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Review of Andrew Schrank, *The Economic Sociology of Development* (Polity Press, 2023)

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## Book Reviews

**Andrew Schrank, *The Economic Sociology of Development* (Polity Press, 2023).**

Amid rising wealth inequality, declining public services, erosion of rights, the rise of far-right governments, and intensifying social tensions, the world's current state of affairs may seem too gloomy to inspire any discussion about development. Yet, counterintuitively, Andrew Schrank's *The Economic Sociology of Development* presents a compelling argument that now is precisely the moment to revisit reflections on development's meanings, strategies, and consequences. More than that, Schrank seeks to incorporate concerns often relegated to the global South into the established field of economic sociology, which so far has attracted more attention from the global North. With its bridge-building spirit, Schrank's book could not be more timely.

The book offers a roadmap for navigating the alignments and fractures in development perspectives throughout the twentieth century. It recounts how classical sociology's efforts to center the development of "modernity" or "industrial capitalism" within its analyses—and address disparities between "the West and the rest"—began to wane by the mid-twentieth century. Schrank explains that, after World War II, sociology in the core countries shifted its focus toward issues "within the metropole," relegating debates about obstacles and pathways to growth and improvement of life to the margins of the discipline. Consequently, issues related to postcolonial and impoverished countries were repositioned to the interdisciplinary field of development studies. At this juncture, a productive dialogue emerged between economists and social scientists, as well as among scholars from the global North and South, shedding light on the "sociological problems" of development—specifically, the social, political, and religious attitudes and norms that shape critical elements of the economy, such as savings, wages, and entrepreneurship.

However, the field's potential was quickly overshadowed by alternative, more influential approaches. On the one hand, versions of modernization theory dominated the remaining debates on development within sociology departments, suggesting that, akin to in Western countries, the transition from "backwardness" to "modernity" in former colonies would be inevitable and governed exclusively by the adoption of modern values, habits, and institutions. On the other hand, Schrank argues that a "curious alliance" emerged between neo-Marxists and neoclassical economists, who questioned the relevance of the development debate per se. While the latter dismissed the importance of "noneconomic" factors and promoted an optimistic view of comparative advantages and free markets, the former challenged the very possibility of national development under capitalism, arguing that it existed somewhere between illusion and a zero-sum game, rendering it an indefensible project in any terms. Following the end of the Cold War, such divergences became less relevant as neoclassical economists came to dominate development discussions within academic and policy circles. Although their predictions for economic growth systematically failed due to their insensitivity to the "sociological problems" faced by developing countries, sociology did not automatically reenter the intellectual battleground. Schrank aims to address this gap by leveraging the sophistication of the "new economic sociology" as a foundation for revitalizing sociological analyses of development.

Considering these competing accounts, Schrank confronts complex questions about the meanings of development. Examining two leading approaches for thinking about development—commodity production (represented by gross domestic product per capita) and enhancement of capabilities

(measured by the Human Development Index)—the author not only dissects their advantages and disadvantages but, more important, exposes their limitations. Beyond a certain redundancy, these indicators, which focus on national averages, fail to accurately capture income distribution among individuals in an increasingly unequal world. Moreover, they fall short in accounting for the unequal relationships between countries and peoples at the international level, which Schrank contends should be part of a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of development and underdevelopment.

To gain insights into this, Schrank contrasts the gradational view of modernization theory with the relational perspective of neo-Marxists regarding development from an international standpoint. The former posits that key elements for development—such as wealth, income, education, and health—are accessible to all countries, albeit at varying levels or grades. Thus, the development process can be likened to a footrace where all participants could, in principle, cross the finish line, regardless of their pace. In contrast, neo-Marxists argue that the advantages enjoyed by some countries come at the expense of others, to which they are bound by “unequal and combined” relations. From this perspective, development would resemble a football game in which one side triumphs over the other. Aiming to reconcile these disparate views, Schrank suggests two paths forward.

On the one hand, the author makes a case for a broadly relational approach to development to account for global interconnectedness, especially pertinent in an era of ecological crisis in which the effects of isolated actions transcend national boundaries. On the other hand, Schrank contends that sociology should move beyond neo-Marxist pessimism and draw insights on national development, refocusing on the factors that enable mobility and reduce inequality within societies. One might question whether this solution merely reintroduces the divide between “unit-level” and “system-level” analyses, potentially privileging the former when considering the book’s structure. Additionally, one might wonder whether updating the terms of interdependence among national developments entails a more ambitious intellectual endeavor—which could more effectively merge the histories and futures of Northern and Southern countries—and therefore warrants greater emphasis and reflection.

In any case, Schrank offers an innovative analysis of the variety of development dynamics across late-developing societies during the Cold War era. In particular, the typology he builds to describe the state’s roles in transforming (or accommodating) rural elites and fostering (or not) capitalist markets can illuminate different national trajectories and, in doing so, invite future comparative research. Furthermore, drawing on sociological studies, Schrank remarkably reconstructs the inverse process in the final decade of the twentieth century, during which countries partially moved toward neoliberal convergence through institutional diffusion and isomorphism. At the same time, the author warns of the limits of these sociological explanations, which provide scant insight into diverse experiences such as the rise of China, the decline of the WTO, and the emergence of contemporary populism.

With its informed and reflective narrative, Andrew Schrank’s book offers a refreshing analysis of how economic sociology theories, concepts, and methods can revitalize a historically rich yet fragmented knowledge field of development. By placing social, political, institutional, and economic change at the forefront of his approach, Schrank successfully integrates political economy into economic sociology—which is no small feat. It is a book well worth reading.

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