# Rebels in Disguise —

# Assessing the Rise and Rule of the Randomistas

**ABSTRACT**

# Abstract

Abhijit Banerjee, Esther Duflo and Michael Kremer were awarded the 2019 Sveriges Riksbank Prize in Economic Sciences in Memory of Alfred Nobel for their pioneering of randomized control trials (RCTs) to find reliable answers about the best ways to fight global poverty. This article unpacks the laureates’ theoretical and methodological approach to development economics in order to evaluate to what extent their approach signifies a break from broader trends in the field. In particular, it investigates the role RCTs have played in both generating knowledge about development interventions and in shaping development policy debates more broadly. Finally, the article argues that despite their rebellious and radical façade, the randomista enterprise has led to a more exclusive development economics, while at the same time failing to improve our ability to fight poverty.

# 1. Introduction

This article critically evaluates the contributions of the winners of the 2019 Sveriges Riksbank Prize in Economic Sciences in Memory of Alfred Nobel. The prize was awarded to Abhijit Banerjee, Esther Duflo and Michael Kremer for having ‘introduced a new approach to obtaining reliable answers about the best ways to fight global poverty’ (The Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences 2019). What is notable in the justification for this prize is the attention to methods rather than theoretical advances.

In the mid-1990s, Michael Kremer pioneered the use of randomized control trials (RCTs) to test a range of interventions that could improve school results in western Kenya. In the 2000s, the use of RCTs expanded drastically, often led by Abhijit Banerjee and Esther Duflo, often with Michael Kremer. In 2003, Banerjee and Duflo, along with Sendhil Mullainathan, founded the *Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab* (J-PAL). This lab was entirely devoted to conducting ‘randomized impact evaluations to answer critical questions in the fight against poverty.’[[1]](#footnote-1) Banerjee and Duflo popularized the approach with their book *Poor Economics: A Radical Rethinking of the Way to Fight Global Poverty* (2011), which is now taught in Development Economics classes across the world.

While it is great news that attention has been directed towards the persistence of poverty globally, and also that a woman and a scholar from the Global South were among the 2019 laureates (the Prize is usually awarded to white men based in the Global North), it is important to unpack what is ‘new’ and ‘radical’ about this approach, and to what extent this work contributes to the fight against poverty.

Banerjee and Duflo have repeatedly claimed that development policy has been driven too much by ideology in the past and that this is the reason for much of failed development policy (e.g., Banerjee 2005; Banerjee and Duflo 2011). They claim to use experiments to get away from these big ideological debates and let the findings speak for themselves. They argue that experimental methods are able to deliver unbiased estimates, meaning that with repeated trials we would get estimates that tend to get closer on average to the true value of parameters (Ravallion 2020). This is because experiments are often understood to resolve the problem of unknown confounding factors that may impact an experiment’s internal validity (Cartwright 2011), as well as selection bias which might impact its external validity (Samii 2020). By randomizing interventions over many units (individuals, households, schools, hospitals, etc.), the idea is that the causal impact of the intervention can be isolated, offering a ‘clean causal inference’ (Gisselquist 2020, p. 1; see also Levitt and List 2009; List 2009).

Banerjee, Duflo, and Kremer (2016, p. 2) argue that while RCTs may not have completely revolutionized development economics, they have ‘at least profoundly altered, the practice of development economics as an academic discipline.’ They document this trend by pointing to the drastic rise in the number of RCTs published in academic journals, the increased fraction of impact evaluations carried out as RCTs, and the increase in RCT papers presented at major development economics conferences. Indeed, the approach is often considered the ‘gold standard’ (Cartwright 2011), the ‘tool-of-choice’ (Ravallion 2020) or ‘hegemonic’ (Akram-Lodhi 2014) in development economics research and international development practice. As Deaton and Cartwright (2018, p. 3) note, there is certainly a ‘common perception that RCTs always provide the strongest evidence for causality and for effectiveness.’

Despite the hype — or perhaps because of it — RCTs have long been critiqued, both from inside (e.g., Deaton 2010; Ravallion 2012) and outside the mainstream of the profession (e.g., Reddy 2012; Kabeer 2019). This article goes beyond summarizing critiques of RCTs to engage with how RCTs fit within broader issues in economics, and how they are related to the role of methods and theory in knowledge production, evidence-based policy, and inclusivity and pluralism.

I first give a brief overview of the laureates’ backgrounds, before assessing to what extent the rise of the randomistas[[2]](#footnote-2) breaks from broader trends in economics. This involves considering both their theoretical and methodological approach, as well as how they have dealt with internal critiques in the discipline. I then go on to evaluate to what extent their approach is really strengthening our ability to fight poverty, as suggested by the Prize Committee. The latter involves unpacking the relationship between the randomistas and the aid industry as well as evidence-based policy. This is of particular concern from a political economy perspective, given that randomistas are now among the most influential experts in the world of development.

To explore the influence of RCTs on policy in more concrete terms, I look at how the randomistas have impacted the development debate on microcredit. Finally, before concluding, I outline how the randomista enterprise, despite its proponents’ attempts to position it as an inclusive, diverse and interdisciplinary effort, is actually largely exclusive, narrow and hierarchical.

# 2. The Laureates: Who are they?

## 2.1. Abhijit Banerjee

Abhijit Vinayak Banerjee was born to an academic economist household in Mumbai, India in 1961. His father was a Professor of Economics at Presidency College, Kolkata and his mother a Professor of Economics at the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences (CSSSC) in Kolkata (Bagchi 2019; Javed, Ghosh, and Basu 2019). Banerjee graduated with an undergraduate degree in Economics from the University of Calcutta in 1981 and with an MA in Economics from Jawaharlal University (JNU) in 1983 — where he was involved in student politics and even got arrested at one point (Arun 2019).

He went on to study economics at Harvard University, from which he received a PhD in 1988 after writing a dissertation on information economics. Upon graduating, he got an Assistant Professorship at Princeton University, where he stayed for a few years before moving back to Harvard in 1991 and then the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in 1993. At MIT he was appointed Ford Foundation International Professor of Economics in 2003.

Banerjee’s two most cited works are papers that further develop neoclassical economic theory in various ways: Banerjee (1992) looks at the (inefficient) equilibrium resulting from optimizing individuals engaging in herd behavior, while Banerjee and Newman (1993) link inequality to credit market imperfections, which determine whether people can engage in wage work, entrepreneurship or hire others to start a firm. This theoretical starting point, which builds on Banerjee’s PhD, can be considered the theoretical foundation of his subsequent interest in experimentation on individual behavior through RCTs. It was after the founding of J-Pal in 2003 that his academic publications turned sharply towards experiments in developing countries (e.g., Banerjee, Jacob, and Kremer 2005; Banerjee et al. 2007a; Banerjee et al. 2010; Banerjee et al. 2015a, 2015b).

Banerjee has also served at the President of the Bureau for the Research in the Economic Analysis of Development (BREAD) and he has held a series of prestigious fellowships.[[3]](#footnote-3) In addition to the Nobel Prize, he received the Ifosys Prize in 2009 in Social Sciences and Economics, the Bernhard-Harms Prize from the Kiel Institute for the World Economy in 2014, and he was named one of *Foreign Policy* magazine’s top 100 global thinkers in 2011. His book with Duflo, *Poor Economics*, won the Goldman Sachs Business Book of the Year. In 2013 he was appointed to the High-Level Panel of experts by Ban Ki-Moon to advise the UN on a global development agenda to follow the Millennium Development Goals after 2015.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Shortly after they were awarded the Nobel Prize, Good Economics for Hard Times (Banerjee and Duflo 2019) was published. It considers solutions to the issues facing economies across the world, drawing on the results of a great deal of economic research. The book recommends, among other things, that the US should provide better support for workers displaced by trade, should increase investment in education, and should seek to create high-status jobs.

Banerjee has also co-directed two documentary films: ‘The Magnificent Journey: Times and Tales of Democracy’ (with Ranu Ghosh) in 2019 and ‘The Name of the Disease’ in 2006. Banerjee, now an American citizen, is the second India-born economist to be awarded the Sveriges Riksbank Prize in Economic Sciences in Memory of Alfred Nobel; Amartya Sen was the first. Banerjee was married to and had a son (who died in a car accident in 2016) with Dr. Arundhati Tuli Banerjee, a lecturer of literature at MIT. They divorced in 2014. Banerjee then married Duflo in 2015, and he has two sons with her.

## 2.2. Esther Duflo

Esther Duflo was born in Paris, France in 1972, to a pediatrician and a Professor of Mathematics (Parker 2010). Duflo started a history degree at École Normale Supérieure in Paris. She spent almost a year in Moscow writing her undergraduate thesis and working for a French economist at the Central Bank of Russia and for Jeffrey Sachs, who was advising the architect of Russia’s post-communist ‘shock therapy’ reforms at the time (Gapper 2012). Duflo has mentioned in several interviews that her mother instilled a sense of social justice in her through her social work (e.g., Gapper 2012), and the time in Moscow convinced her that she wanted to be an economist as it would allow her to pursue her academic interests while doing ‘things that mattered’ (Parker 2010). She therefore graduated in 1994 with an undergraduate degree in History and Economics from École Normale Supérieure, and subsequently with a Master’s degree jointly from DELTA (now the Paris School of Economics) and the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) in 1995. In 1999 she completed her PhD in Economics at MIT, with a dissertation on the effects of the ‘natural experiment’ of an Indonesian school-expansion program in the 1970s on wages (Duflo 2001), under the joint supervision of Abhijit Banerjee and Joshua Angrist.

