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To cite this article: John H. S. Aberg & Derick Becker (2019): The world is more than a stage: foreign policy, development and spatial performativity in Ethiopia, *Territory, Politics, Governance*, DOI: [10.1080/21622671.2019.1675531](https://doi.org/10.1080/21622671.2019.1675531)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/21622671.2019.1675531>



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Published online: 15 Nov 2019.



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# The world is more than a stage: foreign policy, development and spatial performativity in Ethiopia

John H. S. Aberg <sup>a</sup> and Derick Becker<sup>b</sup>

## ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to reconcile performative theorizing, which captures the place of systems of thought on foreign policy practice, and broader sociological approaches that link networks and institutions across space, especially as they relate to the global economy. Once developed, the theory, which is termed here 'spatial performativity', is applied to recent efforts to promote industrialization through the development of special economic zones in Ethiopia. In doing so, attention is drawn to a burgeoning area of African and Chinese foreign policy and economic cooperation.

## KEYWORDS

performativity; state space; New Structural Economics; global value chains; China–Africa; industrialization; foreign policy; special economic zones


**HISTORY** Received 20 April 2018; in revised form 22 September 2019

## INTRODUCTION

Ethiopia is Africa's fastest growing economy and is attracting the interest of scholars, investors and leaders alike. The Ethiopian government has launched an ambitious industrialization programme that is a central part of its Growth and Transformation Plans (GTP I and II) initiated in 2010 with the aim of transforming Ethiopia to a middle-income country by 2025. To this end, the government envisions the establishment of approximately twenty special economic zones (SEZs) or industrial parks, both state and privately owned, that will attract investment and set the foundation for the development of the country's manufacturing base (EIC, 2018). Albeit from a low level, since 2010, the inflow of foreign direct investment (FDI) has been increasing rapidly and Ethiopia is now the largest FDI recipient in East Africa (UNCTAD, 2017, p. 223). The question that animates this study is less the causes of Ethiopia's economic growth, but how to understand the change in development policies that has occurred.

Ethiopia's development policy reflects the agency of a political elite that seeks to maximize economic growth and development while bolstering the regime (Gadzala, 2015; Gebresenbet, 2014; Hodzi, 2018). Yet, it is also shaped by material changes in the global economy and the

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foreign policies of other states. China, in particular, reflects both of these latter points; it has become a formidable economic power while its foreign policy seeks to promote the outward expansion of its companies as it climbs global value chains (GVCs). It further relates to institutional and ideational factors as Ethiopia stands out for its unique position in the global developmental financial–intellectual nexus, which is palpable in its relation with China, which has emerged as a key actor in international development, both bilaterally and multilaterally. Apart from commanding national development banks, Chinese ‘financial diplomats’ operate central positions within the Bretton Woods institutions and the United Nations.

Ethiopia’s development policies have largely been crafted in line with a new body of thought disseminated from the World Bank called New Structural Economics (NSE) (Lin, 2011a, 2012a, 2012b). Ethiopia serves as a testing ground for the intellectual ideas of its former chief economist, Justin Lin, who developed NSE and has taken an active interest in the country’s development. Much of this engagement focuses on policy advice that emphasizes infrastructure investments and the construction of SEZs to attract foreign light manufacturing firms, which should spur Ethiopia’s industrialization process. More than just providing loans, the World Bank plays an intellectual role that connects economic thinking to pragmatic foreign policy issues (Samoff, 1992; see also Mohan, 1994), with the NSE framing here not only the nature of Ethiopia’s under/development but also its solutions. At the same time, Chinese manufacturing interests and Ethiopia’s value to them further reflect broad changes in the global economy and China’s upward GVC mobility (Gereffi, 2014; Zhu & Pickles, 2014).

Hence, Ethiopia’s development policy is a socio-material process that involves ideas, knowledge, institutions and structural factors, yet this process needs to be performed or, rather, put into practice by actors. Ideas alone provide symbolic power, but agents need to apply ideas to rearrange or organize the material and social world. Given the prominent role of the World Bank as a provider of intellectual policy guidance, and given the increasing attention by scholars to systems of thought in behaviour, we find merit (and limits) in performative approaches. Michel Callon’s notion of performativity and the related concept of *agencement* is instructive here, especially how it conceptually seeks to link knowledge/expertise and the material organization to which it refers (i.e., markets) ‘as a process whereby sociotechnical arrangements are enacted’ (Callon, 2007, p. 330). This notion fits well with Lefebvre’s (1991) spatial theory and the argument that space is produced as a material, mental and social process. The relationship between material space – the space of the material organization and practices of the global economy – and the ideational that explicates space by providing a perspective on how to understand the world, and how to make a way forward within it, is of particular relevance.

