Gordon White and Development Studies

An Appreciation

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1 Introduction

This short essay is not in any sense a fresh contribution to academic thinking based on Gordon White's published work in the field of development studies. Rather, its purpose is to draw attention to the wider intellectual and practical significance of Gordon's work and the relationship between the two. It is organised as follows. First, it summarises some aspects of Gordon White's contribution to development studies. Second, it outlines some of the more enduring concepts and approaches that Gordon developed in the course of his research. Third, it moves on to demonstrate some of the practical applications of his ideas and their policy relevance.

2 Influences

A hallmark of Gordon's approach to research was his ability to build on a strong disciplinary foundation in political science as a basis for his forays into development studies, while at the same time retaining a deep specialist knowledge of one developing country. The energy and excitement he exuded in exploring new avenues of scholarly enquiry was infectious. He was quick to respond to and engage with new concepts in the political science literature. Gordon's skill lay not just in engaging with new ideas but in reinterpreting their potential relevance to development studies and using them as signposts for prospective research projects. At times, some of these ideas would seem questionable or even suspect, but he would provide them with a fresh gloss or direction and their creative potential would gradually become apparent. Gordon would tenaciously defend new avenues of thinking, but accept and listen to counter-arguments with an open mind.

Solitary endeavour was rarely Gordon's preferred approach to research. Much as he enjoyed reading and writing alone, a great deal of his work was in collaboration with others, as is readily apparent from his impressive list of publications. Many scholars in Britain, Canada, China and the United States worked with Gordon on joint projects which he had gestated. For younger researchers this was an important learning process, as it exposed them to a critically inquisitive approach, one that was theoretically grounded but cognisant of the value of solid empirical research. Gordon was fastidious

in acknowledging the contribution of co-authors in books and publications, even if their contribution had been relatively modest. This gave younger scholars useful exposure and contributed to the development of their own academic careers.

Gordon's influence on scholarly activity was not restricted to his academic research and publications. Colleagues and students alike were struck by his strong commitment to graduate teaching to which he devoted serious time and effort. He was an inspiration to students new to the politics and political economy of development. Gordon was also supervisor to many Ph.D students, many of whom have gone on to become prominent academics in their own right. Towards the end of his life Gordon often lamented that he did not have enough new doctoral students to supervise, since he was convinced of the fresh and valuable insights that can arise from sustained field exposure.

3 Ideas

Gordon was most comfortable when engaging in intellectual debate and critically assessing the value of new ideas and concepts. His critical disposition was always underpinned by a pragmatic streak, even if he was scathing about the ways in which some concepts were applied in development studies. As the essays in this Bulletin amply demonstrate, Gordon was fundamentally preoccupied with the relationship between human agency and institutional design. This is perhaps best captured by the following questions: how do conscious social actors organise around and collectively express shared political and class interests, and how do institutions respond and adapt to such organized interests in ways that are politically expedient and developmentally significant? There were four main concepts that Gordon found useful in seeking answers to these questions in his work in the 1990s: civil society, social capital, synergy, and institutional design.

3.1 Civil society

Gordon responded positively to the contemporary revival of the idea of civil society and its newer derivatives, social capital and synergy. His response was invariably measured and pragmatic. He would read widely to ascertain the varied intellectual roots of social science concepts as a basis for determining their academic viability and utility in guiding applied research. In his writing Gordon's approach would be to render concepts intelligible and analytically useful within the ambit of development studies. Unlike the tendency of some scholars to abjure concepts that have attained some degree of popular currency because they are seen as crude and academically debased, Gordon preferred to engage, refine and reinterpret, as a means of integrating new ideas into wider frameworks of enquiry.