Duflo got an Assistant Professorship at MIT immediately upon completion of her PhD, making MIT break its institutional rule against hiring its own students (Adriano 2020). She has been there ever since, with the exception of brief periods of leave. After co-founding J-Pal with Banerjee and Mullainathan in 2003, she was promoted to Abdul Latif Jameel Professor of Poverty Alleviation and Development Economics in 2005. Since then, she has published actively in the field of development economics, with a strong orientation towards RCTs. For example, Duflo has applied experimental methods to areas such as education (Duflo 2001; Duflo, Dupas, and Kremer 2011; Duflo, Hanna, and Ryan 2012, 2015a), health (Duflo, Dupas, and Kremer 2015b), gender (Duflo 2003, 2012; Chattopadhyay and Duflo 2004), agriculture (Duflo, Kremer, and Robinson 2008, Duflo, Kremer, and Robinson 2011) and microfinance (Banerjee et al. 2013, 2015a). She has also written several articles on randomized methods themselves, such as Duflo (2007), Duflo, Glennerster, and Kremer (2008) and Duflo and Kremer (2005). Indeed, beyond her research, Duflo has described herself as an ‘institution builder’ (Parker 2010), actively promoting the use of randomization in development through J-Pal and other channels. Already in 2004, she said in an interview ‘I have a sense that we are in the process of forming generations of people who will shape the field’ (CSWEP 2004, p. 10).

She has also won multiple awards, including the Elaine Bennett Research Prize in 2002, the MacArthur Foundation ‘genius’ fellow, and the John Bates Clark medal (often called the ‘mini- Nobel’). Beyond her professorship at MIT, Duflo is also a research associate at NBER, a board member of BREAD and director of CEPR’s development economics program.

Notably, while her husband Banerjee is only the second Indian to win the Nobel, Duflo is only the second woman. She is also the youngest to ever win the Nobel — 47 when the prize was announced. After winning the Prize, she said she hoped it would inspire other women in economics to ‘continue working, and … to give them the respect that they deserve like every single human being’ (BBC 14 October 2019).

## 2.3. Michael Kremer

Michael Robert Kremer was born in 1964 and grew up in Kansas, USA (Subramanian 2007). His parents were both professors at Kansas State University, his father a Professor of Architecture and his mother a Professor of English.[[5]](#footnote-5) After completing his undergraduate degree in Social Studies at Harvard University in 1985, he traveled to Kenya — and ended up staying for a year to teach math and science at the Eshisiru Secondary School, in Kakamega District.[[6]](#footnote-6) When he returned to Harvard, he founded the nonprofit organization WorldTeach along with other Harvard students, and he was its Executive Director from 1986 to 1989. In that period, WorldTeach placed more than 360 volunteer teachers in developing countries.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Kremer completed his PhD in Economics from Harvard in 1992 under the supervision of Robert Barro, immediately got a Postdoctoral Fellowship at MIT, and then went on to be hired as an Assistant Professor of Economics at MIT the following year, becoming Banerjee’s colleague even before Duflo arrived at the department as a graduate student.

Kremer was originally trained as a development macroeconomist and his paper on the ‘O-ring’ theory of economic development was an important contribution to this subfield. Kremer (1993) challenges the view of labor as a homogenous factor of production, by proposing a production function that incorporates the effects of imperfect observability of skills leading to imperfect matching, which allegedly paves the way for explaining multiple equilibria and poverty traps. Combined with imperfect information, Kremer argues that individuals will tend to underinvest in human capital, which in turn means that small differences in education policy can produce even larger differences in income. In line with Banerjee’s theoretical findings, and neoclassical theory in general, this understanding of market failure generates a perceived need for tools to fix these failures.

In 1995, while discussing with friends who worked for an education-focused Dutch NGO in Kenya about how school programs would be rolled out, Kremer first proposed to randomize social policy (Subramanian 2007). The NGO liked Kremer’s idea, which allowed him and some colleagues to design an RCT, covering 100 schools and running over five years (1995–2000), that would enable them to estimate the impact of providing new textbooks to the schools (see Glewwe, Kremer, and Moulin 2009 for the full published study). Kremer was ‘totally shocked by the results’ that the provision of textbooks did not lead to better school outcomes (Jayachandran 2019). He carried out another RCT with the same NGO from 1998 to 2001 to test the impacts of school- based mass treatment with deworming drugs, along with Edward Miguel, which demonstrated that mass treatment of children with deworming drugs reduced school absenteeism substantially (Miguel and Kremer 2004). Kremer returned to Harvard as a Professor of Economics in 1999, and was appointed to Gates Professor of Developing Societies in 2003 in the same department, which is his current position.

Starting in 2000, Banerjee, Duflo and others were working on RCTs in India. These studies ultimately concluded that remedial education works, while simply adding other resources to a school does not (Banerjee et al. 2007a). This led Duflo and Kremer to a collaborative project along with Pacaline Dupas on educational programs in Kenya, exploring the effects of splitting students into classes by academic preparation (Duflo, Dupas, and Kremer 2011). Duflo has since labeled Kremer as a visionary for his early use of experimental methods (Smialek 2019). Kremer has run an impressive amount of RCTs on education policies in developing countries (e.g., Chaudhury et al. 2006; Muralidharan and Kremer 2009; Kremer and Holla 2009; Kremer and Williams 2010; Kremer, Glewwe, and Ilias 2010; Kremer, Bettinger, and Saavedra 2010; Duflo, Dupas, and Kremer 2015a; Kremer et al. 2016), but also on other topics, such as public health interventions (Cutler et al. 2010; Duflo, Dupas, and Kremer 2015b; Baird et al. 2016; Ahuja et al. 2017; Croke, Hsu, and Kremer 2017), and agriculture (e.g., Duflo, Kremer, and Robinson 2011, Fabregas, Kremer, and Schilbach 2019).

As Kremer’s founding of WorldTeach at the age of 22 might suggest, his vitae demonstrates a strong ability to connect the insights from research to research-based policy. He is, for example, co-founder of Precision Agriculture for Development (PAD), a non-profit organization that works to transform agriculture in developing countries by using the latest available technologies and research methods to increase productivity and income of smallholder farmers,[[8]](#footnote-8) and he also helped to create the Development Innovation Ventures for the US Agency for International Development (USAID), and has been its Scientific Director since 2010 (Saldinger 2019). He is also a board member or advisor to many non-profit organizations, and he was named a Young Global Leader by the World Economic Forum. Kremer has held several prestigious fellowships and received innumerable awards, including a MacArthur ‘Genius’ Fellowship, the Scientific American 50 Best Researchers Award, and Presidential Early Career Award for Scientists and Engineers.

Kremer’s work has also paved the way for the creation of a new mechanism called the Advanced Market Commitments (AMCs), which is meant to further the development of vaccines (Subramanian 2007). This is based on some of his early work (Kremer 1998), his influential book with Rachel Glennerster (Kremer and Glennerster 2004), and more recent work (e.g., Kremer and Snyder 2018; Kremer, Levin, and Snyder 2020). The AMC is meant to create incentive mechanisms to encourage the development of vaccines in developing countries. In 2005, the Center for Global Development (CGD) released an influential report (Barder, Levine, and Kremer 2005) picking up on the proposals made by Kremer and Glennerster (2004), and the following year, Canada, Italy, Norway, Russia, the UK and the Gates Foundation together committed $1.5 billion to develop a pneumococcal vaccine using AMC. According to a working paper by Kremer, Levin, and Snyder (2020), this innovation and investment has led to 150 million children being immunized and approximately 700,000 saved lives. Kremer, Glennerster, and many of their frequent collaborators and co-authors (a team of 15) have now formed Accelerating Health Technologies with Incentive Design (or AcceleratingHT) to analyze the financing of health technology for COVID-19.[[9]](#footnote-9) The key premise of AMC and AcceleratingHT is that vaccine developers may invest less than would be socially optimal because of the risk that their research might not succeed, so funders (donors/sponsors/governments) should pay a big portion of the vaccine makers’ expenses upfront, with companies paying a smaller share. The agreement includes the establishment of a pre-agreed guaranteed price for the vaccine (Subramanian 2007).

Kremer is married to one of his coauthors, Rachel Glennerster, who was also the Executive Director of J-Pal from 2003 to 2017. She is currently on leave from J-Pal as she serves as the Chief Economist of the UK’s Department for International Development (DFID). Kremer was the 11th faculty member from Harvard to receive the Sveriges Riksbank Prize in Memory of Alfred Nobel.[[10]](#footnote-10)

# 3. Randomistas and Economics: Developments and Continuity

The randomistas often present themselves as rebels in the academy, where the radicalness of their approach comes from challenging the neoclassical orthodoxy. People living in poverty do not always behave rationally. Markets do not always work perfectly. Much like behavioral economists, their work is framed as moving away from key foundational principles to a more ‘realistic’, ‘empirical’ and ‘experimental’ endeavor (Streeck 2010; Santos 2011; Heukelom 2012; Berndt 2015). This has led to praise by other economists for the randomistas’ departure from a ‘landscape of development economics [that] has been scarred by ideological battle’ (Coyle, March 11th, 2011).

This section first unpacks the randomistas’ conflicted, and somewhat confused, relationship to neoclassical theory. It then assesses how the quest to randomize fits in with the so-called ‘empirical turn’ in economics more broadly, before unpacking how the randomistas have responded to internal critique.

## 3.1. The Randomistas’ Relationship to Theory

Positioning their work as atheoretical is clear in Duflo’s famous analogy to plumbing, which suggests that economic research is technical, objective and value-neutral (as I’ve argued elsewhere; e.g., Kvangraven 2020). However, while randomistas are not always upfront about their theorizing, all approaches in the social sciences have theoretical foundations, even if only implicitly. This section demonstrates that the laureates’ work is grounded in neoclassical microeconomic theory. This has implications for how experiments are designed, assumptions made about human behavior, and how conclusions are drawn about causality. The randomistas’ position is confused in this sense, as they call for objectivity and going beyond ideology, while at the same time drawing on neoclassical concepts. The problem then becomes not randomistas not having theory (Deaton and Cartwright 2018) or having too little theory (Mookherjee 2005), but rather randomistas failing to be explicit about the fact that their guiding theory is not objective. Below, we unpack how the randomistas present their research as both theory-free and as theory-testing, before exploring important critiques of their theoretical approach.

