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**Article**

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economic sociology. perspectives and conversations

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*Suggested Citation:* Schrank, Andrew (2024) : Development as a social fact, economic sociology. perspectives and conversations, ISSN 1871-3351, Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies (MPIfG), Cologne, Vol. 25, Iss. 2, pp. 5-11

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/295146>

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# Development as a social fact

Andrew Schrank

## Introduction

This paper challenges both mainstream notions of development, which treat it as an objective feature of self-contained societies, and constructivist alternatives, which view it as an ethnocentric product of western imperialism. Instead, I argue that development is a social fact that's "not always so clearly discernible," much like the systems of "economic organization" alluded to by Durkheim in *The Rules of Sociological Method* (Durkheim [1895] 1982, 57), and go on to explore the implications for economic sociology.

I have divided the paper into four principal sections: The first lays out the limits to both purely objective and purely constructivist interpretations of development. The second makes a broadly Durkheimian case for an alternative that treats development as a social fact that's both "external" to individuals and imbued with "coercive power" over them (Durkheim [1895] 1982, 51). The third illustrates the value of the Durkheimian approach by noting that neither objective nor constructivist notions of development can explain the persistent conflict over the classification of countries by the World Trade Organization. If development was an objective fact, I argue, there'd be no *basis* for disagreement; and if it was little more than a western construct, there'd be no *reason* to disagree. And the fourth concludes by translating the core argument into a broader theoretical and research agenda that puts contrarians and their strategies at the forefront of the development process.

## Competing notions of development in the contemporary social sciences

The connection between economic growth and human well-being is all but an "article of faith" among mainstream social scientists (Philipsen 2015, 1). On their account, indicators of personal income – like

gross domestic product (GDP) per capita – capture the resources available for production, consumption, savings, and investment in society, and resources are the keys to opportunity and choice. When they're growing, argue the faithful, more people can achieve more of their goals, whatever those goals may be. When they're stagnant, however, people have fewer choices and have to make stark trade-offs among competing goals. Mainstream scholars therefore treat growth in per capita GDP as an appropriate gauge and more or less objective indicator of social and economic development.

Amartya Sen nonetheless launched a thoroughgoing critique of the mainstream approach by arguing that economic growth is a means to development rath-

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er than the essence of the process, which is the "expansion of people's capabilities," and that it may not be the most efficient means available in any event (Sen 1983, 760). While he recognizes the importance of material resources, Sen worries about their origins and distribution, and he and his fellow "capability theorists" therefore question the validity of income-based indicators of well-being (Kremakova 2013, 404). Consider, for example, an inequitable petrostate with a large military and a per capita income of \$50,000, on the one hand, and a demilitarized welfare state with a small carbon footprint and an identical per capita income, on the other. Does it make sense to consider them equally developed? Or should notions and indicators of development take additional considerations into account? Proponents of the capabilities approach answer the latter question in the affirmative and have therefore proposed a range of alternatives to per capita income including, most famously, the Human Development Index (HDI) developed by Mahbub ul-Haq and produced annually by the United Nations Human Development Programme. While income-based indicators tend to reduce development to a single dimension, like GDP per capita, the HDI takes the origins and distribution of material resources into account by incorporating measures of health, education, and income into a multidimensional indicator of capabilities (Sen 1999, esp. 318) that presumably rewards the welfare state for building schools and hospitals and punishes the petrostate for putting guns (and fossil fuels) before butter. According to Sen, the goal of the HDI was to "focus on getting at a minimally basic quality of life, calculable from available statistics, in a way that

the Gross National Product or Gross Domestic Product failed to capture” (Sen 2005, 159).

For all of their myriad differences, however, the income- and capabilities-based approaches have at least one thing in common: they assume that development is a more or less objective process that’s subject to spatial and temporal comparison; that is, that development offers a universal goal, or benchmark, and that some countries or societies are objectively more developed than others. Insofar as their preferred indicators of development – GDP per capita and the HDI respectively – are highly correlated, moreover, proponents of the income- and capabilities-based approaches tend to offer similar cross-country rankings. A few low-income countries tend to “overperform” on health and education, and a few high-income countries tend to “underperform” in turn. But the correlations between the two indicators are sufficiently high as to encourage some observers to ask whether they are, in fact, redundant with one another (Schrank 2023, 60; cf. Sunstein 2006, 226).

On reflection, of course, the correlations between the two indicators aren’t particularly surprising. A large body of literature speaks to the associations between monetary income, formal education, and physical well-being at the individual level. Individual correlations tend to grow through aggregation (Robinson 1950). And the architects of both the income- and capabilities-based approaches arguably built similar, self-reinforcing biases into their measures by taking western constructs – like monetary income and formal education – as their points of analytical departure and discounting nonwestern alternatives and values. The results are both troubling and inescapable.