Although mobile factors of production, global financial centres, GVCs and integrated world society networks all erode the formerly close-fitting connection between territory, wealth and power (Agnew, 1994; Babones & Aberg, 2019), we cannot escape the basic spatial fact that goods still need to be produced somewhere, in some location, and that economic activities must be performed by someone. Spatial theorizing, as such, employs a range of analytical tools that function across many levels of analysis akin to macro- and micro-territorial strategies and tactics (Karrholm, 2007, p. 441). Spatial theorizing is explicitly trans-level, recognizing diverse social domains as relatively autonomous but inherently integrated. As such, the framework we propose can and should be applied across a range of levels, but any one research project will, by necessity, be narrower in scope (Leander, 2009). This is particularly relevant for our project where issues of ethnicity and class have a bearing on domestic-level processes relevant to Ethiopia’s economic development and questions concerning who produces and where. Our scope, however, is more macro and systemic: we wish to focus on state-level processes and actors while also assessing the place of larger systemic changes in the global economy, particularly those that stem from China’s ongoing engagement with Africa.

The paper is structured as follows. It starts the development of *spatial performativity* and makes a first test of its theoretical relevance by applying it to make sense of Ethiopia's development policy. We recognize that the theory is still very much under development, but it nonetheless provides a first cut to make good sense of Ethiopia's development policy – its industrialization programme and the establishment of SEZs to attract FDIs in light manufacturing.

## PERFORMATIVITY AND SPACE: TOWARD A SPATIAL PERFORMATIVITY

Scholars of performativity in international relations, such as Weber (1998) and Campbell (1992), seek to explicate a state's foreign policies as acts of 'performance' of ideas, norms and systems of knowledge. In doing so, they wish to show how identity and even sovereignty itself are not static or uniform but must in fact be enacted or 'performed' by actors. Sovereignty, for example, is not simply a taken-for-granted principle universally applied, but is rather performed in varying contexts by various actors; it is subject to change and development. Yet, such 'performances' rely heavily on discourse and symbolic power for analytical rigour; they are too far removed from the real practices of states and those who act in their name. Hence, we are inclined to agree with the critics of this performativity approach (Laffey, 2000; see also Ringmar 2016) who rightly note the significant downplaying of social processes and the basic materiality of the world – or what Henri Lefebvre would criticize as a 'priority of language over space' (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 36).

The critical political economy literature and the 'sociological turn' in International Political Economy (IPE) has, broadly speaking, demonstrated the value of incorporating ideas, norms, and systems of knowledge (i.e., symbolic power) as valuable explanatory tools (Blyth, 2002, 2013; MacKenzie, Muniesa, & Siu Lucia, 2008). Yet, this work similarly tends to downplay the material, the social networks, and the institutional processes that provide the mechanisms for ideational diffusion and change (Babones & Aberg 2019; Bieler & Morton, 2008; Carroll & Carson, 2003; van Apeldoorn & de Graaff 2014). Even a modest prioritization of the mental space over the physical misses the inherently phenomenological interaction between representations of space, physical space and social space in the production of the world. This is particularly important for our case as the global economy is not alone causal; rather, such material processes are 'read' and understood by actors who, rather than simply 'perform' their instantiation, are maintained or reorganized in practice. China's outward orientation in economic foreign policy and the World Bank's intellectual role in making sense of the global economy for developing states must be understood as bound with the material world they seek to redefine and explain for policy-makers. The effect is to delimit the realms of the possible, the ideal and the unrealistic for actors, networks and the processes that sustain them. However, we should not do so by prioritizing or ignoring the material *and* social nature of the world. Performativity has a certain analytical utility, no doubt. But we find greater utility in spatial theories of practice that explicitly link the social, material and ideational in a single theory of the production of space. Spatial theorizing explicitly recognizes that actors very much live in a world of their own making that represents its brute materiality as well as the place of knowledge in 'representing' that world in a way that allows it to be transformed or maintained by actors' 'spatial practices' or, what we have chosen to term – in order to seek unity – *spatial performativity*.

Lefebvre (1979) has declared that the era of capitalism in which we find ourselves is defined by an 'explosion of spaces'. As we look across the map of Ethiopia, we are reminded of this simple truism. Gambella province in the west of the country is all but privatized now, and its populations of Anuak people have been removed from the land to make space for commercial farming and growth, as they are corralled into new villages for their own paths to progress (Human Rights Watch, 2012). In like manner, SEZs emerge and spiral outward from the capital, Addis Ababa, with the hope that light manufacturing will provide the impetus for national economic

development. However, in Lefebvre's thinking, such spaces – or the space of the state itself – is far more than the terrain upon which we act; it is, as many constructivists will recognize, both the product and the producer of social processes. Space is where we exist, but it is also how we exist, in part, by delineating space as either public or private, for example, for cooking and for sleeping, for manufacturing, for learning, for memorializing, for playing, etc. Space reflects both our utilitarian engagement and ideas of it.

Lefebvre (1991, p. 11) sought to unify what he saw as an unnecessary delineation of space into discrete domains of enquiry; he sought a unified theory of the material, the mental and the social. He was also prescient in his thinking on the state, for he clearly recognized that the state, as part of a national–territorial space, is increasingly becoming part of a global space – one that specifically invokes the role of the global economic system in its transformation (Brenner & Elden, 2009). This transformation is both systemic and very much micro; it is symbolic – reflecting our ideas on the ideals of trade and economic development – but such abstract symbols inherent in a discourse or theory of development must be enacted in practice, in changed laws, flows of capital and movements of people as labour.