## 1.1. Randomizing as a Theory-Free Activity

RCTs are derived from a philosophical position that sees access to ‘reality’ as circumscribed by observable means alone, and they see micro-level experimentation as sufficient to arrive at this understanding of observed reality (Surendran and Kumar 2020). As a result, they insist on considering abstractions (theories, models, assessments) as disconnected from the evidence.[[11]](#footnote-11) In line with experimentation in other disciplines, experiments in Economics are seen as ‘techno-epistemic processes that bring … epistemic things — into being’ (Lenoir 2020, p. xiv). As with medical and biological research, it is not driven by theory, but dominated by the choice of experimental systems (Rheinberger 2010).

Consistent with this theory-free conception, the results from the experiments are meant to speak for themselves. As Duflo once put it, ‘Evaluation is rigorous. There is no room for interpretation. Either it works or it doesn’t’ (cited in Labrousse 2016, p. 289). This is in line with the aspiration among economists to turn economics into an exact science, ‘just as rational, just as precise and just as incontrovertible as were the laws of astronomy’ (Walras, Lettre no. 1454 to Hermann Laurent in Jaffe 1965), and with the evolution of economics to an allegedly apolitical and ahistorical science, following European positivist assumptions of a universal, objective truth (Kayatekin 2009), as we also argue in Alves and Kvangraven (2020).

This is clear in Duflo’s (2017, p. 15) view of the randomistas as ‘plumbers’:

*‘economists have the disciplinary training to make good plumbers: economics trains us in behavioral science, incentives issues, and firm behavior; it also gives us an understanding of both governments and firms as organizations, though more work probably remains to be done there.’*

It is clear in this quote that the economist as a ‘plumber’ draws on a specific way of seeing the world.[[12]](#footnote-12) Generally, building on neoclassical views of markets and consumers, much of the laureates’ work demonstrates that markets and consumers underinvest in preventive goods and then explores how such market and behavioral failures can be corrected. An example is the randomistas’ focus on how aspects of poverty can be alleviated through correcting cognitive biases of the poor (see e.g., Duflo, Kremer, and Robinson 2011 Duflo, Hanna, and Ryan 2012;), taking homo economicus as a starting point – a characteristic starting point for neoclassical economics. In the three laureates’ evaluation of the influence of RCTs on development research, they argue that ‘accumulating evidence from RCTs has undoubtedly hastened the diffusion of the idea into development economics and into development policy that poor people are not always rational’ (Banerjee, Duflo, and Kremer 2016, p. 21). Furthermore, Banerjee, Duflo, and Kremer (2016, p. 19) have argued that even if certain program specifics may not be possible to generalize, ‘underlying patterns in human behavior may’ — suggesting that there are some universal laws to be uncovered about how humans behave.

### 3.1.2. Randomizing as a Theory-Testing Activity

While randomistas tend to present experimentation as being a way to go beyond theory, they do not neglect theory. For example, Banerjee and Duflo (2009, p. 156) emphasize that experiments are a ‘powerful tool for testing theories’ (see also Banerjee 2005; Duflo 2007). Elsewhere, they have stated that their goal is to produce a ‘better integration between theory and empirical practice’ (Banerjee and Duflo 2010, p. 78). Nonetheless, the experimentalism of the randomistas remains within the boundaries of neoclassical economics, with a strong focus on methodological individualism. Therefore, when taking a broader look at RCTs within economics, there is a ‘substantial continuity underneath the rebellious surface’ (Berndt 2015, p. 368).

Notably, in much of their discussions of the relationship between theory and empirics (e.g., Banerjee and Duflo 2009), the discussion remains at the level of whether experiments can verify, further develop or disprove existing (neoclassical) economic theory, rather than engaging with other relevant theories. Duflo (2009, p. 173) concludes that ultimately, the ‘goal is better theory’ and that ‘we need a framework for interpreting what we find.’ Despite the recognition of theory’s importance, their engagement with theory often occurs in a piecemeal and seemingly random fashion, drawing on rational choice theory and behavioral psychology to explain their findings, but often presenting these interpretations as objective and impartial (see Kabeer 2020a).

This increased attention to micro-oriented problems associated with poverty alleviation is part of a broader trend in development economics, which involves a movement towards ‘thinking small’ (Immerwahr 2015). This has squeezed out bigger questions about underlying causes of global inequality that are related to global economic institutions, trade, agricultural, industrial and fiscal policy, and the role of political dynamics, in favor how to best tackle symptoms of poverty, such as distributing mosquito nets and offering microfinance (Chang 2010; Reinert, Ghosh, and Kattel 2018; Kvangraven 2020).

### 3.1.3. Limits to the Randomistas’ Theoretical Approach

This leads us to a critique of this use of theory, which comes most forcefully from outside mainstream economics. The critique is largely concerned with the structures shaping individual actions that get assumed away in the randomistas’ universe of methodological individualism. It is thus both a critique of focus and one of theory.

For example, there is a concern that the randomistas’ work does not allow for an understanding of how agents interact with each other as well as how they affect, and are affected by, structural and historical phenomena (Labrousse 2016; Stevano 2020; Kabeer 2020a). Because of this, the focus is on why people living in poverty make choices that could be deemed irrational (Rosenzweig 2012). Kabeer (2013, 2020a) contends that the randomistas’ treatment of preferences as random ignores what feminist economists have long documented, namely that ‘formation of preferences derives from entrenched social constructions’ (Kabeer 2020a, p. 1).

This matters because the neoclassical theoretical lens makes it difficult to uncover structures that disadvantage women. This leads Duflo to accept the view that attention should be focused on men ‘on the grounds that the economic returns will be larger’, rather than acknowledging that the distortions she identifies ‘relate to the historical structures that have curtailed women’s productive potential and protected male privilege’ (Kabeer 2020a, p. 20). This has political distributive implications. While a feminist lens tends to lead to recommendations of gender- affirmative policies, a neoclassical lens tends to lead to recommendations of gender-neutral policies (Kabeer 2020a).

While the methodological individualism embedded in neoclassical economics is partially to blame for the micro-orientation of the randomistas, it is also an effect of what RCTs are capable of measuring. What RCTs can measure is a subset of available policy options. Within this subset, there will be more ‘tunnel’ questions ‘characterised by a limited number of well- specified homogeneous inputs, a tried and tested process, a short and external events-proof causal chain, a large and stable participation, and a set of measurable outcomes in the short run’ (Bernard, Delarue, and Naudet 2012, p. 314). Indeed, the prize was awarded to Banerjee, Duflo and Kremer precisely for ‘dividing [the fight against global poverty] issue into smaller, more manageable, questions – for example, the most effective interventions for improving educational outcomes or child health. They have shown that these smaller, more precise, questions are often best answered via carefully designed experiments among the people who are most affected’ (Sveriges Riksbank Prize in Economic Sciences in Memory of Alfred Nobel 2019).

Critics of RCTs have, in contrast, argued that it is crucial to recognize how phenomena observed at the micro-level are intertwined with macro-processes (Stevano 2020). Although individuals are not separate from the societies in which they exist, aspects of the macroeconomy, culture and politics do not play a large role in experimental conclusions about how and why interventions work. Instead, economic experiments tend to be removed from analyses of power, wider social change, and economic structures that influence national development (Chernomas and Hudson 2019). Furthermore, attention to history is broadly erased, as results from an RCT provide a ‘cross section frozen in time to devoid of trajectory’ (Surendran and Kumar 2020, p. 2).

Even where RCTs have been used to study more macro-oriented questions, such as those related to labor markets, industry and migration, the studies remain narrow. For example, when it comes to climate change (perhaps the biggest structural challenge of our time), Carattini, Gosnell, and Tavoni (2020) argue that it can be fruitfully addressed with RCTs such as those studying the impacts of behavioral change. They argue for the importance of bringing such experiments to developed countries as well, with the only identified downsides being the additional hurdles associated with costs, increased complexity and stronger ethical guidelines in developed countries. This is concerning, given the limited view this provides us with when evaluating the tools needed to address climate change. As it is unlikely that climate change can be effectively addressed through behavioral change at the individual level alone, it is important to not limit policy responses to experimental methods.

Furthermore, Blattman and Dercon’s (2018) study of industrial jobs and entrepreneurship in Ethiopia, provides important insights into worker employment preferences, yet the results of this study cannot say anything substantial about strategies and constraints to structural transformation and industrialization (Kvangraven 2020). This is by design, as questions of structural transformation would be impossible to study with randomized experiments, as they involve economies of scale and complex global dynamics beyond any single closed-off unit. For example, RCTs cannot provide answers to questions about major development successes of the past century, such as successful industrialization by late developers of the massive poverty reduction and growth in China (Ravallion 2009, 2012; Rodrik 2009; Pritchett 2018; Yang 2019). Indeed, the case of China suggests that there is great value in broader and more creative experimentation in policy-making, rather than focusing on ‘what works’ from RCTs (e.g., Andrews, Pritchett, and Woolcock 2012). This has led heterodox economists to argue that there must be space for multiple logics in research in the economics field (retroductive, deductive, and inductive in particular) (e.g., Morgan 2019; Olsen 2019).

## 3.2. Randomistas and the ‘Empirical Turn’: What Role for Experiments?

Given that the Economics discipline itself values methodological innovation and precise measurement (Fourcade, Etienne, and Algan 2015), the laureates’ emphasis on methods and ‘what works’ fits with the discipline’s so-called empirical turn (Angrist and Pischke 2010). As three J-PAL researchers wrote in their assessment of the laureates recently, ‘J-PAL in many ways seeks to fulfill what Angrist and Pischke called the “Credibility Revolution in Empirical Economics”’ (Cole, Parienté, and Sautmann 2020, p. 1).