Consider, for example, indigenous peoples who successfully resisted western encroachment by, in the words of James Scott (2009, 166), “destroying bridges, ambushing or booby-trapping passes and defiles, felling trees along roads, cutting telephone and telegraph wires, and so forth.” Are they more or less developed than their less successful neighbors, who fell victim to western encroachment and therefore have fewer traditional assets, more roads and dams, and correspondingly higher levels of monetary income? The point is not simply that roads and dams facilitate income growth, moreover; it’s that their construction and maintenance contribute directly to investment, employment, consumption, and GDP, or to the western notion of development, while posing a threat to at least some nonwestern societies and their notions of the good life. It’s hard to imagine dam- and roadbuilding in nonwestern societies, after all, without the loss or elimination of indigenous values and cultures.

One might argue that western encroachment allowed not only for the development of dams and roads,

of course, but for the growth of education and health care, and that the benefits of the latter outweigh the costs of the former; that is, that the benefits of human development outweigh the costs of western penetration. But the benefits of human development are neither obvious nor universal, and the HDI is itself measured on western terms that introduce biases into an already “subjective and ethnocentric” (Stewart et al. 2018; cf. Nussbaum 2000) measure. Insofar as it rewards formal rather than informal schooling, for instance, the HDI almost inevitably ranks societies that have embraced or been subject to mass education ahead of those that have defended their traditional lifestyles precisely by keeping their children out of formal schools (Schrank 2023, 103). Is a repressive literacy campaign that forces hundreds of thousands of children into the classroom a victory for human development or a defeat?

The answer depends in part upon norms and values that are “culture-bound” (Jaeger and Selznick 1964), and Mark Granovetter has therefore argued that all efforts to rank societies in terms of development, efficiency, or “adaptive capacity” are plagued by “the difficulty of making intersocietal comparisons of utility” (Granovetter 1979, 499). If one society’s utilities are another society’s disutilities, he suggests, such comparisons would seem pointless. And insofar as people and societies have different values, or utility functions, the problem cannot be solved by maximizing growth and development in the short run and redistributing their returns from the “winners” to the “losers” *ex post facto* – since neither the identities of the winners and losers nor the standards for compensation are obvious. By way of illustration, Jeffery Paige has compared dam-building in the Amazon rainforest – which threatens the “spiritual, physical, and emotional” lives of indigenous peoples – to “driving a bulldozer through the Sistine Chapel” (Paige 2020, 54). Another day’s work to the dam-builder constitutes an existential threat to the Shuar, for example, since “neither they nor their cultures” could survive the loss of the “living forest” (Paige 2020, 54), and neither party is likely to recognize the other’s claim.

So-called post-developmentalists took these arguments to their logical conclusion in the late twentieth century by calling the very notion of development into question (Matthews 2018). Given the number of abuses and atrocities that have been funded, carried out, and justified by planners and donors in the Global South, they argued, investigators should reconsider, or perhaps abandon, the entire concept of development. But their warnings went largely unheeded, according to Aram Ziai, because the donor-industrial complex has a life of its own, a number of late developing countries have achieved sustained growth, and the ideal of a

“middle-class-lifestyle” is, if anything, gaining ground in much of the world. “If there is a chance to achieve a Western lifestyle of consumerism,” he continues, “many people take the chance” (Ziai 2015, 838–39).

Critics of constructivist accounts have gone further, accusing their champions of painting a naïve and idyllic portrait of what are actually oppressive, inequitable, and morally indefensible societies. “We should ask whose interests are served by this nostalgic image of a happy harmonious culture,” argues philosopher Martha Nussbaum, “and whose resistance and misery are being effaced.” Insofar as the victims tend to include women, children, and activists, she continues, “the charge of ‘Westernizing’ looks like a shady political stratagem, aimed at discrediting forces that are pressing for change” (Nussbaum 2000, 38).

By way of summary, therefore, the existing literature on development is anchored by two incompatible and equally untenable positions: an objectivist approach that treats development as a more or less self-evident feature of self-contained societies, and in so doing ignores their interdependence and value conflicts; and a constructivist alternative that treats development as little more than a western ideology imbued with untenable normative assumptions, and in so doing ignores the very real demands of billions of people in the Global South. In an effort to develop an alternative to both positions I treat development as a social fact that is, in Durkheim’s sense, both “external to the individual” and “invested with a coercive power by virtue of which they exercise control over him” (Durkheim [1895] 1982, 52).