Mohan and Power's (2008) recent and wide-ranging analysis of China's re-engagement with Africa, though distinct from our approach here, similarly advocated for placing the policy process in its proper socio-material context; economic processes, party politics and civil society forces in Africa and China are deftly linked to explain recent developments in China–Africa foreign policies. Such holistic approaches to African politics, though decidedly outside of orthodox political science, are not entirely new. Indeed, Bayart's (2009) study of the African state is explicitly social, material, global and local, as is Chalfin's (2010) study of the way the global economic institutions shape the development of policies and practices in a globalizing world. Hameiri and Jones (2016, p. 7) further emphasize that states 'are institutional ensembles that reflect and embed historically evolving social power relations', and under globalization they 'are increasingly fragmented, decentralized and internationalized'. Such approaches are, however, rare and even the recent calls for a turn to 'practice' (Adler & Pouliot, 2011) in the study of foreign policy veer more toward existing performativity approaches that seem unaware of our material existence as they privilege discursive performance (for an eloquent critique of the 'practice turn', see Ringmar, 2014).

It is here where we see the *first* added utility of our syncretic spatial performativity approach: it embeds actors and ideas in both local *and* global material conditions, linkages and processes that are mutually instantiated as spatially performative acts of practice congruent across levels. The sudden interest in African labour, minerals and land reflect actors' experiences with changes in the global economy that have made land more valuable, dislocated the location of cheap labour, and increased the value of existing treaties and trade arrangements that have made investments in certain African locations more attractive. Equally true, however, is the fact that not all states are interested; interested parties have their own domestic economic and political reasons for engaging the continent. Each state is caught up in its own web of relationships that inform policy and decision-making processes.

The *second* value added of our spatial approach is our incorporation of knowledge as representational space. Specifically, we are interested in exploring how the economic theory of NSE represents the space of the economy as a site of both problems and solutions. Like Callon's (1984) concept of problematization, representational space is where knowledge outlines a range of actors, resources and technologies required to conceive and remake the space of the Ethiopian economy. That is, it does so by organizing the problem and solutions into who matters, what matters and who needs to be involved, for example, experts, policy-makers or owners of capital.

Knowledge must be put into practice in the production of the world that it seeks to explain, thereby removing it as an independent variable (cf. Goldstein & Keohane, 1993). Knowledge organizes social activity by setting boundaries and possibilities of action, but it does not necessarily

set all goals or interests; economies, as social activities – with agents, corporations and infrastructures – produce diverse interests and capabilities that give rise to numerous practical problems that, in turn, call on the production of more knowledge. The production and use of knowledge is deeply intertwined with the social behaviour that it, at times, seeks to explain (Mitchell, 2002). The social and ontological separation of the object and its theoretical representation is set aside in *spatial performativity* through socio-technical statements of the world that are implicated in enacting the world. That is, knowledge makes it possible to act by explaining how the world is, why it is and what to do as a result.

NSE, as knowledge, then represents the economic space of the state as having specific problems and potential solutions; it provides a logic to policy formation by defining boundaries of social claims that can be made through, for example, budgets, the privatization of resources, the prioritization of resources and the ranking of competing claims of individuals and organizations. However, its effects are specifically spatial and material: it delineates both the material space of the state and its relations to other spaces within the state and the global economy while also reorganizing social relations within this space. No one form of knowledge is, however, so total as to exclude other representational practices, such as gender or ethnicity (Tache & Oba, 2009; Tejani & Milberg, 2016), which can and do retain explanatory power on some levels but not others.

This point on the trans-level nature of our approach is worth exploring for a moment as it has a bearing on the boundary and scope conditions of our case. Whatever the utility of such a trans-level approach, in practice, any research project will be narrower or broader in scope, encompassing the local or simply acknowledging it but setting it aside in favour of systemic and macro-analysis. For example, the theory of NSE places considerable emphasis on infrastructure spending in its representations of development and the economy. However, to build such infrastructure there must be the material and intellectual resources at hand along with other interested and capable agents to provide capital and manpower. In the case of Ethiopia, however, one also finds that domestic ethnic representations are present in practice; they affect recruitment of labour and who must move as space is set aside for privatization, development and the building of infrastructure (Adugna, 2011; Becker & Wittmeyer, 2013; Lavers 2012; Tache & Oba, 2009). Race, gender and ethnicity will undoubtedly shape local micro- and meso-level labour practices even while systemic processes explain the existence of factories themselves (Ngai, 2004).