Civil society entered the development studies lexicon in the early 1990s and has since assumed major importance in the policy discourse of aid donors. Gordon was quick to assess the relevance and potential applications of the concept, and subjected it to careful scrutiny and analysis.[1] Gordon's conceptual pragmatism was evident in several of his writings, encapsulated in the notion that civil society could be defined as an 'intermediate realm situated between the state on the one side and the basic building blocks of society on the other (individuals, families, and firms), populated by social organizations that are separate, and enjoy some autonomy from the state, and are formed voluntarily by members of society to protect or extend their interests or values' (White *et al.* 1996:3). Gordon recognised the limits of a sociological definition shorn of normative political intent, but he wanted an interpretation of the concept that would be widely understood and provide an entry point for empirical research. Far from acceding to a non-Marxist, pluralist approach, in which all groups and associations are considered to have benign and legitimate claims on the public sphere, he was acutely aware of the fact that civil society was inherently contradictory and inhabited by opposed social and class forces, and that its character and trajectory were fundamentally shaped by state action.

It was this perspective that underpinned his work on civil society in China, where it had been considered by many scholars to be either irrelevant or completely absorbed by an all pervasive state. Gordon, in

[1] This was very much evident in his article published in *Democratization* on the use and application of the concept of civil society. See White 1994.

association with two other China specialists, authored a seminal book on this theme, in which they examined the rise of new forms of state–society relations in contemporary China.[2] By means of careful empirical investigation they were able to demonstrate how associational life in China is intimately shaped and circumscribed by the state, both through direct political control and managed economic liberalisation. In the process they were able to question conventional wisdom concerning the rise of civil society in the West, where it was closely associated with capitalist transformation and the carving out of an independent public sphere by an ascendant bourgeoisie. This experience also sets China apart from other developing countries and raises important qualifications about the capacity of civil society associations to perform the democratising role frequently ascribed to them in the literature.

3.2 Social capital

A second major concept that has attained widespread acceptance in the development parlance of the 1990s is that of social capital. This concept, which is used by Robert Putnam and others to refer to social relationships grounded in structures of voluntary association, norms of reciprocity and cooperation, and attitudes of social trust and respect, was judged by Gordon to have analytical value, even if it had shortcomings in the way that it was applied in the development studies literature. According to Putnam (1993), effective developmental performance is closely associated with the accretion of social capital exhibited in norms of trust and reciprocity among social actors, fostered by dense networks of horizontal associations.

Gordon found the concept of social capital attractive but did not accept its premises uncritically. In his characteristically incisive manner he raised the problem of what he labelled the 'Putnam paradox':

> Since stocks of social capital accumulate over centuries and cannot be built up overnight, if you haven't got it you're not likely to get it. Moreover, since the amount of social capital is associated with actual and potential developmental performance, the localities which are the most needy in developmental terms are also likely to be the least endowed with social

capital. Lack of social capital then operates like some kind of social debt, the burden of which debilitates groups and communities and intensifies the gaps between them and their counterparts with greater social assets. (White and Robinson 1998: 105)

The implication is that the social capital argument, premised on a putative correlation between the density of associational life and positive developmental performance, is tautological if pursued to its logical extreme. It is evident that stocks of social capital vary considerably among similarly structured communities as well as among those exhibiting very different social characteristics, and that a host of other intervening factors shape development outcomes, which makes it difficult to establish strong causal connections. It is also the case, as Gordon observed, that the very process of development can itself undermine associational ties, for example through economic liberalisation which can entail social disruption and cutbacks in government expenditures. A more circumspect understanding of the social capital argument would therefore seem warranted, where some forms of associational ties might be developmentally benign, buttressed by particular forms of productive engagement with state agencies. This led Gordon to consider the utility of a third closely related concept, namely that of synergy, which made its appearance in the development studies literature in the mid-1990s.

3.3 Synergy

Synergy, according to one of its leading proponents, can be defined as 'mutually reinforcing relations between governments and groups of engaged citizens', founded on a 'complementary division of labor between bureaucracy and local citizens' (Evans 1996:1119). This definition presupposes some form of collaborative relationship between institutions in the public and private sectors in pursuit of a common set of developmental objectives. It invariably focuses attention on productive forms of institutional collaboration between community groups, voluntary organisations and state agencies.