## Development as a social fact

I am by no means the first person to describe development as a social fact. Durkheim himself invoked the laws, codes, and conventions of industrial society as both “external” and “indirect” constraints on the behavior of industrialists (Durkheim [1895] 1982, 51) in *The Rules of Sociological Method*, and he went on to describe occupational norms, educational routines, and – perhaps most notably – the “currents of opinion” that drive marriage and fertility patterns that differentiate human societies as “social facts” that are susceptible to statistical analysis (Durkheim [1895] 1982, 55). What marriage and fertility records convey, Durkheim argued, are the “state of the collective mind” (Durkheim [1895] 1982, 55).<sup>1</sup>

Others have followed Durkheim’s lead by declaring development itself a social fact (Gurrieri 1979, 140; Gong and Jang 1998, 89). And – insofar as they demarcate the boundaries between different types of society – concepts like “petrostate,” categories like

“high-income,” and indicators like the HDI offer “collective representations” (Durkheim [1912] 1995; Gilbert 1959) of the social facts in question.<sup>2</sup> Underdevelopment is less the source of pity, outrage, and dismay, on this formulation, than their consequence.

Lest it not be obvious, however, the differences between and among societies of different types are real. When the World Bank aggregates countries into discrete lending groups, for instance, they’re not entirely arbitrary. The list of countries in “fragile and conflict-affected situations” (World Bank 2023a) is produced through more or less clear, if by no means uncontroversial (Nay 2014), criteria and updated on an annual basis. “High-income” countries boast per capita gross national incomes (GNI) of \$13,846 or more (World Bank 2023b), however achieved, and really do produce more marketable goods and services – not to mention carbon emissions – per person than their lower-income counterparts, despite the presence of measurement error (Schrank 2023). Insofar as social facts can only be explained by way of reference to other social facts, moreover, the tight synergies between and among these measures and classifications are entirely predictable (Durkheim [1912] 1995, 134).

The more interesting question, in my opinion, is not whether concepts, categories, and indicators like these are accurate or inaccurate, but what they *do*. What are their performative characteristics and consequences? Insofar as they not only reflect but shape people’s notions of the world in which they live, I’d argue, they have at least three potential repercussions.

First, they can motivate individual and collective behavior. When Laura declares that Cuba is “falling behind,” exactly ten minutes into *Memories of Underdevelopment*, she offers an evocative portrait of their motivational power. She practices her English, covets foreign products, and prepares to abandon Havana for Miami. While her departure represents one possible response to status anxiety, moreover, the revolution she disdains constitutes another (Burton 1997, 21; see also Slater 2011, 387). After all, the late Ronald Dore attributed nationalist “modernization” campaigns of both the left and the right to the “status aspirations” of peripheral elites and intellectuals (Dore 1975, 201–04; Dore 1977, 206–07; Harrison 1988, 111). And the Group of 77’s call for a New International Economic Order (NIEO) in the early 1970s was precipitated and, at least in part, motivated by the realization that “70 per cent of the world’s population account for only 30 per cent of the world’s income” (United Nations General Assembly 1974, 3).

Second, they can legitimate demands, actions, and institutions. While the members of the Group of 77 legitimated their demand for alternative international institutions by acknowledging and underscor-

ing their own poverty and deprivation (Krasner 1983, 244), for instance, nominally “benevolent” dictators fend off critics – at home and abroad – by advertising their own achievements: growth, law and order, education, and the like. Take, for example, Paul Kagame and his allies in Rwanda, who deploy the country’s human development indicators in defense of their heavy-handed rule (Schrank 2023, 57).

And, third, they can regulate the behavior of their architects and subjects. Consider the case of the NIEO in a bit more detail. When northern policymakers embraced the Group of 77’s call for “special and differential treatment” in the 1970s, in an effort to bolster the legitimacy of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), they tied their own hands going forward by “abandoning the principles of reciprocity and nondiscrimination in favor of rules whose fundamental purpose is to directly promote economic development” (Krasner 1979, 519); henceforth, high- and low-income countries would be treated differently by the international trade regime.

Arland Thornton’s theory of “developmental idealism” invokes all three mechanisms simultaneously (Thornton 2001). On his account, ideas about the history of the family in northwestern Europe *that are themselves controversial* have nonetheless been disseminated by colonial authorities, donors, migrants, missionaries, and the mass media, among others, and in so doing have *motivated, legitimated, and sanctioned* reproductive change in the nonwestern world. While canonical accounts of the European “family transition” have been called into question, Thornton argues, they have “been a strong force for changing living arrangements, marriage, divorce, gender relations, intergenerational relationships, and fertility behavior in many parts of the world during the past few centuries” (Thornton 2001, 449), in large part due to their *potentially spurious* correlation with economic development.