There are, as such, multiple representational practices at work in the production of space. What is important is that our theoretical logic operate similarly regardless of our particular level or site of analysis. It is precisely because a theory of spatial performativity can incorporate such local practices within an explanation of the broader transformation of the state and international systemic processes that we seek to apply it here in our study of NSE and Ethiopia's development policy. However, the scope of our project does not presently address the lived experiences at a considerably more micro-level. Rather, we focus on NSE as representational of both the domestic Ethiopian economy and its place in the global economy. We seek to understand this representational space and how it interprets changes in the material organization of the global economy while also pushing policy-makers to interpret and reorganize the Ethiopian economy through it.

Our project is very much a product of theorizing, and is as such placed on a foundation of previous scholarly work, relating to the relevant literature of the field of study. In order to theorize, as Swedberg (2014, p. 169) puts it:

You ... need to know some social theory and be able to handle it well. You may, for example, need to take a concept from one theory and combine it with a concept from another theory. You may want to eliminate some part of a theory and replace it with a new idea of your own, and so on.

Hence, we review, problematize, and critically evaluate the existing literature in order to draw out conceptual pieces and put them to work in new ways. More specifically, we deploy two argument heuristics: we make an assumption and reconceptualize (Abbott, 2004, pp. 110–136). First, we introduce the spatial assumption to theories of performativity. Second, we reconceptualize theories of performativity by emphasizing the trans-level nature of spatiality and how actors and ideas are embedded in both local *and* global material conditions, institutions, linkages and processes. We also incorporate knowledge or systems of thought through the notion of representational space.

Our theoretical perspective proves its utility by being used to construct a case-specific analytical narrative. If theories ‘fail to accomplish the pragmatic explanatory goals for which they were crafted, they can be discarded – not for being *false*, but for being *useless*’ (Jackson, 2011, p. 143; emphasis added). This resonates with Büthe (2002, p. 488) who similarly suggests that the validity of analytical narratives should not be measured as true or untrue but rather as ‘plausible’ or not. Moreover:

The empirical application of a model is more about *calibrating the model* than about falsifying it; the appropriate response to a *discrepancy* between the model and the data is either to *update the model* or to adduce situationally specific reasons why the observed outcome in that case was not what the model ideal-typically envisions. (Jackson, 2011, p. 147; emphasis added)

In many ways, our project can be viewed as a response to the discrepancy between mainstream performative theorizing and how we observe the world, which led us to theorize spatial performativity. And, of course, it is our conviction that spatial performativity is useful and that the case of Ethiopia’s development policy showcases its utility. The following attempts to demonstrate that so is the case.

## FITTING THE TERRAIN: NSE AND THE REPRESENTATIONAL SPACE OF ETHIOPIA IN THE GLOBAL ECONOMY

Trends in the global economy indicate notable shifts in its processes and modes of integration associated with the broad processes of globalization. The ‘rising tide’ metaphor of globalization proponents (similarly invoked by opponents) has characteristically engendered ‘the rise of the rest’ reply and its related ‘South–South cooperation’. (OECD, 2010; UNCTAD, 2010). Along with the old narrative of Asian Tigers comes the more recent ‘Africa Rising’ discourse, which is replacing the previously grim image of the continent with a more optimistic outlook against the background of several fast-growing economies (The Economist, 2011a, 2011b, 2013; Swaniker, 2013; for a critical perspective, see Taylor, 2016).

Bernaysian sloganeering aside, the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) have managed to acquire ‘well-organized domestic supply bases and they have moved up the value chain to incorporate key input suppliers, as well as pre-production (design, R&D [research and development] and purchasing) and post-production (logistics, marketing and branding) services’ (Gereffi, 2014, p. 15). This is a process where China stands out, and the ‘steeply rising costs of land, regulatory compliance, and especially labour (including both wages and benefits) in China’s coastal export manufacturing centres have begun to erode these centres’ cost advantage’ (Dinh, Palmade, Chandra, & Cossar, 2012, p. 4). It was in relation to this dynamic that Lin famously estimated that up to 85 million jobs would be made available globally in labour-intensive industries as China moves up the GVC and relocates its light manufacturing to countries with cheaper production costs (Lin, 2011b). Therefore, the current restructuring of cost advantages in light manufacturing is said to offer opportunities for African countries to enter the GVC, increase private investment and create productive jobs (Dinh et al., 2012). The World Bank, under Lin’s intellectual leadership, actively promoted NSE as the relevant policy framework for

African countries to seize this opportunity by explicitly invoking China's development experience, in particular infrastructure investments and the use of SEZs to attract investments in light manufacturing (Dinh et al., 2012; Lin, 2011a, 2012a, 2012b; Lin & Wang, 2015).

Outside of NSE, Ethiopia and Africa are nestled in a range of institutional arrangements that facilitate Chinese–African economic ties, especially a conducive institutional landscape consisting of duty- and quota-free exports enjoyed by African and least developed countries in the American and European markets through the Africa Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) and the Everything But Arms (EBA) initiative. Hence, the deepening of Chinese–African ties and South–South cooperation partly depends on incentives for investment provided by core Western states and the institutional arrangement they developed and promoted. However, such arrangements and incentives are closely linked with systems of thought that seek to explicate the world as much as they guide politicians to implement market friendly policies. In the case of Ethiopia, NSE figures as the concrete system of thought promoted as a policy framework designed to guide Ethiopia's development process. Apart from capturing the global economic changes associated with China's rise, NSE provides a distinct 'problematization' of space.

