medicines in Latin America”

This paper analyses the political economy of “generic” pharmaceutical markets, i.e. markets in medicines for drugs where patents have expired and are therefore open to multiple suppliers. Markets do not emerge spontaneously, but rather they need to be constructed; and, once created, generic markets operate differently, because of the different ways that they are regulated. Generic markets can be compared along 2 dimensions: “scientific equivalency” and “commercial equivalency.” Together, the two forms of equivalency point toward commodification: when multiple versions of drugs based on the same molecule are both scientifically and commercially equivalent, they are treated as being the same regardless of producer. Yet commodification is subject to political conflict, as the measures that define countries’ positions along the two dimensions of equivalency mobilize actors with distinct interests and resources. Scientific equivalency, a new feature of drug regulation introduced in the US and Europe in the late 20th Century, is encouraged by many external actors, and often desired by local health officials, but opposed by local pharmaceutical firms as a new and costly barrier to entry. Commercial equivalency, also supported by public health officials, can disrupt long-standing practices of pharmaceutical firms, doctors, and pharmacists. This paper analyses approaches to constructing competition -- and the ensuing conflicts over commodification – in Latin America’s 3 largest economies: Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico. I present the overall differences in approaches, and how the countries’ distinct approaches have changed over three decades, from the mid-1990s to the present.

12 Nov Marie Beigelman (King’s), “From Slavery to Freedom”

How violence during slavery might have affected formerly enslaved families' trajectories post emancipation remains an empirically unanswered question. I exploit local variation in enslaved workers' exposure to coercion intensity in two French Caribbean islands: Guadeloupe and Martinique. Using county-level data on enslaved mortality prior to abolition, I document that enslavement conditions were heavily influenced by planters' economic incentives and significantly deteriorated on sugarcane plantations compared to coffee, following heightened competition in the sugar market. Using newly digitized administrative records, I then track outcomes for all formerly enslaved families with children born within five years post-abolition. While exposure to sugarcane is linked to

higher potential earnings and skilled positions for fathers post-emancipation, I find that fathers exposed to the harshest slavery conditions have a negative effect on their children's survival, relative to families with less coerced or absent fathers. I find suggestive evidence that this could be driven by worse enslavement conditions leading to more violent men, to which mothers may have responded through strategic matching decisions with less coerced partners. Taken together, my findings point to substantial inequality among descendants of formerly enslaved individuals, driven by paternal response to extreme coercion.

26 Nov BookKang Seol (LSE), “A ‘Godsend’ Y2K Bug: Is It Misallocation or Market Access That Stifles Firm Growth?” [CON 7.05]

This paper investigates the drivers of sustained firm growth in developing countries by leveraging the unique market access expansion experienced by Indian IT firms during the Y2K period. I examine whether misallocation or market access constraints primarily stifled firm growth, and how firms achieved sustained growth. Employing semantic-based digitization using genAI, I extract firm-level data from Indian IT company directories from the 2000s. I find that 1) significant misallocation existed in the Indian IT sector prior to the Y2K event, and that 2) firms exposed to the Y2K-induced market access expansion demonstrated substantial "catch-up" in productivity. Many firms maintained their improved productivity levels even after the Y2K shock had abruptly ended, suggesting a persistent shift to a higher productivity frontier. I explore potential mechanisms behind this sustained growth, including overcoming sunk costs of partner acquisition, achieving economies of scale, and integrating into global value chains. These findings suggest that market access expansion, albeit temporary, could trigger sustainable industrial development in emerging economies.

3 Dec Tim Besley (LSE), “Theorising Neoliberalism” [CON 7.05]

There is increasing interest among economists in the role of narratives in shaping beliefs about policy. But what determines which narratives are attractive and persist? A case in point is belief in some of the core ideas that travel under the title of “neoliberalism”. We can think of this as both a *causal* narrative, describing how the world works, and as a *moral* narrative, describing how the world should be. The presentation will discuss a project that tries to conceptualize neoliberal narratives and offers a framework to explain why they continue to influence policy-thinking. We discuss how a combination of motivated reasoning by voters and strategic political incentives are important. The presentation will also discuss the potential for looking at the evolution of neoliberal narratives using large language models to analyze text data from manifestos and policy speeches.

10 Dec Aliz Tóth (LSE), “Identity & Emigration: Migration Decisions and Political Consequences in Ranked Ethnic Systems”

This project investigates how ethnic identity shapes labor migration decisions and their political consequences in ranked ethnic systems, where ethnicity and class hierarchies overlap. We argue that disadvantaged groups, facing systemic barriers in domestic labor markets and lower skill attainment, perceive overseas migration—particularly to destinations such as the Gulf that offer few rights to migrants—as a more viable path to economic mobility than internal migration. In contrast, advantaged groups with access to higher skills are more likely to pursue opportunities in destinations such as North America and Europe that offer more rights to migrants. We test these claims using seven rounds of the Kerala Migration Survey alongside a new survey experiment in Kerala, India, the world’s highest out-migration region. Our design examines how discrimination influences migration preferences, perceived feasibility, and political attitudes among migrants and their families. By combining observational data, survey experiments, and qualitative interviews, we highlight how migration trajectories differ across ethnic hierarchies and how these choices shape democratic attitudes, participation, and support for globalization in sending societies.