Gordon was not content with this restricted interpretation of public–civic collaboration and sought to extend the potential utility of the synergy con-

[2] White, Howell and Shang 1996.

cept by focusing on sociopolitical and structural variables that influenced the feasibility of such collaboration. In particular he emphasised the significance of a society's degree of social cohesion, which depends on the amount of structural inequality and the intensity of social conflicts: 'Where gaps between social groups are wide and political power is consequently highly skewed, and where social relationships and fragmented and conflictual, systematic efforts at organizing the kinds of complementarity which can produce the public goods and distribute them throughout the population are likely to be wasted.' (White and Robinson 1998:104). He also stressed the importance of the nature of the political regime in shaping the space available to civic associations to operate within and to engage with state agencies, and as a conditioning factor, which affects the potential for synergistic relationships to develop.

Evans (1996) and others have argued that the institutional foundations of government–civic complementarity extend beyond horizontal ties between associations in the form of social capital. Other key factors are the creation of accountable and efficient state institutions that are staffed by people committed to the idea of public service, and the relations of mutual trust, respect and cooperation that serve to break down the barriers between state and society. While appreciating the significance of these arguments, Gordon recognised that current thinking about the role of the state in the process of organising synergy was inadequate in a number of key respects. He argued that the role of the state in generating synergy was sometimes reduced to creating a conducive environment for civic action to flourish. This is certainly important, since excessive regulation of voluntary activity can stifle the potential for complementarity between state and civic actors, but its role is more profound.

Gordon also questioned a prevalent assumption in the literature which holds that state officials are motivated exclusively by self-interested behaviour that negates any potential for building collaborative relationships for virtuous developmental purposes. He also recognised that a predisposition towards constructing synergy on the part of public officials would often not occur without demands being placed on the state from below. This he termed 'political synergy', where 'pressures [are] exerted by

social organizations to stimulate government provision of public goods and enforce government accountability to popular demands for them' (White and Robinson 1998:99). This notion adds a valuable extension to the concept of synergy by highlighting the importance of the political context and purposeful behaviour by state actors in cementing inter-institutional complementarities.

3.4 Institutional design

Gordon's interest in the developmental potential of civil society and social capital was tempered by his fundamental concern with the nature of the state. His critique of the concept of synergy outlined in the previous section is redolent of this preoccupation with state power. His penchant for analysing the role of the state was sometimes wrongly construed as a predilection for statist solutions to development problems. In his earlier work he saw the potential for virtuous state action embodied in revolutionary socialist regimes that came to power in the aftermath of liberation struggles in Africa and Asia in the 1970s (Murray *et al*. 1983). Gordon later cultivated the concept of the developmental state in his analysis of the successful East Asian 'tiger' economies, arguing that the deliberate construction of a set of institutions geared towards a clear vision of development under the guidance of a motivated political leadership was key to their success (White 1988).

This preoccupation with the potential for virtuous state action underpinned one of Gordon's last research endeavours on the nature of the democratic developmental state. The changed political context of the 1990s, where many former authoritarian states had successfully accomplished a transition to democratic rule, posed new development challenges. Put simply, how can democratic states in poor societies articulate and implement successful development strategies? Gordon argued that part of the solution lay in designing political institutions in ways that could produce developmental benefits. This led him to consider the respective merits of presidential versus parliamentary forms of government, federal political arrangements, affirmative action in the form of guaranteed representation in legislative bodies, and the scope for enhanced participation in decentralised political institutions (White 1998).

Despite the potential he saw for conscious political and institutional design in fostering the conditions for developmental success, Gordon recognised that these conditions could only be reproduced in a very specific set of circumstances. In this respect he was unusually pessimistic, arguing that 'Democratic developmental states may turn out to be the exception rather than the rule' (White 1998:42). He suggested that most cases of successful developmental states tend to be historically contingent, regime characteristics are not adequate explanations in their own right, and that the underlying dynamics of social and material inequality may ultimately frustrate redistributive efforts. Despite his own normative preference for developmental social democracy, he acknowledged that in view of formidable political and material constraints, 'many countries may not succeed either in consolidating democratic institutions or in achieving socio-economic development' (*ibid.*:44). For Gordon the more likely candidates for developmental democracy were authoritarian semi-democracies of the East and Southeast Asian variety, or elitist democracies along Latin American lines.