The laureates have promoted a notion of revolution in their methodology – making it seem like we cannot really know anything without RCTs (Donovan 2018). As Steinbaum (2019) noted, this is not the first time economists have believed that they have finally discovered empirical verification. In 1964, George Stigler concluded his presidential address to the American Economic Association in the following way:

*The age of quantification is now full upon us. We are armed with a bulging arsenal of techniques of quantitative analysis, and of a power—as compared to untrained common sense—comparable to the displacement of archers by cannon. . . . It is a scientific revolution of the very first magnitude. . . . Our expanding theoretical and empirical studies will inevitably and irresistibly enter into the subject of public policy, and we shall develop a body of knowledge essential to intelligent policy formulation.* (Stigler 1965, p. 16–17)

Furthermore, the use of randomized experiments in economics dates back to the 1920s and 1930s, so this cannot be seen as an entirely new phenomenon (Levitt and List 2009). There was also a period in the mid-20th century when large-scale social experiments were conducted by government agencies. However, what we are seeing now is different in the nature and range of experiments – with a more diverse set of controlled experiments taking place outside the laboratory environment. Compared to experiments of the last century, contemporary RCTs tend to be of shorter duration and smaller in scope, and they tend to limit themselves to evaluating only what can be easily measured (Leão and Eyal 2020). This makes it more difficult to address complex mechanisms that produce and reproduce global poverty.

Whereas economics has long been known to have physics envy (Mirowski 1991), the randomistas express a strong desire to emulate the methods of medicine (e.g., Banerjee and Duflo 2011). Randomistas present medicine as an authoritative science, and they use their association with medical methods as a way of legitimizing the knowledge they create (Donovan 2018).[[13]](#footnote-13) Ironically, the randomistas fail to mention the fact that scholars in the medical field do not claim that medical experimentation offers objective evidence. While RCTs have reshaped medical knowledge and practice over the past 70 years, the medical field recognizes drawbacks and limitations of the RCT method and RCTs have never monopolized medical knowledge production (Bothwell et al. 2016). On the contrary, the use of medical experimentation is fraught with methodological and ethical debates (Will and Moreira 2010; Bothwell et al. 2016; Deaton and Cartwright 2018; Surendran and Kumar 2020).

Many other methods, such as case series and reports, continue to offer valuable insights in medicine, as RCTs are considered an inappropriate tool to evaluate many types of interventions (Bothwell et al. 2016). For example, surgeons increasingly recognized the limitations of RCTs done in the 1960s and 1970s, realizing that ‘each patient had unique pathological findings, each surgeon had different skills, and each operation involved countless choices about anesthesia, premedication, surgical approach, instrumentation, and postoperative care, all of which defied the standardization that clinical trials required’ (Bothwell et al. 2016, p. 2178). Indeed, the Academy of Medical Sciences (2017) has explicitly stated that the type of evidence needed, and the method necessary to obtain that evidence, will always depend on the question being asked.

In line with this, there is a stark difference in the way social and natural scientists frame the history of RCTs and the way randomistas themselves frame it. For example, Chupein and Glennerster (2018, p. 62) see the rise of RCTs as key to methodological breakthroughs that have ‘advanced our knowledge of human behavior.’ They rarely point to any downside of the empirical development. Meanwhile, from a historical and anthropological perspective, Kevin Donovan (2018, p. 27) argues that the rise of experiments has not eliminated uncertainty, but rather ‘redistributed the means through which knowledge about development is considered credible’. From a philosophical perspective, Cartwright (2012) has pointed to the problematic underlying assumption that there is one specific true impact that can be uncovered through economic experiments.

Even if we were to buy into the theoretical and methodological framework that the randomistas present, how things really work on the ground seem to be quite far removed from the simple stories presented in published RCT papers. So, while the method may seem ‘clean’, there have been several studies exposing messiness in the field that is unreported when presenting the results of RCTs. Examples of methodological problems include manipulation and sloppy design published by renowned randomistas (see e.g., Bédécarrats et al. 2019 for a critique of Crépon et al. 2015; and Kabeer 2019, 2020b for critiques of Karlan and Parienté 2014 and Banerjee et al. 2015b). Problems with attrition, lack of blinding and other post-randomization confounding and selection biases almost always occur (Hernán, Hernández-Diaz, and Robins 2013; Deaton and Cartwright 2018). However, RCT papers rarely report details about deviations between design and implementation, which makes it difficult to know what is actually being measured (Barrett and Carter 2010).

While the randomistas place much emphasis on second stage data analysis (the econometrics), rigorous data collection seems to be given less priority (Bédécarrats, Guérin, and Roubaud 2020b). Generally, the data collection and data entry errors observed in Crépon et al.’s (2015) RCT in Morocco suggests a lack of experience and knowledge with data collection (Bédécarrats et al. 2019). This may have to do with the hierarchical organization of J-Pal, which makes for a sharp division of labor between project managers and field staff. Furthermore, the fact that a handful of researchers work on a considerable number of RCTs, raises the question of their capacity to quality check all elements of each trial (according to Bédécarrats, Guérin, and Roubaud 2020b, in 2019 Duflo had 64 RCTs to her name, equal to over four new RCTs a year). Problems with a series of RCTs have come to light, but always through ‘outsider’ reports, not by randomistas themselves (e.g., Drèze 2018b, 2020; Bédécarrats et al. 2019, 2020b; Kabeer 2019, 2020a). This stands in stark contrast to the widespread claim randomistas have put forward that results from RCTs speak for themselves or that they simply ‘are what they are’ (Banerjee et al. 2007b; Glennerster 2013).[[14]](#footnote-14)

## 3.3. The Debates Within Economics

There is a lot of discussion within the economic mainstream about RCTs as a methodology. These range from lack of attention to spillover effects, general equilibrium and other macroeconomic effects, heterogeneous effects being more important than the average effects, the lack of identifiable causal mechanisms, and problems with both scaling and external validity. The randomistas have responded to these critiques (rather than the critiques of their theoretical starting point and focus put forward by heterodox and political economists) and have sought to resolve some of these issues. Other issues remain unresolved.

Somewhat similar to the heterodox critique of the randomistas’ being limited by methodological individualism, mainstream economists have also critiqued RCTs for micro- reductionism. However, there have been efforts to identify and measure general equilibrium and spillover effects among randomistas, recognizing that the whole may be different from the sum of its parts (Bardhan 2005). Buera, Kaboski, and Shin (2012), for example, find that large scale microfinance provision can affect aggregate productivity and investment, and Cunha, de Giorgi, and Jayachandran (2019) demonstrate how social benefits affect market-level prices. There have also been serious attempts to measure the effects of scaling up RCTs (Muralidharan and Niehaus 2017), as well as handling the aggregation challenge of using micro-level experimental evidence to provide evidence for macro-level questions (Humphreys and Scacco 2020). Further, while many RCT studies simply generate an average effect that is not always relevant, there have been important advances made to consider heterogeneous treatment effects (e.g., Davis and Mobarak 2020).

The argument that experiments measure effects and ignore causal mechanisms has been leveled by both mainstream and heterodox economists (Heckman and Smith 1995; Reddy 2012; Shaffer 2014). On the one hand, randomistas have proposed to resolve this by changing the designs of the experiments (Davis and Mobarak 2020). For example, Karlan and Zinman (2009) include a two-stage randomization to distinguish the effects of different types of asymmetric information in credit markets. Other efforts to get around this problem include considering several variations of an intervention in an experiment, as well as including mediators (e.g., Imai, Tingley, and Yamamoto 2012), and more careful data collection (Dillon et al. 2020). While these efforts may address some concerns from within the mainstream, they do not get around the problem of not capturing underlying social, economic and cultural structures that affect causal processes (Deaton and Cartwright 2018; Kabeer 2019). Many have therefore argued that complementary ethnographic work is needed to understand the mechanisms underlying an impact evaluation (e.g., Rao, Ananthpur, and Malik 2017; Rao 2020). As Naritomi et al. (2020) point out, it is far from the norm, but some researchers do complement quantitative evidence from RCTs with qualitative evidence to better understand the mechanisms involved (e.g., Bergman et al. 2019).

A related issue is one of external validity, which both RCT critics and proponents recognize as a central challenge (Cartwright 2007; Deaton 2010; Muller 2015; Banerjee, Chassang, and Snowberg 2017; Bates and Glennerster 2017; Deaton and Cartwright 2018). A call for more replications has been one response to this challenge (Dehejia 2015; Donovan 2018; Gisselquist 2020). However, it is uncommon for researchers to replicate RCTs or to check their validity across geographies, mainly because of the high costs of running RCTs (Bothwell et al. 2016; Pieterse 2020). However, in instances where replication has taken place, replicated studies often come to substantially different results than the original RCTs (Bédécarrats et al. 2019; Raffler, Posner, and Parkerson 2019).[[15]](#footnote-15)

Beyond replication, there have been efforts directed towards applying meta-analysis to RCT data (Bandiera et al. 2017; Meager 2019). Other efforts include extrapolation based on structural modeling, exploiting selection and non-compliance within RCTs, principal stratum analysis, and reweighting based on observable characteristics to make predictions about policy effectiveness in other contexts (see Williams 2020 for an overview of this literature).

One common rebuttal to the external validity challenge has been to claim that all case studies suffer from this problem (Banerjee and Duflo 2009; Samii 2016, 2020). As Deaton and Cartwright (2018) argue, this is a misleading defense as the strengths of various methods depend on the question at hand and the purpose of the study. If you are looking the average effect of an intervention in a population, an RCT may be a good method. However, RCTs can only provide partial answers if the intention of an investigation is to make general or causal claims, or if it is about something impossible to randomize in the way an RCT requires.

# 4. The Rise and Rule of the Randomistas in Development Policy

While randomistas have influenced academic research substantially, much of the excitement around RCTs has been about their potential role as a tool to ‘resolve contentious policy debates’ (Chupein and Glennerster 2018, p. 62). Indeed, the laureates have expressed their desire for RCTs to revolutionize social policy in the twenty-first century (Duflo and Kremer 2005; Banerjee et al. 2007b). The influence of RCTs on policy has been substantial. It extends beyond providing evidence on individual projects and programs and encompasses reframing and broadening current thinking in development (Banerjee, Duflo, and Kremer 2016; Donovan 2018; Hjort et al. 2019; Das 2020; Naritomi et al. 2020). This section reviews the randomistas’ influence on policy, discusses the notion of evidence-based policy, and then delves into a specific policy debate (on the efficacy of microfinance) to evaluate what role RCTs have played in ‘resolving’ this debate.

