

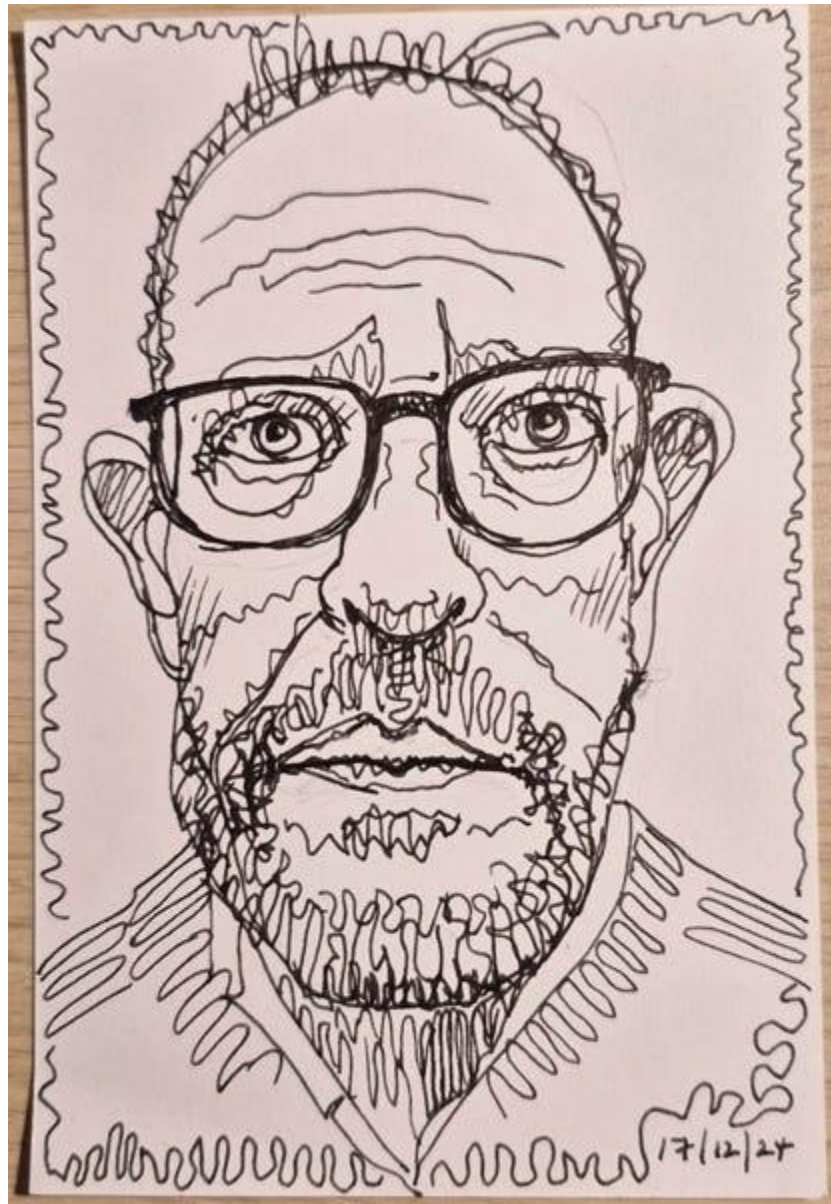


# Th(inking) and Working Politically

Breaking out of linear narratives

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February 2025



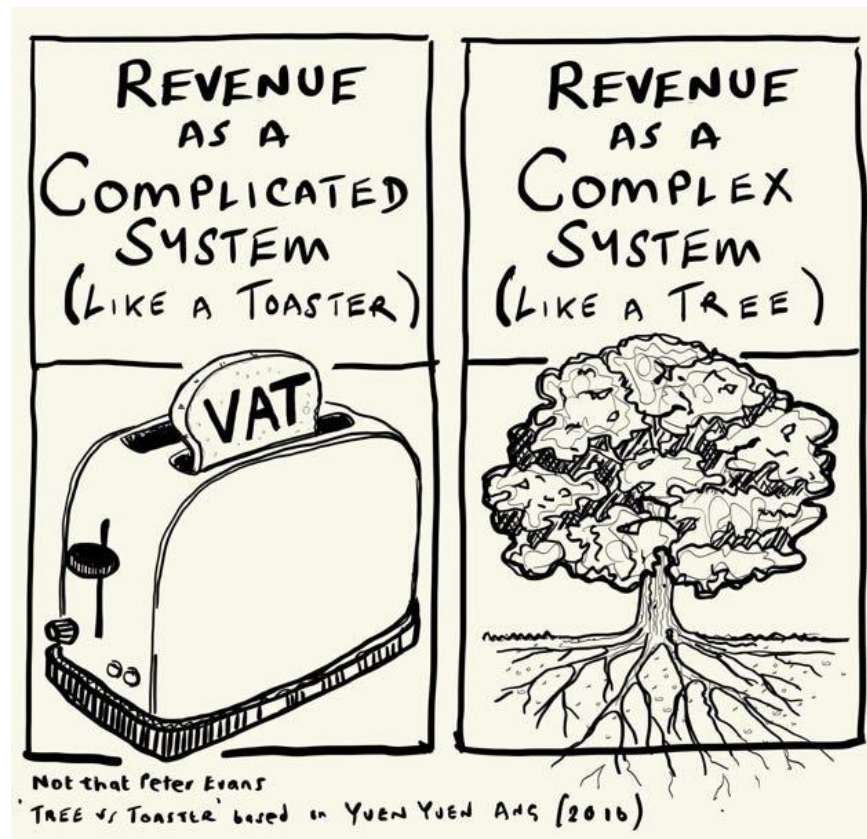
I am a [hack](#) of many trades – at work and play. Late onset political economy followed stints as a governance and social development adviser, a PhD in urban health, and before that I was a swan catcher and nearly became a zoologist. Drawing and painting also ebbs and flows in my life. One of the few things that I saved from 20 years in DFID is a paper file marked 'best doodles'.

Among the things that frustrate me in political economy analysis and research (language too arcane, too slow to emerge in public, too much of a private good because it is not widely shared, too niche and speaking to the converted...) is the limitation inherent in analysing a fascinating and complex context and policy problem and presenting it in a linear narrative

text. This is just what modern humans do, but it feels like a real constraint when what we are describing is complex and anything but linear. I think linear communication also fosters 'solutionism' and technocracy. As well as boredom.

I am an armchair fan of systems thinking too, though my grip on the science is weak and I get easily turned off by abstract tools and framing. Lots of similarly sized bubbles, forests of thin connectors, and tiny labels....

In systems, my inspiration is schoolbook diagrams of ecosystems - so physical geography, flora and fauna, biology, chemistry, weather, and the relationships between these things. (Importantly) the system flows - carbon, water, nitrates etc.