What constitutes a 'problem' can either stem from the practical experience of living in the world and/or from systems of thought that help explain the world and what is wrong with it. What interests us most here is how a system of thought, in this instance NSE, explains the world, notes a problem with it and elucidates a solution to it. The question that NSE attempts to answer is fundamental, straightforward and old. It concerns the very nature of the development problem: How can and do poor countries develop? (Lin, 2012b). In the past, this question resulted in answers that could be placed on a continuum from the ahistorical to the deeply historical. Modernization theorists stood at one pole and Marxist scholars at the other; one proposed a neutral view to how all states develop where the other saw one state's immiseration as inexplicably tied to the wealth of others; one called for 'good' policy, where the other called for structural change to the global economy. The debate has never truly been settled, but the question has been posed anew by NSE from within the World Bank.

Like many such holistic theories before it, NSE makes its argument temporal but also uniquely spatial. At the centre of NSE lies an emphasis on light manufacturing as a starting point for structural transformation and economic development. NSE consists of three core pillars that echo modernization theory. First, an economy's *factor endowment* is endogenously determined and differs depending on the stage of development, which has implications for the optimal industrial structure at a given point of economic development. Second, stages of economic development shall be viewed as parts of a gradual process spanning along a *continuum* from 'a low income agrarian economy to a high-income post-industrialized economy', and not described in bifurcated terms like 'developing countries' versus 'industrialized countries'. Third, while the market is recognized as the 'basic mechanism for effective resource allocation', the state is simultaneously imperative, mainly as a *facilitator* that should play an 'active role' in assisting and coordinating industrial upgrading by providing infrastructure (both 'soft' and 'hard' infrastructure) (Lin, 2012a, pp. 14–15). The active facilitating role of the state suggested by NSE should not be confused with the 'big push' perspective that advocates a more central and direct role of the state in the resource allocation and industrialization process. According to Lin, such interventions are *comparative advantage-defying* and stand in contrast to the *comparative advantage-following* approach of the NSE (see the debate in Lin & Chang, 2009). From the perspective of NSE, light manufacturing is the logical first step out of a low-income agrarian economy. That this would not happen via an invisible hand means that specific policies would need to be enacted to facilitate and bring about this structural transformation.

What stands out here is the transhistorical a priori assumptions of factor endowment. While there is certainly justification in broad statements about the structural differences between highly industrialized countries in Europe and agricultural economies in Africa, a country's factor



endowment is also relational. That is, as Lin's writings, his case studies and the actions of the Chinese and Ethiopian governments make clear, broader global economic conditions and economic transformations alter the relevant value of a given state's factor endowment; it does not exist a priori. As was noted above, even broader multilateral economic treaties can increase, and thus potentially decrease, the value of focusing on trade and economic investments in a given state. The dearth of infrastructure to bring goods to markets can also affect the relative value of endowments. Thus, whatever a priori assumptions are made, they require a host of actions and entanglements to function as understood within NSE. They must be made active in practice via government action and the formation of investment relationships, which occur in the context of GVC governance and production network dynamics (Neilson, Pritchard, & Yeung, 2014).

As conceived by Michel Callon, 'problematization' does not simply provide an answer to the development question. It also envisions a particular constellation of actors who define their identities and interests relative to each other and in a manner that is explicable from within a specific body of knowledge (Callon, 1984). According to NSE, the state should focus on removing 'key constraints' (poor trade logistics, infrastructure bottlenecks, lack of skills, etc.) by implementing 'selective' development policies that 'narrow down' the reform agenda and make it more manageable. The state should provide investments incentives, such as tax exemptions, and in particular, as inspired by the Chinese development experience, it should focus on critical infrastructure and the construction of SEZs for light manufacturing (Dinh et al., 2012; Lin, 2012a; Lin & Wang, 2015).

The NSE thus produces a particular image of the state that is clearly outward looking and export oriented, even as it focuses inwardly on transformation. The focus on the particular factor endowments of a given state still necessitates that states get the policies right; the market does function according to some logic, but states may misunderstand this logic and craft poor policies that hinder development. States must then actively focus on the 'right' set of policies linked to their particular factor endowment and their specific infrastructure needs, with an eye to developing the state for the present and future needs of the global economy. If African states consider this advice, according to NSE, they will attract FDIs and seize the opportunities of China's upward GVC mobility and the ongoing redistribution of cost advantages in light manufacturing.