## 4.1. RCTs and the Aid Industry

To understand how the randomistas have impacted policy, we need to unpack both the demands of the aid industry that RCTs are able to satisfy and the strategic positioning of the randomistas. RCTs both fit in well with current developments in the aid industry – and they push the aid industry in certain directions (Bédécarrats, Guérin, and Roubaud 2017; Donovan 2018).

To understand the demands of the aid industry, it is necessary to provide some context. Given that states across the developing world had been heavily undermined and underfunded in the 1980s (Mkandawire 2005), there was a strong trend towards an NGO-ization of development in the 1990s. This was driven by Western agencies and donor governments wanting to bypass the inefficient state to reach people living in poverty ‘directly’. By necessity, aid was to an increasing extent being directed through individual projects rather than sector or country-wide schemes (Krause 2014). With the launch of the UN Millennium Development Goals, this focus on targeted poverty alleviation was compounded. Furthermore, at the beginning of the 2000s, there was increased emphasis on improving aid effectiveness (Savedoff, Levine, and Birdsall 2006; Mawdsley, Savage, and Kim 2014).

Particularly after 2008, the cost of aid programs became increasingly important, given that aid budgets came under pressure (Donovan 2018). As the randomistas often emphasize cost effectiveness (Glennerster and Kremer 2011), their mission fits in well with the interests of the aid community. This broader aid discourse made it easier for the randomistas to gain influence and be heard (Donovan 2018). Furthermore, the privatization and fragmentation of the foreign aid sector since the 1980s enabled the randomistas to bypass political resistance to randomization among both development workers and beneficiaries (Leão and Eyal 2020). The randomistas’ strong influence on the aid debates is in line with the relatively quick uptake of academic trends within aid policy (Stein 2008; Donovan 2018), and especially Economics departments’ strong ties to institutions such as the Gates Foundation, DFID and the World Bank (Donovan 2018).[[16]](#footnote-16)

While the structure of the aid industry made it easy for randomistas to exert influence, it is worth noting that the randomistas also made concerted efforts to position themselves as the solution to the aid industry crisis (Bédécarrats, Guérin, and Roubaud 2017; Donovan 2018). Donovan (2018) identifies two claims by the randomistas that increased their influence on aid debates: (1) they disputed aid’s effectiveness, and (2) they denounced the prevailing claims that aid was effective. They then presented RCTs as a way to both improve aid’s effectiveness and measure its effectiveness better.

An important element of this strategy was the insistence on a pervasive lack of knowledge in development, which then paved the way for experimentation (Deaton and Cartwright 2018; Donovan 2018).[[17]](#footnote-17) As McGoey (2009, p. 155) puts it, uncertainty ‘demands attention, debate, funding, and most crucially, experts to determine how the situation should be resolved … [T]he expert’s insistence on the uncertainty of a situation is virtually unchallengeable, for expert uncertainty, unlike expert knowledge, is difficult to dispute.’ By identifying uncertainty, then, randomistas paved the way for a role for their own methodological expertise.

In addition to meeting a perceived knowledge gap in the aid industry, the randomistas also provide tangible ways to address development problems that appeal to an aid establishment which has been more oriented towards targeted interventions since the 1990s. For example, when speaking publicly, Duflo often makes use of what historian Haskell (1985) has called ‘humanitarian sensibility’. Her optimism and tangible solutions is a part of the donor appeal. In Duflo’s words:

*this is less depressing than the view that it is a big conspiracy against the poor. Name your favourite enemy – capitalism, corruption … Our view is easier. You think hard about the problems and you can solve them. That is why I feel generally a happy person, not at all discouraged* (Duflo, cited in Gapper 2012).

As the above quote demonstrates, Duflo manages to offer constructive solutions to global poverty while at the same time dismissing critics who point to broader structural problems (e.g., capitalism, corruption). Rather than challenging the cuts to the education systems that are forced by austerity, the focus of the laureates directs our attention to absenteeism of teachers, textbooks, the effects of school meals and the number of teachers in the classroom on learning. Their lack of challenge to the systems in which aid agencies operate may indeed be one of the secrets to their success with donors (Bédécarrats, Guérin, and Roubaud 2017).[[18]](#footnote-18)

Furthermore, as they incorporate critique of the aid industry, the randomistas in effect function to displace more radical voices (Boltanski 2011; Donovan 2018). Indeed, precisely by depicting themselves as the rebels, they manage to shift the terms of the debates about aid and development. They have repeatedly depicted themselves as facing resistance and hostility because of their radical approach (e.g., Parker 2010); and despite their success and strong influence on academia and policy, randomistas have continued to present themselves as peripheral, ‘self-fashion[ing] as an upstart group, fighting against the tide’ (Donovan 2018, p. 40).

## 4.2. RCTs and Evidence-Based Policy

As with the aid industry, the rise of RCTs fits well with the rise of ‘evidence-based policy,’ which is in line with the What Works Movements of the US and the UK, and what White (2019) calls the fourth wave of the ‘evidence revolution’. Randomistas often present their quest for evidence as neutral and in everyone’s best interest. For example, Naritomi et al. (2020, p. 1) argue that RCTs bring academics, policymakers from governments, NGOs and international organizations together ‘who share an interest in credibly estimating the causal effects of development programs’ (see Duflo et al. 2015b; Pomeranz and Vila-Belda 2019). Similarly, when the Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA) website states that ‘When our evidence goes out into the world, it can be used by anyone,’[[19]](#footnote-19) it suggests that experimental research has the status of an accessible public good that anyone can pick up and use, rather than producing extremely context-specific estimations.

While the evidence-based policy agenda already constitutes a very narrow view of evidence, within this agenda, ‘RCTs lie at the top of the hierarchy’ (Drèze 2020, p. 1). As Duflo and Kremer (2005, p. 93) put it, ‘all too often development policy is based on fads, and randomised evaluations could allow it to be based on evidence,’ suggesting that evidence did not inform policies before RCTs became prominent.[[20]](#footnote-20) Similarly, the Global Executive Director of J-Pal, Iqbal Dhaliwal has presented evidence produced by J-Pal as an alternative to ‘basing decisions on instinct, ideology, or inertia’ (Adriano 2020, p. 33). The idea that only RCTs can constitute evidence has further led to absurd conclusions such as ‘The World Bank is finally embracing science’ (The Lancet Editorial 2004). The policy options available in an evidence-based policy world also get narrowed down by such a view of evidence (Parkhurst 2017; Kelly and McGoey 2018).

It is an alluring idea that we could find out ‘what works’ through research and then bypass the messy policy-making processes (Hirschman 1967), often tainted by ideology and corruption. What this idea misses is the fact that the adoption of ineffective policies is often driven by political priorities rather than lack of evidence (Parkhurst 2017; Drèze 2020). While it might seem puzzling from a political economy perspective that randomistas position RCTs as a way to let scientific evidence rather than foreign interests determine development priorities (Schmitt 2014), this is very much in line with broader attempts to present market-oriented interventions as apolitical (Pykett 2012; Jones, Pykett, and Whitehead 2013).

As policy decisions are political in nature, shielding these value judgements from public scrutiny does little to strengthen democratic decision making. Indeed, attempts to depoliticize policy belittles the agency and participation of people in policy-making (Drèze 2018a). It is also important to note that policies are informed by reflections on values and objectives, which economists are not necessarily well-suited to deal with. More broadly, good policy requires understanding, not just evidence (Drèze 2020).

Furthermore, the narrowness of randomized trials is impractical for policy making. While RCTs tend to test at most a few policy variations, in the real world of development, interventions are overlapping and synergistic. A broader assessment of economic and social realities is unavoidable when deciding whether a policy in question can be reliably implemented elsewhere (Kvangraven 2020). This view recently led 15 leading economists to call for evaluating ‘whole public policies’ rather than assessing the ‘short-term impacts of micro-projects’ (Alkire et al. 2018). Furthermore, the evidence-based policy agenda has been criticized for being ‘theoretically naive, focusing primarily on the uptake of research evidence as opposed to evidence defined more broadly, and privileging academics’ research priorities over those of policymakers.’ (Oliver, Lorenc, and Innvær 2014, p. 1).

Finally, the response to COVID-19 in the United Kingdom is an excellent example of the political use of so-called evidence-based policy (Alves and Kvangraven 2020). At the beginning, when other European countries were locking down, the UK government argued that expert evidence showed that locking down too early could cause negative psychological effects and that there was a risk of demoralizing people if the lockdown needed to be extended (Brooks et al. 2020; Lunn et al. 2020). It later became clear that this evidence was based on behavioral experiments in entirely different contexts.[[21]](#footnote-21) While the political economy of the British government might explain some of this abuse of evidence, the randomistas’ claim that underlying patterns in human behavior can be generalized has helped to legitimize this kind of reasoning in public policy (Banerjee, Duflo, and Kremer 2016).

## 4.3. Evidence from RCTs: Resolving Debates?

Given that thousands of RCTs have been carried out over the past two decades, it is worth reviewing what evidence this has produced, and whether and how it helps us better understand development processes. Policies that have been tried and tested range from those addressing behavioral constraints to agricultural input use (Duflo, Kremer, and Robinson 2008; Duflo, Dupas, and Kremer 2011; Brauw and Hoffmann 2020; for a critique see Stevano 2020) to education policies (Duflo, Hanna, and Ryan 2012, 2015a, 2015b; for a critique see Muller 2020). The most comprehensive groups of RCTs across different countries, and thus claiming to have external validity, are studies of the graduation program (Banerjee et al. 2015b) and microcredit (Banerjee et al. 2015a, 2015c). The RCTs of the graduation program, involve a bundle of policies targeted at people living in extreme poverty to help them generate lasting improvements in their well-being. They were conducted across six countries. Based on these studies Banerjee et al. (2015b, p. 15) conclude that ‘the positive impacts generated by these programs are likely to be predictive of what a government could expect, if implemented similarly but at a larger scale.’ However, Kabeer’s (2019, p. 197) analyses of two of these six studies (the ones in India and Pakistan) find that ‘not only did the RCTs fail to meet their own criteria for establishing causality, but they also provided very limited explanation for the patterns of outcomes observed.’