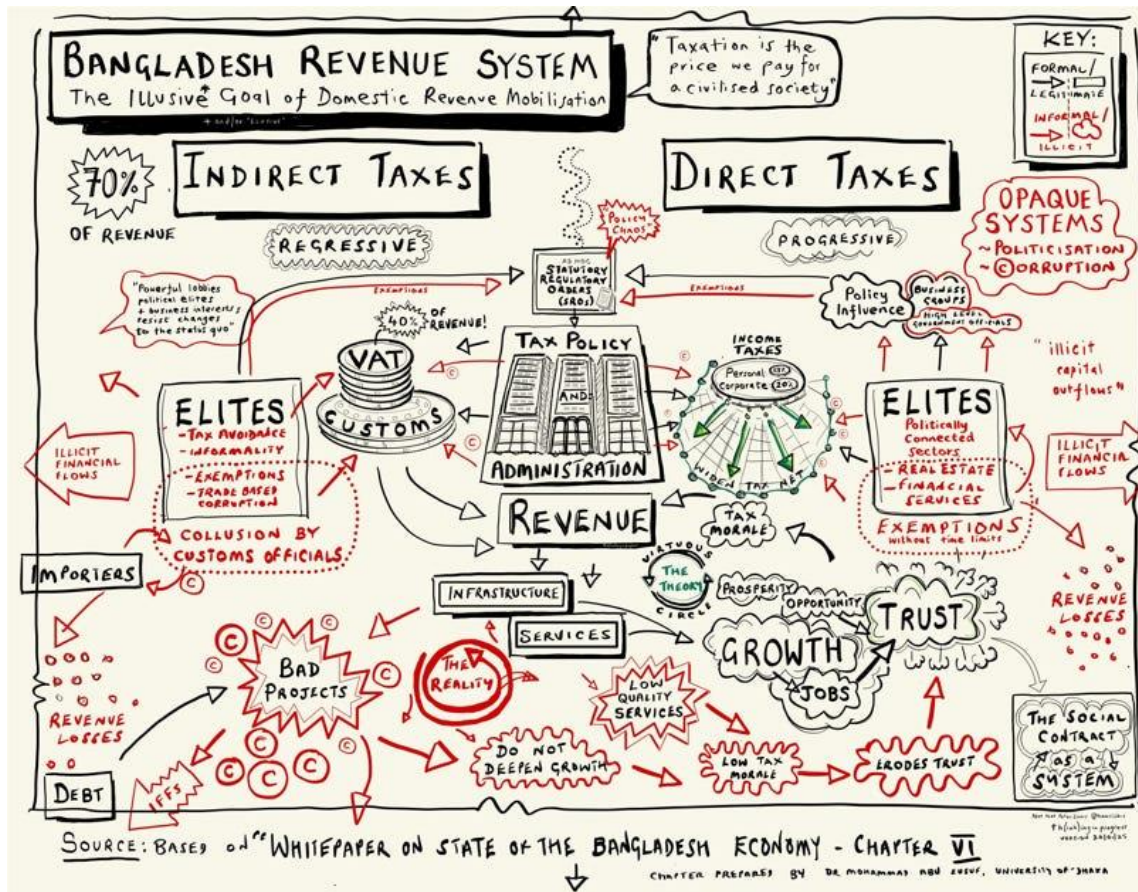


So.... I've been taking the doodles and trying to make them a little more polished, and using just enough systems thinking, in an attempt to break out of linear narratives of power, politics, and context, but also pinning this to organisational 'geography' - such as the fiscal architecture of how a government spends public funds (in theory at least).

Until now, my method was to scratch out a drawing on paper and then send this to my in-house artist (daughter @hamsiidris actually now living far away) to draw on an iPad. I would then bombard her with demands for changes. Lately she has been busy with fripperies like university finals, so I have been teaching myself to use graphic software, under her remote supervision. We both work under the brand 'Th(inking) in Progress'.

Diagrams emerge from my own work, but also when I read analysis that I like and feel a strong urge to try and set it out graphically – so recent examples include the Kenya economic crisis (based on [blogs by Ken Opalo](#)), Sri Lanka fiscal system, and the Bangladesh revenue system (based on a chapter in a new Whitepaper).

The [Bangladesh revenue diagram and accompanying blog](#) are the most recent and were also produced at pace – so acting quickly and getting something out in the policy moment was more important than perfection. The blog also strays into cartoons – in an attempt to use the dark arts (sarcasm, satire) to slay some of the resilient 'zombies' of technocratic tax reform.



It was intended for a non-specialist audience, and I have been flattered by circulation within the Bangladesh reform system. Perhaps there is room in the world for more tax jokes....

If you want to know more – please get in touch ([Peterevans.pje@gmail.com](mailto:Peterevans.pje@gmail.com)). Ideas for future diagrams always sought. And if you want to use the diagrams – feel free, with attribution.

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**Disclaimer:** The views expressed in this reflection are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the Thinking and Working Politically Community of Practice.

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The Thinking and working Politically Community of Practice (TWP CoP) is a global network of practitioners, researchers and policymakers in development and global affairs committed to promoting more effective policy and practice. The TWP CoP works to foster more politically aware approaches to understand how change happens and why, translate findings and implications emerging from political economy analysis into operationally relevant guidance, encourage more flexible and adaptable ways of working, and provide evidence-based insights that can stimulate innovation, sharing and learning in international development and global affairs.

The TWP CoP is funded by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office and hosted by the International Development Department at University of Birmingham.

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