4 Policy Significance and Practical Applications

Gordon was not, by inclination, primarily concerned with policy issues. But as Blecher (in this volume) has noted, Gordon appreciated the complexities of the broader policy context, and at times explicitly considered the policy applications of his research findings. More commonly, the policy significance of Gordon's work was latent and implicit, and needs to be consciously drawn out, with reference to some of his ideas sketched out earlier in order to demonstrate their practical relevance.

His writing on the potential of civil society to play a role in peaceful democratic transition in China exemplifies this latent policy significance. In line with his circumspect understanding of civil society, Gordon was deeply sceptical of the transformative promise of civil society in China, since 'it is so diverse, fragmented and potentially destabilising. To this extent, civil society is as much of an obstacle as an impetus to democratization' (White *et al.* 1996:217). For this reason, he argued that 'The tendency towards idealizing the political potential of civil society should be minimised' (*ibid.*). While he

did not spell out the policy implications of this argument, it is evident that Gordon departed significantly from the prevalent assumption in the literature concerning the democratizing potential of civil society. He thus viewed with some suspicion the perception of Western leaders and policy–makers concerning the desirability of rapid political transition premised on an expanded societal and economic role for civil society. Rather, drawing on comparative experience elsewhere in the developing world, he thought that a stable and peaceful political transition could be best accomplished through a process of bargaining and accommodation between elites in state and civil society.

A similar ambivalence underlay his assessment of the potential for synergistic relationships to be established between state and civic providers of social services. His scepticism of the political potential of civil society was mirrored by his cautious assessment of the role of civic organisations in social service provision. In contrast with advocates of voluntary and private sector provision as alternatives to services provided largely by the state, Gordon was cognisant of the problems of market failure. In this respect he argued that 'Over the long term the state is likely to be of crucial importance in organizing and financing social services ... no comprehensive system of social provision, whether civic or commercial, is likely to work satisfactorily without properly constituted state authority and institutions' (White and Robinson 1998:113).

Gordon saw enormous potential in organising synergy between state and civic providers but recognised that the process is complex and requires an acknowledgement that relationships of reciprocity and trust are not only confined to civil society but extend to the wider public realm. Drawing out the implication of this observation for practical purposes he concluded that 'the detailed experience of action to organize various forms of synergy, co-production and partnership can be drawn together in the search for potential lessons and best practice, and new models of project/programme design which can be successful in achieving effective complementarity between state and voluntary agencies.' (*ibid.*:113–14). It is notable that this approach is beginning to inform practical programming decisions of some external agencies, who question the received wisdom concerning the putative self interest of state officials and

the perceived superiority of the market in shaping allocative decisions, and foster collaborative relations between state and civic agencies as the basis for a more effective and participatory approach.[3]

Gordon was known for his general distrust of non-governmental organisations. He tended to see them as a somewhat artificial intermediate category, lacking a distinct social base and level of autonomy, and thus marginal in relation to other organised actors in civil society (White 1994). Nevertheless, he appreciated that in circumstances where governments and communities are operating under conditions of economic stress and fiscal austerity the role of NGOs with external links can be important: 'They act in a substitutive capacity to restore associational capacities when these would otherwise be weak or collapsing' (White and Robinson 1998:106). In this way he saw NGOs as providing a bridge between the state and civil society in particularly adverse circumstances, and as a form of organisational glue which could help to cement social capital, but as organisations which were essentially ephemeral and therefore not a long-term substitute for state and civic organisations.

Finally, while Gordon was pessimistic about the prospects for building successful democratic developmental states, he continued to see the normative potential for constructing regimes that could best achieve effective and equitable development in the interests of the broad mass of the poor in developing and transitional states. His interest in the potential for the emergence of this type of regime, however, was not purely driven by normative concerns, since he recognised that successful developmental performance would protect new democracies from a downward spiral of mutually reinforcing political and economic decline.