Insofar as they get incorporated into norms, values, standards, and laws, therefore, interpretations and indicators of development matter. They help determine who gets market access and who doesn’t; who gets aid and who gives it; who gets elected and who gets ousted; where foreign direct investment originates and ends up; how and how much reproduction occurs, etc. And their establishment and enforcement are therefore subject to conflict and controversy within and between countries.

A skeptic might suggest that the chosen categories and classifications always wind up reflecting and reproducing the needs and interests of powerholders. And in a tautological sense that may be true. But insofar as it’s impossible to know *ex ante* which criteria the powerholders want or need, or who really holds power independently of the categories and classifications at

issue, it doesn’t provide a falsifiable theory – and it certainly can’t explain changes in the distribution of power and resources over time.

## Classifying countries at the World Trade Organization

Consider the case of the World Trade Organization (WTO). Like the GATT, the WTO recognized the distinct needs of the Global South, at least in theory, by offering developing countries “special and differential” (S&D) treatment provisions designed both to increase their “trade opportunities” and “safeguard” their interests when the agreement was negotiated in the mid-1990s (WTO 2023, 5). The specific provisions include exemptions, flexibilities, and capacity-building measures of various sorts. And their numbers keep growing (cf. WTO 2016; WTO 2023) despite both the ongoing paralysis of the WTO itself (Baschuk 2023) and opposition from the European Union and United States (Schneider-Petsinger 2020, 33).

The EU and US are concerned less about the contents of the S&D provisions, however, than their beneficiaries. The WTO “does not specify criteria or a process for determining development status” (WTO 2019, 10) other than by recognizing the very “least-developed countries” (LDCs) designated by the United Nations. Members of the WTO are therefore allowed to declare their own development levels and, by extension, their eligibility for S&D provisions including transition periods and “carve-outs from existing disciplines” (WTO 2019, 13). And the EU and US delegations have not only condemned the practices of some of the WTO’s wealthiest and/or fastest-growing members – who allegedly label themselves “developing” in order to take advantage of these and similar provisions – but have anticipated dire consequences for the organization as a whole. “Members cannot find mutually agreeable trade-offs or build coalitions when significant players use self-declared development status to avoid making meaningful offers,” argued the US delegation in 2019. “Self-declaration also dilutes the benefit that the LDCs and other Members with specific needs tailored to the relevant discipline could enjoy if they were the only ones with the flexibility” (WTO 2019; see also European Commission 2018; Schneider-Petsinger 2020).

Non-discretionary alternatives might augment the legitimacy of the organization (Krasner 1981, 140), and the US delegation has therefore put forward “objective criteria” that render members of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Group of 20 (G20), the World Bank’s “high-income” category, and countries that are responsible

“for no less than 0.5 percent of global merchandise trade” ineligible for special and differential treatment (Shea 2019). But insofar as the OECD and G20 are exclusive clubs (Keohane and Nye 2001) that lack clear and consistent membership criteria (Slaughter 2004, 46; Carruthers and Halliday 2006, 542–43; Wade 2009, 553; Clifton and Díaz-Fuentes 2011, 553–54), and the proposed trade and income criteria are themselves based on subjective cutoffs on debatable indicators, the US criteria are more controversial and less objective than they may seem at first glance, making their failure to generate widespread support or acceptance an all but foregone conclusion (WTO 2022).

In short, the WTO saga speaks to the subjectivity and the social construction of development. There are no objective criteria by which to decide which societies are more or less developed, whether or to what degree development is underway, or what dimensions of development are most desirable. But the WTO saga poses a no less vexing challenge to constructivist alternatives. After all, the conflict at the WTO derives less from the distinct utility functions than the distinct interests of different countries, and the demand for S&D provisions – and for the “developing country” classification they presuppose – is not a western imposition but a product and legacy of the Group of 77 low-income countries. Left to their own devices, the high-income OECD members would in all likelihood say “good riddance” to S&D provisions in their entirety. But low-income countries want special treatment because they and their inhabitants want to enter world markets on – something like – their own terms.

It’s worth underscoring, moreover, that the persistent conflict at the WTO poses a damning challenge to both objectivist and constructivist accounts of development. If the concept of development was objective and beyond dispute, as mainstream accounts imply, there’d be no basis for disagreement. All parties would, by definition, embrace the objective definition or be exposed as self-interested charlatans. And if the concept of development was a pure social construct, or western imposition, there’d be no reason to fight. All parties would be satisfied with their existing situations regardless of their income levels. The fact that none of the parties is truly happy with the status quo suggests that development is neither purely objective nor purely subjective, and the persistence of conflict at the WTO is therefore unsurprising.