Similar critiques can be made of the group of six RCTs on microcredit published in the January 2015 issue of American Economic Journal: Applied Economics (Banerjee, Karlan, and Zinman 2015c).[[22]](#footnote-22) Each experiment documents the impact of microcredit in a different setting, arguing that microcredit proponents to date had failed to ‘disentangle causation from correlation’ (Banerjee, Karlan, and Zinman 2015c, pp. 1–2). The conclusion drawn from the studies was that the interventions were modestly positive at best, and often they did not lead to significant changes in terms of health, education, and women’s empowerment. This section focuses on four issues in relation to these studies: (1) their engagement with prior evidence, (2) issues of internal validity, (3) issues of external validity, and (4) scientific publication standards and engagement with critics.

First, Banerjee, Karlan, and Zinman (2015c, p. 1) claim that ‘the evidentiary base for anointing microcredit was quite thin,’ which is in line with the randomistas’ tendency to not cite or build further upon non-experimental studies (Bédécarrats, Guérin, and Roubaud 2020b). Indeed, prior evidence is dismissed for being based on ‘anecdotes, descriptive statistics or impact studies that are unable to distinguish causality from correlation’ (Banerjee, Karlan, and Zinman 2015c, p. 1–2). Furthermore, Banerjee, Karlan, and Zinman (2015c) claim to be participating in debates about microcredit that have been ongoing since the 2000s, but 12 of the 18 references in their introduction to the special issue come from the authors themselves and 17 (94.4 per cent) from other J-Pal members (Bédécarrats, Guérin, and Roubaud 2020b). No non-RCT articles are cited, despite the rich literature on microcredit across social sciences (from Morduch 1999 to Duvendack et al. 2011). In a systematic review, Duvendack et al. (2011) establish that microcredit does not have transformative effects and that the results so far reveal a limited and heterogeneous impact. Indeed, against the backdrop of existing non-experimental studies, Banerjee et al. (2015) seem to have no new results (Bédécarrats, Guérin, and Roubaud 2020b). This erasure of non-experimental work is a characteristic of RCTs and has led to complaints that the RCT enterprise is not sufficiently cumulative (Deaton and Cartwright 2018; Bédécarrats et al. 2019; Kabeer 2020a). As Kabeer (2020a) notes, many RCT studies simply reaffirm the findings of nonexperimental studies.

Second, there are several issues regarding internal validity (for a full discussion see Bédécarrats, Guérin, and Roubaud 2020b). For example, all the articles mention a systematic problem of statistical underpower, as sample sizes are not large enough to estimate actual impacts (Bédécarrats, Guérin, and Roubaud 2020b).[[23]](#footnote-23) Furthermore, the results of the RCTs can be interpreted in widely different ways than the randomistas interpret them, again questioning the notion that RCT results ‘are what they are.’ As Bédécarrats, Guérin, and Roubaud (2020b) note, strong assumptions about individual behavior determine the interpretation of the RCT results presented in the special issue, and that anthropological and political economy frameworks would lead to significantly different interpretations. For example, while the RCT studies in the special issue suggest that the establishment of microenterprises reflects an expansion of choice, this interpretation neglects to consider that they may actually reflect the absence of choice – as many micro-entrepreneurs prefer formal, paid employment over precarious self-employment. This is an example of a more general feature of the interpretations made by randomistas that tend to focus on individual ‘rational’ behavior, obscuring the complexity of motivations as well as the structural conditions that restrict choice (ibid, Kabeer 2020a).

It is worth mentioning that the special issue claims that the studies in it allow us to draw the conclusion that microcredit is *not* the ‘debt trap’ many of its critics claim it to be. Again, none of these critics are cited, leaving the reader wondering who they are and what their evidence is. This is striking, given the amount of critical literature on the negative effects of microcredit, especially in the Global South (Bateman, Blankenburg, and Kozul-Wright 2018). How do the RCT studies reach the conclusion that microcredit is not a debt trap? This leads us to the issue of external validity. The six RCTs focus on areas and populations that were meant to be free of microcredit, thus one would expect over indebtedness to be less acute in these areas than elsewhere. Generalizing those cases to make a general argument is thus problematic. Furthermore, over-indebtedness *has* been documented in some of the countries studied, but the fact that these RCTs did not detect it seems to be evidence enough for Banerjee et al. (2015) to conclude that it does not exist (Bédécarrats, Guérin, and Roubaud 2020b).

For example, the RCT on Bosnia and Herzegovina uncovers that the treatment group had payment difficulties and recognizes these difficulties could be a symptom of over-indebtedness (Augsburg et al. 2015). Therefore, although the RCT cannot conclude anything about the existence of debt trap, it seems irresponsible to rule it out, especially given the context of a prior over-indebtedness crisis in Bosnia (Bédécarrats, Guérin, and Roubaud 2020b) Similarly, the default crisis that took place in Morocco during the RCT in question is not mentioned.

The many issues with severe over-indebtedness experienced in India are papered over as well. Banerjee, Karlan, and Zinman (2015c) cite one press article about ‘anecdotes’ of indebted borrowers, ignoring the many scientific studies documenting this as a phenomenon in India (Srinivasan 2009; Morgan and Olsen 2010, 2011; Taylor 2011; Guérin et al. 2013; Joseph 2013; Mader 2013; Mader 2018; Carswell, De Neve, and Ponnarasu 2020).[[24]](#footnote-24) Bédécarrats, Guérin, and Roubaud (2020b) therefore turn Banerjee, Karlan, and Zinman’s (2015c) claim about anecdotal evidence on its head and ask: Is not the evidence from one RCT in the outskirts of Hyderabad that is anecdotal, if they are interested in the general trends in India?[[25]](#footnote-25)

Beyond ignoring prior work and validity concerns, there are deeper problems with scientific norms that are sidestepped in the work of the randomistas on microcredit. They both sidestep rules of scientific ethics and seemingly refuse to engage with critics. The norm in academia is that knowledge is supposed to be validated based on anonymous and critical peer review. For this to happen, a few ethical scientific rules must be respected, such as managing conflicts of interests (Bédécarrats, Guérin, and Roubaud 2020b). In the case of the special issue on microcredit, the three editors are members of J-Pal (Abhijit Banerjee, Dean Karlan and Jonathan Zinman 2015c). In addition to the introduction to the special issue, each of these editors also co-authored one article in the special issue, and two of them were members of the Board of Editors (Abhijit Banerjee, Dean Karlan and Jonathan Zinman 2015c). Furthermore, Duflo is both the journal’s editor (and founder) and co-author on two of the six articles. What’s more, nearly half of the authors of the articles in the special issue are also members of J-Pal (11 of 25) and four are affiliated professors or PhD students with J-Pal (Bédécarrats, Guérin, and Roubaud 2020b). The journal, thus, does not seem to be particularly preoccupied with managing any conflicts of interests. Ties to editors play a large role in publishing, more so in economics than in other social science fields (Wu 2006; Fourcade, Etienne, and Algan 2015; Colussi 2018). But these ties undermine claims to objectivity and rigor.

Moreover, there is no discussion of ethical issues in the microcredit special issue (Bédécarrats, Guérin, and Roubaud 2020b)*.* The articles do not specify whether informed consent was requested or obtained, with one exception, which asked for partial consent. The Bosnian RCT provided credit to individuals initially rejected by the microfinance institution’s risk criteria; this places the ‘treated’ group at risk of overborrowing**.** This goes against the principle of doing no harm. We will get back to this issue in the next section.

On engaging with critics, Bédécarrats et al. (2019, 2020b) document a strategy among the randomistas that seems to be to ignore them. The authors, Florent Bédécarrats, Isabelle Guérin, and François Roubaud, invited proponents of RCTs to engage in scientific debate on several occasions, but never received an answer (Bédécarrats, Guérin, and Roubaud 2020b). Ten of the most vocal proponents of RCTs were invited to contribute to an edited volume that was being put together with Oxford University Press on RCTs (Bédécarrats, Guérin, and Roubaud 2020a), but they all declined.

After writing the critical review of the Moroccan RCT on microcredit, Bédécarrats et al. (2019) informed Crépon et al. (2015) of their conflicting findings and drafted a Comment for AEJ:AE (which was declined). Only after the results by Bédécarrats et al. (2019) were published by the press did Crépon et al. (2015) react, producing a 51-page Rejoinder arguing that their results were robust. Given that the conclusions of the two studies were completely contradictory, Bédécarrats, Guérin, and Roubaud suggested that a third party assessment be carried out to determine if one of the studies should be retracted, but Crépon et al. (2015) declined this invitation. Furthermore, Crépon and his coauthors sidestepped scientific standards by not providing their codes (Bédécarrats, Guérin, and Roubaud 2020b).

Finally, the rich literature on microcredit (both qualitative and quantitative) demonstrates that certain types of microcredit may be useful for certain categories of populations and in certain contexts, but not in others (Copestake et al. 2016). Given the heterogeneity of effects and the complexity of the causal claims, RCTs are not necessarily a better method to study the impact of microcredit (Duvendack et al. 2011; Bernard, Delarue, and Naudet 2012; Bédécarrats et al. 2020), and it is difficult to say if RCTs have improved our ability to fight poverty. If anything, they have restricted it by undermining existing evidence, limiting what is considered legitimate knowledge, and stifling open scientific debate about the impact of microcredit programs.