WINTER TERM 2026

21 Jan Jamie Wong (Princeton), “What Is Our Nation but a Machine That Is Learning?": Venture Capitalism and Governance in Contemporary China”

[CON 7.05]

Drawing on fieldwork with venture capital (VC) investors, startups, and their government partners in China, this talk examines how venture capitalism intersects with Chinese governance in the business-to-government (B2G) market—specifically, how startup companies partner with local governments to fulfill central state mandates. By reflecting on how participants see themselves as nodes within a larger algorithmic assemblage to generate policy, the talk considers the Chinese state’s latest iteration of adaptive and experimental governance. It also asks how the impact and influence of AI technologies—such as machine learning—may extend beyond domain-specific applications, and how sociotechnical imaginaries shaped by these technologies confer scientific authority on Chinese governance models.

18 Feb Nelson Ruiz-Guarín (Essex), “Not Every Cloud has a Silver Lining: Climate-Related Natural Hazards and Campaign Contributions in Colombia”

In contexts of local state capture, can negative economic shocks reduce elite influence in politics? We focus on the impact of natural hazards, which have been shown to have significant negative economic effects and which, therefore, might be capable of limiting local state capture. Where natural hazards undermine the economic interests of local elites, this may reduce the resources that elites can commit to campaign contributions through which they exert political influence. Alternatively, campaign income might increase in response to natural hazards if local elite capture extends to increases in government transfers that follow the occurrence of hazards. We explore these expectations using a difference-in-difference design in Colombia, where climate- and weather-related natural hazards such as flooding and landslides are increasingly frequent and widespread. Our results show that natural hazards significantly increase campaign contributions for mayoral candidates in municipal elections. Moreover, this increase is driven by personal contributions from candidates and their direct relatives. Further analysis supports two possible and compatible explanations for this: an increase in economic capacity through the capture of transfers and an increase in incentives to gain control over discretionary spending.

4 Mar Eleonora Guarnieri (Bristol), Male Dominance and Cultural Extinction (joint with Ana Tur-Prats)

Why do some cultures and their associated values go extinct while others prevail? In this paper, we uncover a relationship between a society’s deep-rooted gender norms and its risk of cultural extinction, proxied by language loss: languages from more gender-equal societies face a higher likelihood of extinction compared to those from male-dominant societies. We measure language status and male-dominance using the Ethnologue and the Male Dominance Index, respectively, for a global sample of 4,750 languages. The negative relationship between male dominance and extinction holds after accounting for fundamental determinants of economic development and societal collapse at the language-group level such as geography, climate variability, conflict exposure, and historical factors, as well as after the inclusion of country fixed effects. We then leverage European colonization as a natural experiment to investigate how inter-group dynamics shape cultural extinction. In a dyadic framework, we find that Indigenous societies with more gender-equal norms than their colonizers are significantly more vulnerable to cultural extinction. Cultural distance in gender norms is a stronger predictor of extinction than linguistic distance, distance in pre-colonial institutions, or the characteristics of either the colonizer or the Indigenous group.

11 Mar Felipe Gonzalez (Queen Mary), “Transfers and Political Support in Times of Economic Crisis”

Despite economic crises, incumbents often retain electoral support. We study Chile’s 1970-1973 infant nutrition program under Salvador Allende’s left-wing government and attribute this electoral resilience to the political returns of transfers during crises. The program provided milk to preschoolers, reducing infant mortality and bolstering electoral support despite hyperinflation and economic hardship. Using administrative data, surveys, and variation in crisis severity, we show transfers had greater political returns in areas most affected by the crisis. Survey evidence suggests voters swayed by transfers did not blame the government for the crisis. Our findings highlight how transfers and crisis perceptions sustain electoral popularity.

18 Mar Henrique Menezes (Federal University of Paraíba), “Global Health Partnerships and the Quest for Equitable Pharmaceutical Innovation after COVID-19”

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed deep structural vulnerabilities in the global pharmaceutical innovation and manufacturing system, particularly the high concentration of vaccine R&D and production in a limited number of countries. Although vaccines were developed and scaled up at an unprecedented speed, limited manufacturing capacity in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) led to unequal access and severe global inequities. This experience broadened and intensified debates on the need to geographically diversify pharmaceutical production and technological capabilities. As a result, the pandemic renewed momentum for international cooperation, technology transfer, and capacity-building initiatives aimed at creating more resilient, equitable, and globally distributed health innovation systems.

The research aims to analyze global health partnerships aimed at the dissemination of technological capacities for pharmaceutical research, development, and manufacturing in developing countries, with a focus on vaccines. These emerging mechanisms are expected to complement the traditional pharmaceutical innovation system by addressing existing gaps in access to pharmaceutical technologies fostering the creation of a sustainable network of firms in the developing world with the capacity to produce such technologies, and promoting the development and availability of technologies targeting neglected diseases. These new forms of partnership are expected to rely on technical collaboration among developing countries (e.g., the BRICS Vaccine Research Centre), cooperation between developed and developing countries (e.g., the G20 Coalition), as well as engagement with international organizations (e.g., the WHO mRNA Technology Transfer Hub, PAHO, and IVI) to support the development of specific pharmaceutical products and enhance technical capabilities for research, development, and manufacturing.

1 April Niharika Singh (LSE), “Worker Collective Action and Public Service Delivery: Experimental Evidence from India”

Can grassroots collective action improve public service delivery in low-capacity states? We partner with an informal union to randomize the establishment of new, local branches demanding public workfare benefits for women across rural Bihar. Treatment areas see a substantial increase in the formation of local worker groups and engagement in costly collective action as measured by dues payments and protest attendance. This increased activity leads to significantly higher workfare employment and income. Importantly, we find no evidence of negative spillovers on other groups, suggesting that the observed gains reflect existing rationing of work.