However, China complicates the neat theoretical arrangement offered by NSE. Even when putting aside the strong ties between business and government in China, the push to invest abroad is as much a domestic concern within China as a useful foreign policy tool. Within the 'broad strategic contours' set by the CCP leadership, Chinese foreign policies are increasingly fragmented with many diverse foreign policy actors involved in their own 'inter-scalar contestation' reflecting diverse interests and purposes (Hameiri & Jones 2016, p. 72). The linkages required indeed foster greater Chinese economic influence in the region, and more broadly, China's role in shaping what South-South cooperation looks like, yet this is done through a diverse range of actors. Chinese development banks and funds have come to play important roles in providing development capital, with a strong emphasis on reducing infrastructural bottlenecks (Chen, 2013; Lin & Wang, 2015). These financial entities are working together with the Chinese government and together with traditional multilateral donors as they collaborate with African governments. Yet, there is no self-evident link between Chinese or multilateral development capital and Ethiopia or between Ethiopia and foreign light manufacturing firms. There might be strong structural inducements but not structural inevitability. For economic opportunities to materialize, they have to be performed and made to do so. The problematization of development within NSE, by identifying and empowering a set of actors and logics through which the actors should operate, is indispensable to the various network constellations and relationships set to bring about industrialization in Ethiopia. Such a system of knowledge must be made to fit local circumstances; it requires an actor with existing, if at times opposed, interests and distinct social processes.

Under the long leadership of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) and the late Prime Minister, Meles Zenawi, Ethiopia has been inspired by Chinese and East Asian development experiences – a legacy that continues to thrive under current Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed. The common purpose that unites the Ethiopian political elite is a strong sense of national mission, a sense of urgency to develop the country and erase the 'national shame' of poverty (Cheru, 2016). In fact, development is securitized, and the developmental discourse of the Ethiopian government frames poverty as an existential threat (Gebresenbet, 2014). At the core, we find the conviction that the country must embark on a *new* path towards industrialization to realize the telos of national development, especially one that moves toward attracting FDI (see the interview with former Ethiopian President Mulatu Teshome in Abiye & Fikade, 2013).

This has given rise to a push to orient better the Ethiopian state within the global economy in line with the representational space conceived by NSE and by learning from the Chinese and the wider East Asian development experience. In 2010, Ethiopia launched its first Growth and Transformation Plan (GTP I), and, in 2015, the second plan (GTP II) was set in motion. Ethiopia aims to become a low middle-income country by 2025, and the government envisions the establishment of approximately twenty SEZs throughout the country, both state and privately owned (EIC, 2018). As is stated in the main text of the GTP II, industrial parks are 'necessary' to reach 'Ethiopia's goal of becoming Africa's light manufacturing hub' (Ethiopian National Planning Commission, 2016, p. 143). With a population exceeding 100 million, Ethiopia is the second-most populous country in Africa, and apart from having a population with extremely low salary levels, Ethiopia stands out for its comparative advantage in five particular light-manufacturing sectors: leather, apparel, wood, metal and agribusiness (Dinh et al., 2012).

Without a test ground that figures as the spatial laboratory for NSE the promise of light manufacturing to kick start growth and development that the theory envisions would never materialize. This, in fact, invests the Ethiopian elite with agency (as much as it sparks internal political struggles for control over the economic processes). Although other African states are ready to cut the links that tie Ethiopia to a burgeoning network of stakeholders and replace it as the next example that fills the 'Africa Rising' discourse with substance, the competitive dynamic does not prevent certain policy ownership and agency. The fit between particular constellations of actors and processes is manifest in the spatial practices of these actors in commanding material changes to the Ethiopian economy and in policy changes to produce an investment climate as envisioned in NSE. Thus, through the performative lens, NSE's problematization of economic development makes it possible to conceive of new networks of actors that can and eventually do come together to engender material changes in the economy and the physical space of the state.

## SPECIAL ECONOMIC ZONES AND DEVELOPMENT: FROM REPRESENTATION TO TRANSFORMATION

The high-level Chinese support for investment promotion through the establishment of SEZs across Africa has been reiterated at the Ministerial Conferences of the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) since its creation in 2000. At the third FOCAC Ministerial Conference in 2006, former Chinese President Hu Jintao declared that China would establish between three and five SEZs in Africa, out of which one, the privately run Eastern Industrial Zone, was established in Ethiopia in 2007. The establishment of the government-run Bole Lemi Industrial Zone followed in 2012, co-financed by the World Bank (UNDP, 2015). In 2016, the Hawassa industrial park was inaugurated, and in 2017, the Kombolcha and Mekelle industrial parks were inaugurated while another six SEZs are under construction. The China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation (CCECC) serves as the main contractor for the construction of the industrial parks (EIC, 2018). So far, textile, garment and shoe manufacturers from China, Turkey

and several other countries have established production in Ethiopian SEZs. Retail chains such as Tesco, Walmart and H&M have begun sourcing their goods from Ethiopia. Much like an earlier era of unspooling production into piecemeal webs across oceans, the current economic processes rest on the active concatenation of interests and ideas.