What’s more surprising, in light of contemporary sociological theory, is the fact that a mere two-thirds of all WTO members (Busch 2023) have declared themselves developing countries when, in theory, all 164 could do so. If S&D provisions really offer their employers a competitive advantage, after all, and there’s nothing to prevent high-income members from

designating themselves developing, the rational EU and US strategy would not be a futile effort to push rising powers to abandon S&D provisions but a simple effort to adopt them by designating themselves “developing” as well – either sincerely or as a bargaining chip. The fact that they haven’t done so poses a challenge to both rational actor models of international institutions, which posit self-interested behavior on the part of their members and potential members, and new institutionalist alternatives, which anticipate isomorphic pressures of various sorts that would produce the same outcome (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Dobbin et al. 2007).<sup>3</sup>

High-income countries don’t declare themselves developing, I’d argue, because development, though a social fact, is at least loosely anchored in objective reality. And insofar as objective facts like machinery and mortality provide at least broad limits on social facts, like development hierarchies, they limit the degree, if by no means the occurrence, of “decoupling between purposes and structure, intentions and results” (Meyer et al. 1997, 152) among other things (Bromley and Powell 2012; Meyer and Bromley 2013). While high-income countries are allowed to declare themselves developing, in theory, doing so would destroy the legitimacy of the very institution they’re trying to save, in practice. Institutions will command legitimacy, in the words of the late Arthur Stinchcombe (1997, 17), “if people believe that the institutional enforcers themselves believe the values” that they allegedly serve, and will “lose legitimacy as soon as it appears they are only interested in the letter of the law” (Stinchcombe 1997, 7). This perhaps explains why the US never claimed developing country status at the WTO, emerging economies like South Korea and Brazil have recently abandoned it, and many middle-income countries hold out despite persistent pressure to the contrary (Zeisl 2019), all while treating the categories and classifications themselves as weapons of economic warfare.

In short, the most practical question is not “What is development?” but “How do actors understand, interpret, and exploit existing notions of development and in so doing remake the concept and the world going forward?” The answers are anything but obvious, but they’re unlikely to emerge from the purely objectivist or constructivist accounts that dominate the contemporary literature. If the objectivist accounts were accurate, after all, people would have faith in existing institutions, and institutional change presupposes not faith, according to Ezra Zuckerman, but “doubt in prevailing institutions and the valuations they support” (Zuckerman 2012, 240; see also Canales 2016). If constructivist accounts were accurate, however, nonwestern societies and their populations

would be more or less happy with their lots in life, and wouldn't be pursuing institutional change – or western-style development – in the first place. What's needed, therefore, is an economic sociology that recognizes not only that development is a social fact but that it's the very imprecise measurement and assessment of social facts that offer “contrarians” the opportunity they need to pursue potentially transformative strategies (Zuckerman 2012; Schrank 2023).

## Conclusion

I have argued that development is neither an objective feature of coherent societies nor a fictive product of western imperialism but a social fact that's both anchored in material reality and subject to imprecise measurement and assessment. My account can explain why actors worldwide not only pursue development, contra constructivism, but debate the meaning and measurement of the concept itself, contra objectivism. And in so doing it contributes to a growing body of literature that traces social change to gaps between “prevailing public valuations and objective conditions” (Zuckerman 2012, 235) and their exploitation by contrarian actors and organizations. When public valuations and objective conditions are in line, after all, there's neither a practical nor a moral basis for challenging the status quo. Instead, the guiding princi-

pal is *de gustibus non est disputandum*. When public valuations deviate from objective conditions, however, contrarians and institutional entrepreneurs can exploit the opportunity to pursue their own goals, for better or for worse.

What's needed, therefore, is not only a realization that development is a social fact subject to more or less objective constraints but a renewed focus on actors who spark organizational and institutional change by challenging prevailing valuations and assessments. Who are they? When and where do they arise? And to what effect? By systematically answering these questions, we will not only recognize that development is a social fact but translate that recognition into a more productive theory of the process in the years ahead.

## Endnotes

- 1 See Ottaway (1955) on Durkheim's analysis of education and socialization.
- 2 Modernization theorists treat modernity as a social fact (Camorrino 2016, 272) and neo-Marxists treat the capitalist world-system as a social fact (Aronowitz 1981, 512).
- 3 Opposing pressures could, in theory, lead low-income countries to classify themselves as “developed” in a quest for status, and in so doing abandon their access to S&D provision; the fact that they rarely, if ever, do so constitutes another blow to new institutional accounts that anticipate institutional isomorphism.

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