Alert to the possibility of this perilous outcome, Gordon outlined a set of circumstances, which he thought would be conducive to the construction of democratic developmental states. Although it would be difficult to cast these as policy prescriptions, they do have practical validity. They include the following: societies at a higher level of socio-economic

development with a relatively homogenous population, strong sense of national identity, cohesive social structure, and lacking in gross inequalities; the ability of forces of civil society to construct development coalitions that can both strengthen state capacity and tackle problems of poverty and insecurity; well developed and integrated political party systems organised on programmatic rather than personalistic lines; the legitimate concentration of institutional authority in a parliamentary or a presidential system; and societies where the autonomy of political elites is not compromised significantly by economic or political dependence (White 1998: 45–6). By implication, Gordon would have considered these conditions to be sufficiently propitious to democratic development so as to warrant policies aimed at their strengthening; hence it is only where such conditions obtain that external efforts to promote democratic developmental states have a chance of succeeding.

Although such a set of conditions largely emanates from the historical circumstances germane to particular societies, they are susceptible to some degree of outside influence. The most obvious source of external influence is that of foreign aid, which can influence institutional design and enhance the capacity of state and civic organisations if devised in a sensitive and appropriate manner. Gordon usually fought shy of foreign aid policy, in part because he was circumspect about outside intervention, but also because he was sceptical of the tendency of policy-makers to devise simplistic solutions. He rarely steered his conclusions to aid policy concerns, though there were exceptions and Gordon did not underestimate the significance of external actors.

The closest Gordon got to aid policy prescription was in the conclusion to the volume he edited with Robin Luckham (1996), where they considered the various ways that aid donors might address problems of democratisation through their development assistance programmes. Gordon was doubtful about the merits of democracy assistance, since he believed that the interplay of internal regime dynamics and organised collective action would ultimately be a more significant locus for sustained political change, and because he was doubtful

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[3] One example is the Ford Foundation, which has sought to identify and highlight the conditions under which public officials promote excellence and innovation in government in its recent programming work in Brazil, the Philippines and the United States. Various bilateral and multilateral agencies are now beginning to perceive the benefits of a more collaborative approach in which state and civic capacity are mutually reinforced.

about the possible negative impact of external intervention. Mindful of such issues he wrote:

> The exercise of both economic and political conditionality should be preceded by care, caution and knowledge. The dangers of ill-conceived intervention are patent. An excessively harsh regime of economic reform imposed on a reluctant government struggling to establish its democratic credentials is one such ... Political conditionality can backfire where it commands strong domestic support and donors should refrain from pushing for multi-party elections in circumstances where they might exacerbate deep-rooted social antagonisms. (Luckham and White 1996: 282–3)

In this respect, he concluded with Luckham that a modest approach to democracy assistance, premised on micro-level and indirect interventions, was preferable to comprehensive institutional models based on legal and constitutional reform.

5 Concluding Remarks

Gordon's contribution to development studies has been evident in many spheres, ranging from his influence over colleagues and students, injecting vigour into conceptual debates, and by enriching thinking on more applied policy issues. It is a measure of his academic stature that his work and ideas have had a profound impact, both in contemporary China studies and development studies, united by a strong disciplinary loyalty and orientation.

Colleagues, friends and students will remember with a mixture of fondness and appreciation the qualities that Gordon evinced in his work: adherence to academic rigour underpinned by a strong political commitment; a sustained engagement with theory while remaining rooted in empirical research; deep insights into the politics of contemporary China combined with an up-to-date knowledge of the comparative literature; and critical engagement with policy issues while remaining sensitive to the practical implications of his research.

Gordon's contribution to development studies cannot be summarised with ease or simplicity, and cannot be done full justice in a short appreciation; suffice to say that it continues to inform and enrich the ideas of those he worked with and nurtured. Balzac once said of a great French surgeon: 'Like all men of genius he had no heirs; he carried his skill within him and carried it away with him.' In Gordon's case his skill lives on and continues to influence the theory and practice of his successors to the ongoing benefit of the development studies field.

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