# 5. An Inclusive or Exclusive Enterprise?

The randomista enterprise often claims to be promoting inclusivity and diversity in economics, through collaboration with institutions in the Global South, and through an interdisciplinary approach. This section reviews the case *for* RCTs as an inclusive enterprise, before demonstrating that the randomistas remain exclusive in significant ways.

First, let’s consider the collaboration with scholars in the Global South.[[26]](#footnote-26) Randomistas tend to emphasize that their research has led to an increase in in-field apprenticeships for young researchers and the ‘establishment of robust research infrastructure in numerous developing countries around the world’ (Chupein and Glennerster 2018, p. 62). J-PAL’s culture of active collaboration across the world by RCT proponents is well known (Avdeenko and Frölich 2020; Banerji and Chavan 2020).

It is true that the randomistas practice a form of collaboration that is not common in the economics profession (Labrousse 2016). Furthermore, randomistas have invested considerably in training and capacity building workshops for partners in the Global South, to ensure that they are able to carry out and manage their own experiments (Duflo et al. 2015). What’s more, collaboration with co-authors in the Global South is slightly higher for RCT studies than other development papers (3.6 percentage points higher across the 2000–2019 period), but is still very low – only around 10 per cent of all published papers in development economics in 2018 listed a co-author from the Global South according to Naritomi et al. (2020).

Second, proponents argue that RCTs encourage interdisciplinary work (Avdeenko and Frölich 2020; Haan, Dowie, and Mariara 2020). Naritomi et al. (2020) argue that RCTs can help promote more interdisciplinary, inclusive, and diverse quantitative development research, which they demonstrate with data from recent publications in development economics. They conclude that greater attention to methodological rigor could lead to ‘increases in pluralism and inclusiveness of research in development economics’ (Naritomi et al. 2020, p. 2).[[27]](#footnote-27)

Do these arguments hold? The rest of this section reviews various ways in which RCTs may be considered an exclusive, rather than inclusive enterprise. Exclusivity can be found in the randomistas’ method, theory and approach, in terms of excluding scholars and scholarship from the Global South, excluding the knowledge of subjects, and in terms of excluding ethical issues concerning the people taking part in experiments.

Given that the randomista community is united primarily by their methodology (Donovan 2018), in addition to being guided by a shared theoretical apparatus (Kvangraven 2020), the spirit of teamwork and inclusiveness among the randomistas operates within certain boundaries, leaving out those who do not operate within the same conceptual range or cognitive infrastructures (Fleck [1934] 1981; Hirschman and Berman 2014). In that way, they are inviting scholars from the Global South and elsewhere to be a part of their way of thinking, rather than being open and inclusive to theoretical frameworks and methods that have emerged in the Global South. This is a liberal Eurocentric view of what it means to be inclusive.[[28]](#footnote-28) Similarly, although the prize going to Duflo symbolizes a step forward for women in economics, given her limited view of the role of sexism in society it is unlikely that she will work to address sexism in economics field in a structural manner.

Furthermore, there are important exclusive practices by the randomistas that are hidden behind their quest for rigor. For example, while one could fruitfully think of RCTs as one tool among many, it is clear from the randomistas’ failure to engage with non-experimental studies in their literature reviews that, for many RCT proponents, ‘RCTs are not just top of the menu of approved methods, nothing else is on the menu’ (Ravallion 2018, 11).

Economists’ neglect of insights from other social sciences and their methodologies (Bourdieu 2005) is also evident in the work of the randomistas. This is problematic, given that alternative approaches can provide perspectives to complement knowledge generated by RCTs. For example, Kabeer (2019) points out that it is unlikely that RCTs alone can adequately explain the central role of human agency for project success, and demonstrates how insights from feminist economics can complement findings from RCTs.

What’s more, the randomistas study many questions that might be enlightened by interdisciplinary input, such as alcohol addiction, electoral fraud, early childhood stimulation, governance, political order, accountability, political institutions, weak states and collective action (Humphreys and Weinstein 2009; Banerjee, Duflo, and Kremer 2016). However, rather than look to the approaches and theoretical frameworks of other disciplines, the randomistas engage in What Boulding (1969), Granovetter (1990) and Fine and Milonakis (2009) have called ‘economic imperialism’, by seeking to generalize and expand neoclassical economics to domains outside economics.

Furthermore, while randomistas claim to be inclusive of scholars in the Global South, as they organize workshops and engage them as partners, there are many indications that the randomista enterprise has made development economics a more exclusive and hierarchical field. First of all, RCTs have been criticized for taking advantage of local researchers and not giving appropriate credit to scholars working on the projects in the Global South (Cronin-Furman and Lake 2018; Kaplan, Kuhnt, and Steinert 2020). Furthermore, the majority of RCT studies, even when they are conducted in the Global South, are credited to scholars based in the Global North. According to Hoffman (2020), out of experiments conducted in the Global South published between 2009 and 2014 in top economics journals, 84 per cent of lead authors were at institutions in the US or Western Europe. In contrast to the natural sciences where all members of a group participating in an experiment get credit for papers published based on those experiments, economics papers published based on RCTs tend to only give credit to a few authors, while the rest are relegated to mentions in a footnote. This reality runs counter to the idea that the RCT enterprise is particularly inclusive of scholars in the Global South. Second, the cost of doing an RCT has raised financial barriers to entry across the world, even for researchers in less elite institutions in the West. Because of this imbalance, ‘inequality in the production of ideas regarding development’ has been ‘amplified’ (Kapur 2020, p. 1). The persistence of power imbalances in research teams has indeed provoked backlash in some countries, where moves have been made to raise barriers to foreign researchers (Rochmyaningsih 2018). Unfortunately, despite the rise of field experiments in economics, critical reflections on ethics in field work is discussed much less in the field than in anthropological, geographic, conflict, and global health literature (Kaplan, Kuhnt, and Steinert 2020).

On a related note, there is also the question of power embedded in decisions of which interventions to test and how they will be evaluated (Chambers 1997; Zaveri 2020). While randomistas claim RCTs allow them to interact with and get close to people and their customs (e.g., Paluck 2010; Glennester 2015; Bandiera 2019), their methodology is the one that allows for this the least compared to other micro-oriented research methods. For example, qualitative field work requires more time spent with the subjects of the research and opens up more possibilities for a deeper understanding of people’s culture and reasoning.

Indeed, as RCTs often involve imposing ‘our realities on the poor’ (Zaveri 2020, p. 1), participatory methods may be more inclusive, and therefore also more useful (Sielbeck-Bowen et al. 2002; Guijt 2014; Van Hemelrijck and Guijt 2016).[[29]](#footnote-29)

What’s more, the institutional arrangements with institutions such as J-Pal and IPA at the center reinforce the power of the researchers in the Global North to frame the questions to be asked, and how and where to investigate them. Although not stated, there is an implicit understanding underpinning this arrangement that it is the Global North researchers that have the most important expertise. This brings us to the colonial and paternalistic dimensions of researchers based in the Global North estimating what is best for people living in poverty in the Global South (Tilley 2011; Berndt and Boeckler 2016; Sindzingre 2019; Hoffman 2020). This is an issue because the research questions tend to originate in the Global North, even when the questions are about the lives of people living in the Global South. Rather than taking the realities or epistemologies of the communities being studied as starting points, interventions are designed to ‘test’ behavioral responses to pre-defined interventions.

A related problem is the exclusion of ethical concerns in RCTs (Hoffman 2020). Among the problems at stake are issues such as lying, instrumentalizing people, the role of consent, accountability, the role of foreign intervention, in addition to the choice of who gets a treatment (for a comprehensive overview of ethical issues related to RCTs, see Baele 2013 or Sindzingre 2019). Let’s look at consent in RCTs as an example. Few social experiments discuss informed consent explicitly, let alone discuss the ethical issues with securing informed consent among children or people living in poverty (Schuman 2012). Hoffman (2020) finds this to be particularly true for RCTs, and finds that participant awareness of the experiment is lower for experiments conducted in Africa, Asia and Latin America (34 per cent) than for experiments conducted in Europe (65 per cent). Furthermore, Hoffman finds that among experiments carried out in former colonies, 78 per cent of authors do not even discuss informed consent. While some state that participants were intentionally left ignorant and some indicate informed consent for parts of the study, not a single study indicates that participants were explicitly aware of being a part of an experiment. Not securing informed consent from participants is problematic from an ethical viewpoint, as it violates their personhood by treating them as subjects to be manipulated for research (Barrett and Carter 2010; Hoffman 2020). While one could argue that the benefits of findings from RCTs are so great that it justifies the withholding of consent in order to increase the chances of internal validity (e.g., Bulte, Di Falco, and Lensink 2020), considering the many methodological and conceptual problems with RCTs discussed in this article and elsewhere, the widespread withholding of consent among people living in poverty becomes difficult to justify.

While ethical concerns regarding potential harm to groups is discussed extensively in the medical literature, it receives less attention in Economics. Indeed, this has long been a concern among critics of Economics, as the profession not only lacks a code of ethics, but it has historically showed very little interest in ethical questions (DeMartino 2009). In his study of the American Economic Association’s (AEA) archives, DeMartino (2009, p. 2) found that:

*Only once has the AEA Executive Committee established a committee to investigate the need for professional ethics, and it did so in that case (in 1958) only because leading economists had been accused of plagiarism and other professional misconduct. The general attitude of the profession, reports A. W. Coats (1985, 1710–11), was that ‘the AEA needed no special code of ethics because the canons of correct professional practice were too obvious to require specification.’*

DeMartino’s critique of the profession’s lack of ethical considerations extends beyond the missing code of ethics to highlighting the need for economics to acknowledge the epistemic asymmetry between themselves and others, as well as epistemic insufficiency. This implies that ‘they may do substantial harm as they try to do good.’ (DeMartino 2013, p. 166). This problem is much broader than the ethical concerns related to RCTs outlined above, but it is particularly relevant for randomistas to consider.