*Who* speaks and *from where* one speaks is as important as *what* is spoken. To recognize fully the importance of this seemingly obvious point, however, requires recognizing that social processes exist within material ones. While social networks and processes matter, they alone cannot tell us much unless we link such processes to both institutions of authority and material resources. NSE, as a system of knowledge, further harmonizes actors and interests that control powerful assets, offer institutional economic legitimacy, and decision-making control. The close association of key institutions in the global economy, the World Bank, the Chinese government and the Ethiopian government is thus not a priori but must be made and produced by individuals who see such an association.

In the prologue of his book *The Quest for Prosperity: How Developing Economies Can Take Off* (2012), Lin outlines what it meant to occupy the commanding heights of knowledge production within the World Bank:

Being asked to serve presented an extraordinary opportunity and was a sign of changing times. For the first time since the World Bank was created in 1944, a national from a developing country was being invited to serve as its chief economist, *guide* its intellectual leadership, and *shape* the economic research agenda of the institution. To meet the challenges of development, the institution had to be an *agent of change*. To be effective in this role it must *combine its finance with ideas and knowledge*. (Lin, 2012b, p. x, emphasis added)

This power to influence, guide and shape development ideas and policy was to a significant extent directed toward Africa, and Ethiopia in particular. Together with a growing number of Chinese financial diplomats who operate central positions within the Bretton Woods institutions and the United Nations, such as Li Yong, Director General of the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), the mission is to ‘bring the manufacturing industry to the African continent’ (Li, 2014, p. 4). In his keynote presentation at the first UNIDO forum on strategies and instruments for inclusive and sustainable industrial development (ISID) in June 2014, Lin outlined the Growth Identification and Facilitation Framework (GIFF) as an effective methodology for targeting ‘latent comparative advantage based on the endowment structure of the economy and its level of development’. Lin bases GIFF on NSE and its viability is tellingly demonstrated by the ‘excellent example’ of Ethiopia (UNIDO, 2014, p. 13), which serves as one of three pilot countries in UNIDO’s Programme for Country Partnership (PCP).

The first study Lin commissioned as Chief Economist of the World Bank, *Light Manufacturing in Africa* (Dinh et al., 2012), was explicitly based on NSE and used Ethiopia as a case study. Lin, who served as advisor to both Zenawi and Hailemariam, officially released the study in Ethiopia and urged that it be used as a ‘guide’ for the transformation of Ethiopia’s industrial structure (World Bank, 2012). Zenawi later visited factories and industrialists in the Pearl River Delta and invited Chinese manufacturers to establish production in Ethiopia, couching the appeal for investment around Ethiopia’s relative factor endowment and the potential for light manufacturing, such as shoe making.

The production of space offers a decidedly non-determinist perspective on network configurations, one that embraces messy real-world contingency while still taking account of the concrete materialities that limit *and* expand the scope of choice. By way of example, Helen Hai – UNIDO Goodwill Ambassador, chief executive officer (CEO) of the Made in Africa Initiative, former Executive Member of Huajian Shoe Company, and advisor to several African leaders – provides a telling account in an interview with the Ethiopian newspaper, *The Reporter*.

One way of attracting investment is by creating quick and successful examples. I think the case of Huajian is worth mentioning. This happened in just about two years. The reason I am doing what I am doing now is that I was deeply touched by the willingness of [Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn] and his desire to attract FDI in order to create more jobs and increase exports. Once, I was travelling with him on a plane and that gave me an opportunity to understand that he is more than willing to attract foreign investments to Ethiopia even more than his predecessor. (Fikade, 2014)

The quick and successful example of Huajian Shoe Company to establish production in Ethiopia that Hai mentions came into being through contingent events that illustrate an important empirical facet – the need for political seduction to ‘lock in’ and convince actors to accept the roles proposed for them (Callon, 1984). Such ‘locking in’, of course, requires the active participation of key individuals to engender relationships to produce a given end. This is, as such, an active social process of ‘tying practices together’ (Jackson 2004, p. 286), and one of many.

In July 2014, Lin led a group of Chinese industrialists from the Chinese regions of Fujian and Zhejiang, as well as from Hong Kong and Taiwan, to examine the business environment and the possibilities for investment in Ethiopia, Rwanda and Senegal. The nature of the networking that took place is elucidated in travel chronicles, documented by China’s National School of Development (NSD), Peking University, where Lin is Honorary Dean:

The majority of the Chinese delegation was made up of business leaders from textiles, garments and shoe-making. During the trip, the delegation met with various heads of state, visited special economic zones, listened to reports on the investment environment ... had in-depth discussions on the situation with local Chinese Embassy Economic Counsellors, negotiated partnership possibilities with international buyers and witnessed the signing of investment agreements between two of the delegation members and African governments. (NSD News, 2014)

In Ethiopia, Lin was officially honoured for his work and awarded with a commemorative silver medal by former Prime Minister Hailemariam for his contribution to the Ethiopian economy, further strengthening their ties and displaying Lin’s indispensability to Ethiopia’s development programme (NSD News, 2014).

