

MELISSA DELL

Contact Information

Department of Economics
Harvard University
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Employment

Assistant Professor, Harvard University, Department of Economics: July 2014 – present
Visiting Assistant Professor, Stanford Institute for Economic Policy Research: September 2016
– June 2017

Past employment

Junior Fellow, Harvard Society of Fellows: July 2012 – June 2014

Affiliations

Faculty Research Fellow, National Bureau of Economic Research
Global Scholar, Canadian Institute for Advanced Research

Education

PhD Economics, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2012
MPhil Economics, Oxford University, with Distinction, 2007
AB Economics, Harvard University, *summa cum laude*, 2005

Awards and Grants

2016	National Science Foundation Grant #1628867: “Military and Civic Action” (\$364,407)
2016	Alfred Sloan Fellowship
2014	Named by the IMF as the youngest of 25 economists under the age of 45 shaping thought about the global economy
2012	Review of Economic Studies Tour
2007	National Science Foundation, Graduate Research Fellowship
2005	Rhodes Scholarship
2005	John Williams Prize – Best Undergraduate Harvard Student in Economics
2005	Seymour Harris Prize – Best Undergraduate Harvard Thesis in Economics
2004	Harry S. Truman Scholarship

Publications

“Trafficking Networks and the Mexican Drug War” *American Economic Review*, 105 (6), 2015, 1738-1779.

"What Do We Learn from the Weather? The New Climate-Economy Literature" (with Ben Jones and Ben Olken). *Journal of Economic Literature*, 52(3), September 2014, pp. 740-798.

“Temperature Shocks and Economic Growth: Evidence from the Last Half Century” (with Ben Jones and Ben Olken). *American Economic Journal: Macroeconomics*, 4(3), July 2012, pp. 66-95.

“The Persistent Effects of Peru’s Mining *Mita*.” *Econometrica* 78(6), 2010: pp. 1863–1903. Translated and reprinted in *Apnutes* 68, 2011: pp. 209-263.

“Productivity Differences Between and Within Countries” (with Daron Acemoglu). *American Economic Journal: Macroeconomics* 2(1), January 2010: pp. 169–188.

“Temperature and Income: Reconciling New Cross-Sectional and Panel Estimates” (with Ben Jones and Ben Olken). *American Economic Review Papers and Proceedings* 99 (2), May 2009: pp. 198-204.

Working Papers

“Nation Building Through Foreign Intervention: Evidence from Discontinuities in Military Strategies.” (with Pablo Querubin). Revise and Resubmit *Quarterly Journal of Economics*.

This study uses discontinuities in U.S. strategies employed during the Vietnam War to estimate their causal impacts. It identifies the effects of bombing by exploiting rounding thresholds in an algorithm used to target air strikes. Bombing increased the military and political activities of the communist insurgency, weakened local governance, and reduced non-communist civic engagement. The study also exploits a spatial discontinuity across neighboring military regions, which pursued different counterinsurgency strategies. A strategy emphasizing overwhelming firepower plausibly increased insurgent attacks and worsened attitudes towards the U.S. and South Vietnamese government, relative to a hearts and minds oriented approach.

“The Historical State, Local Collective Action, and Economic Development in Vietnam.” (with Nathaniel Lane and Pablo Querubin). Submitted.

This study examines how the historical state conditions long-run development, using Vietnam as a laboratory. Northern Vietnam (Dai Viet) was ruled by a strong centralized state in which the village was the fundamental administrative unit. Southern Vietnam was a peripheral tributary of the Khmer (Cambodian) Empire, which followed a patron-client model with weaker, more personalized power relations and no village intermediation. Using a regression discontinuity design across the Dai Viet-Khmer boundary, the study shows that areas historically under a strong state have higher living standards today and better economic outcomes over the past 150 years. Rich historical data document that in villages with a strong historical state, citizens have been better able to organize for public goods and redistribution through civil society and local government. This suggests that the strong historical state crowded in village-level collective action and that these norms persisted long after the original state disappeared.

“The Development Effects of the Extractive Colonial Economy: The Dutch Cultivation System in Java” (with Ben Olken)

Colonial powers typically organized economic activity in the colonies to maximize their economic returns. While the literature has emphasized the negative impacts of colonial extraction on institutional quality, the changes in economic organization implemented to spur production may have countervailing long-run effects. We examine these in the context of the Dutch Cultivation System, the integrated industrial and agricultural system for producing sugar that formed the core of the Dutch colonial enterprise in 19th century Java. We show that areas close to where the Dutch established sugar factories in the mid-19th century are today more industrialized, have better infrastructure, are more educated, and are richer than nearby counterfactual locations that would have been similarly suitable for colonial sugar factories. We also show, using a spatial regression discontinuity design on the catchment areas around each factory, that villages forced to grow sugar cane have more village owned land and also have more schools and substantially higher education levels, both historically and today. The results suggest that the economic structures implemented by colonizers to facilitate production can continue to promote development and economic activity in the long run.

“Insurgency and Long-Run Development: Evidence from the Mexican Revolution.”

This study exploits within-state variation in drought severity to identify how insurgency during the Mexican Revolution, a major early 20th century armed conflict, impacted subsequent government policies and long-run economic development. Using a novel municipal-level dataset on revolutionary insurgency, the study documents that municipalities experiencing severe drought just prior to the Revolution were substantially more likely to have insurgent activity than municipalities where drought was less severe. Many insurgents demanded land reform, and following the Revolution, Mexico redistributed over half of its surface area in the form of *ejidos*: farms comprised of individual and communal plots that were granted to a group of petitioners. Rights to *ejido* plots were non-transferable, renting plots was prohibited, and many decisions about the use of *ejido* lands had to be countersigned by politicians. Instrumental variables estimates show that municipalities with revolutionary insurgency had 22 percentage points more of their surface area redistributed as *ejidos*. Today, insurgent municipalities are 20 percentage points more agricultural and 6 percentage points less industrial. Incomes in insurgent municipalities are lower and alternations between political parties for the mayorship have been substantially less common. Overall, the results support a view of history in which relatively modest events can have highly nonlinear and persistent influences, depending on the broader societal circumstances.

Work in Progress (drafts or presentations available upon request)

“The Long Run Effects of Agricultural Productivity Shocks: Irrigation and Structural Change in Mexico.” (with Pablo Querubin)

“Foreign Competition, Unemployment, and the Mexican Drug War.” (with Ben Feigenberg and Kensuke Teshima)

“Networks of Structural Change: The Role of Japanese War Production in Spurring Taiwan’s Growth Miracle” (with Sahar Parsa)

“Land Reform, Inequality, and the 20th Century Evolution of the Taiwanese Economy.” (with Scarlet Chen and Sahar Parsa)

“Trading Colonialism and Southeast Asia's Long Economic Decline.” (with Leander Heldring and James Robinson)

Professional Activities

Associate Editor for the *Journal of the European Economic Association*.

Referee for *American Economic Review*, *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics*, *American Economic Journal: Macroeconomics*, *American Economic Journal: Policy*, *American Political Science Review*, *Econometrica*, *The Economics of Transition*, *Environment and Development Economics*, *European Economic Review*, *Journal of Development Economics*, *Journal of Economic Growth*, *Journal of Environmental Economics and Management*, *Journal of the European Economic Association*, *Journal of Political Economy*, *Journal of Public Economics*, *Journal of Regional Science*, *Oxford Development Studies*, *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, *The Review of Economics and Statistics*, *Revista de Historia Económica*, *Science*, *Nature*, *Nature Climate Change*