To go back to the question posed of whether RCTs in Economics make up an inclusive or exclusive enterprise, I argue that the way the industry currently is shaped means it is largely exclusive of other ways of knowing, including both non-Western and non-mainstream economic approaches. However, the problem with RCTs extends beyond the lack of epistemological inclusivity. The fact that the way RCTs are conducted often means scholars in the Global North set the agenda with a shallow engagement with scholars in the Global South, that research subjects in the Global South are used for research without their consent, that research subjects are being instrumentalized, and that there is very little concern with ethical questions related to experimentation on human subjects, suggests that the research is often exploitative as well. While it is a positive step that RCT researcher seek to highlight the need for inclusivity and diversity in research, to achieve this the whole enterprise will need to be dramatically overhauled.

# 6. Conclusion

Given the dominance of RCTs in development economics and the methodological and conceptual problems with the approach, it is important to challenge the Prize’s legitimization of a methodologically and theoretically prescriptive view of how to find solutions to global problems*.* Indeed, there is important research to be done on systems that produce poverty and inequality, but this requires systems-level thinking.

The rise of the randomistas is consistent with changes in the field of economics, especially development economics. Shifts in the aid industry in the 2000s also paved the way for the increasing influence of the randomistas. While neither challenging the existing systems of knowledge production nor systems of social provisioning, randomistas have strategically positioned themselves as ‘rebels’ in academia and policy-circles. This has led to a narrowing of ways to think about development research and policy, and a silencing of more critical voices. Furthermore, the randomistas draw clear boundaries around what is considered legitimate knowledge; this too limits our ability to conceptualize and solve problems (Reddy 2012).

Perhaps the most concerning aspect of the randomista enterprise is their claim to neutrality and objectivity. While knowledge generated by RCTs may be able to generate useful insights in some instances, evidence always requires interpretation. As Kabeer (2020a), Bédécarrats, Guérin, and Roubaud (2020b), Drèze (2020) and others demonstrate, the findings of the randomistas do not speak for themselves; they require interpretation. The randomistas’ interpretation of these results through a neoclassical lens limits their understanding of social phenomena because it fails to understand how structures constrain individual behavior.

Particularly in light of covid-19, this theoretical and methodological narrowing of the field and of what counts as evidence is a problem for our ability to build a more just and resilient society, given the structural fragilities the pandemic has exposed (Alves and Kvangraven 2020). The laureates draw attention to the massive disparities and poverty in the world, and in many instances also the problems with relying on market forces to fix these issues. However, their solutions center on patching the system here and there – with vaccines (Kremer, Levin, and Snyder 2020) and social safety nets (Banerjee and Duflo 2019) – rather than addressing the underlying systemic problems that give rise to poverty and inequality.

Furthermore, as the randomistas’ contribution to the microcredit debate demonstrates, running many RCTs across the world to test one intervention does not ‘settle’ the policy debate on that issue. To the contrary, the result of the randomistas’ increased dominance is not one of increased certainty about development policy, but rather an extended experimental system (Rheinberger 2010), where the randomistas are at the upper-end of the hierarchy of authoritative voices in development (Donovan 2018). The randomista enterprise tends to delegitimize other ways of knowing, thereby excluding centuries of insights and research in the social sciences from across the world. While in line with the marginalization of alternative economic theories since the 1970s, the randomistas have helped cement a hierarchical, positivist and Eurocentric field. To decolonize economics, it is necessary to challenge RCTs’ claim to objectivity, while pushing to open up space in the field for epistemologies that originate from outside of the West.

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1. The Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL) website: www.povertyactionlab.org/about-j-pal [accessed May 25, 2020]. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The term ‘randomistas’, referring to scholars who conduct RCTs, was initially meant as a critique when Angus Deaton (2007) first used it. However, it has since become a common term used to describe researchers who rely heavily on RCTs, even among randomistas themselves. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. ‘Abhijit Banerjee’ <https://www.povertyactionlab.org/person/banerjee>. Accessed July 5th 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. ‘Ban names high-level panel to map out “bold” vision for future global development efforts’ UN News, July 31st, 2012. Available here: <https://news.un.org/en/story/2012/07/416752-ban-names-high-level-panel-map-out-bold-vision-future-global-development> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Michael Kremer — Interview. NobelPrize.org. Nobel Media AB 2020. Tue. 7 Jul 2020. Accessed July 5th, 2020. <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/economic-sciences/2019/kremer/interview> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. MacArthur Foundation — Michael Robert Kremer. Accessed July 5th, 2020. <https://www.macfound.org/fellows/556/> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Harvard Kennedy School — Faculty Profiles — Michael Kremer. Accessed July 5th, 2020.<https://www.hks.harvard.edu/faculty/michael-kremer> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Precision Agriculture for Development: <https://precisionag.org/> [accessed July 5th 2020]. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. As of July 2020, the team consisted of Amrita Ahuja, Susan Athey, Arthur Baker, Owen Barder, Juan Camilo Castillo, Rachel Glennerster, Michael Kremer, Scott Kominers, Jean Lee, Jonathan Levin, Christopher Snyder, Alex Tabarrok, Brandon Tan, Duc Tran and Witold Wiecek. Overview of the project is available here: [www.acceleratinght.org](http://www.acceleratinght.org) [accessed July 5th 2020]. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. ‘Harvard at a Glance — Nobel Laureates’. Full list available at:<https://www.harvard.edu/about-harvard/harvard-glance/honors/nobel-laureates> [accessed July 5th 2020]. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. This stands in contrast to a realist position, where ‘theorising is impossible in the absence of both the abstract and the particular, and as such is not an activity separate from understanding’ (Surendran and Kumar 2020, p. 2). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Many have criticized the plumber analogy for being somewhat misleading. For example, Rao (2020, p. 2) points out that ‘the plumber is not incentivized by the pressures of academic publishing’. See also Akram-Lodhi (2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. This influential report by CGD (2006, p. 3) captures this sentiment: ‘No responsible physician would consider prescribing medications without properly evaluating their impact or potential side effects. Yet in social development programs, where large sums of money are spent to modify population behaviors, change economic livelihoods, and potentially alter cultures or family structure, no such standard has been adopted.’ Furthermore, randomistas consistently use medical vocabulary when discussing development problems, such as referring to aid projects as ‘treatments’. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. J-Pal’s former Director, Rachel Glennerster’s (2013) view that RCTs simply ‘provide independent or objective results … . Because …  the results of a randomized evaluation are what they are. … [T]here is relatively little flexibility for the evaluator to run the analysis in different ways to generate the outcome they want to see.’ This sentiment has been repeated over and over by randomistas. For example, Banerjee et al. (2007b, p. 115) argues that evidence from RCTs ‘is simple to interpret. The beauty of randomized evaluations is that the results are what they are’. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Furthermore, the circumstances needed to even evaluate whether experiments may have external validity are often inadequately reported (Peters, Langbein, and Roberts 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. It was World Bank president George Woods (1963–1968) who laid the foundation for a large influence of economists within the Bank (Donovan 2018). As President, he established the Bank’s Economics Department and the key position of Chief Economist, and the number of economists increased by 25 per cent under his leadership. By 1991, 80 per cent of senior staff in the Policy, Research and External Affairs departments had training in Economics or Finance (Woods 2000). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. On the political economy of strategic ignorance, see Gross and McGoey (2015) and McGoey (2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. This is true for the uptakes of many methodologies that resonate with a particular way of seeing the world. There have, for example, been a series of critiques of the World Bank’s measure of poverty and inequality because they conform to the narrative of globalization being inclusive (Wade 2002; Reddy and Pogge 2010; Hickel 2017; Human Rights Council 2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. ‘Innovation for Poverty Action — What Do We Mean By Impact?’ Accessed July 5th, 2020. [www.poverty-action.org/impact/what-do-we-mean-impact](http://www.poverty-action.org/impact/what-do-we-mean-impact). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Oliver, Lorenc, and Innvær (2014) contend that such claims are themselves unsupported by evidence. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. The specific argument on the demoralizing effects of an extended quarantine was based on a randomized experiment on extending deployment in the armed forces. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. For a comprehensive critique of this Special Issue, see Bédécarrats, Guérin, and Roubaud (2020b). For a critique of earlier RCTs on microcredit (as well as studies using other methods), see Duvendack et al. (2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. 60 per cent of the impacts at 1 per cent significance come from the Moroccan RCT, although it represents just 12 per cent of the total number of estimated impacts. Moreover, a replication by Bédécarrats et al. (2019) found flaws in the Moroccan RCT that cast doubts on the whole study and lowers the number of significant impacts even further. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. There has also been important work on how the promotion of microfinance intersects with forced labor and cycles of debt bondage in India (see Morgan and Olsen 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Kabeer (2020a) finds similar problems with Duflo’s (2015) generalizations about women’s employment in the service industry in India based on a few RCTs of IT-related jobs in Mumbai and Business process outsourcing (BPO) jobs in the outskirts of Delhi. For Kabeer, Duflo’s conclusions stand in contrast to the broader trend in the country, which shows little evidence of rise in service sector jobs for women. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Randomistas in the Global North often seem to misunderstand the constraints scholars in the Global South face and, perhaps not surprising given their cognitive frames, attribute them to individual inadequacies. For example, in her piece on the laureates, Bandiera (2019; emphasis added) writes that ‘bringing academics to the field has exposed a large number of locals to research ideas, and, most importantly, to the idea of research’. This suggests that scholarship in the Global South is constrained primarily lack of knowledge about research rather than structural problems that have led to underfunding of public universities (see e.g., Federici, Caffentzis, and Alidou 2000). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Note that economics is currently the least interdisciplinary of the social sciences (Fourcade, Etienne, and Algan 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. For a related critique of inclusion and diversity in higher education, see Ahmed 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Indeed, it has long been recognized by anthropologists that reducing global issues such as poverty to a technical problem tends to come at a human cost (Ferguson 1994). [↑](#footnote-ref-29)