As is becoming clear, whatever the seemingly neutral focus on certain factor endowments within NSE, such endowments only become productive, even potentially so, when understood as such and when capable actors can facilitate its productive organization. Neither the World Bank and investors, nor Chinese and Ethiopia’s politicians are working with a blank slate but rather with what is ready to hand. In this sense Ethiopia also offers numerous other facilitating institutions as part of its role as the conference and headquarters capital of Africa. Ethiopia enjoys political network centrality and the capacity to organize networking opportunities. This provides greater access to relevant stakeholders and increases opportunities to strengthen the links with a wide variety of actors. For example, the two-day international forum, Investing in Africa Forum, which was held in Addis Ababa on 30 June–1 July 2015, is but one of several multi-stakeholder events that gather many influential entities under the same roof. Representatives from the World Bank, UNIDO, the Chinese government, Chinese development banks and the Ethiopian government were all assembled in a collaborative effort ‘to promote accelerated and responsible investment and investment partnerships in African countries, both from China and elsewhere as well as within Africa, particularly for the light manufacturing sector’ (World Bank, 2015).

Such forums, though obvious sites of networking, as one might expect, are gatherings with a specific intent organized around a specific agenda with select individuals in attendance. The forum is part of the social process whereby roles are enacted and concretized. The current conference also served a dual purpose of providing some legitimacy to the ideas of NSE and Ethiopia as an

exemplar. The linkages between NSE, Ethiopia, China, the UN, the World Bank and economic development were woven into a coherent nexus (see also UNIDO, 2014).

At these forums, Ethiopian state officials perform the role of diplomatic campaigning activists ready to promote their country's opportunities. For instance, at UNIDO's second ISID forum in November 2014, Ethiopian State Minister for Industry Mebrahtu Meles advocated for Ethiopia's investment opportunities in the manufacturing sector. Meles outlined Ethiopia's factor endowment and its priority sectors for investment, which were similar to what was outlined in the World Bank's *Light Manufacturing in Africa* study (Dinh et al., 2012). Meles further highlighted the role of the Investment Board of Ethiopia's Investment Commission and the Industrial Zones Development Corporation, which are specific bureaucratic agencies that handle investments in Ethiopia's SEZs. Apart from investments in soft infrastructure, such as the establishment of vocational training centres and expansion of universities, Meles also emphasized Ethiopia's 'massive investments' in hard infrastructure, such as investments in energy infrastructure (dam construction) and critical transport infrastructure (highways and railways) crucial for enhancing power capacity and for linking landlocked Ethiopia to global markets. Meles further offered an impressive set of investment incentives. In sum, his performance demonstrates a government dedicated 'to provide hand holding support to the private sector' for the economic reorganization of the Ethiopian state (Meles, 2014).

For Ethiopian officials, SEZs are seen as imperative devices for attracting investment and binding actors and doing so over the long term (UNIDO, 2014, p. 31). The SEZ serves as a perfect material and spatial transformation as envisioned within the representational space of NSE by literally delineating space where specific economic activities can occur, where infrastructure is organized in favour of these activities, and where resources – material and manpower – are funnelled to produce an economic outcome. These SEZs are also set apart from the domestic institutional landscape and function as 'one-stop shops' where government services are streamlined and located within the zone (Addis Fortune, 2018). That this occurs under the positive aegis of a suite of policies and government acts to bring about changes in regulations, tax structures, labour laws, and infrastructure in this specific place should not detract us from the role played by NSE nor the real social processes that engendered these SEZs and the economic activities produced therein.

## CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this paper was to understand the change in Ethiopia's development policy, and to this end we sought to develop a model of *spatial performativity*. We started with a basic premise: economic material organization (domestic and global), systems of knowledge, overlapping treaty structures, and social networks do not stand alone but must be put into practice. Focusing on practices allows researchers to capture not just the ongoing production and reproduction of a given social system but how and why it changes as it does. Similarly, we sought to explicate these processes as neither strictly local nor systemic. Indeed, Ethiopia's factor endowment and the varied yet often overlapping trade treaties obtain their particular value here in conjunction with changes in the global economy, particularly China's GVC mobility. But so too is there a role for knowledge in guiding actors policy choices. Here the intellectual ideas of Lin, who took an active interest in Ethiopia's development while serving as Chief Economist of the World Bank, plays a significant role. NSE is representational of both the domestic Ethiopian economy and its place in the global economy. It provides a specific interpretation of the changes in the material organization of the global economy while also pushing policy-makers to interpret and reorganize the economy through it. As a result, it pushed the Ethiopian state towards infrastructure investments and construction of SEZs for light manufacturing. Through these specific instances of domestic and foreign policy development and the crystallization of disparate interests as forms of spatio-

performativity, Ethiopia has become enmeshed in global production networks and is presently redrawing the map, so to speak, for capital accumulation and growth. Whether it will succeed in becoming a middle-income country by 2025 remains to be seen.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to Michael Strange, Paul Cammack, Erik Ringmar, Peter Baehr and the two anonymous reviewers for insightful comments on earlier drafts.

## DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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