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Diversity, Dialogue, and the Sociology of Development

An Introduction

ABSTRACT The study of development has been fundamental for sociologists since the earliest days of the discipline. Yet, after over a century of sociological inquiry, how much do we know about development, and what is the future of development from a sociological perspective? This special issue highlights how eclectic and inclusive the field of sociology of development has become in recent decades, illustrating the depth and proliferation of our sociological understanding of “development” through new theoretical and methodological approaches and explorations of emerging topics. In this introduction, we examine early sociological contributions to development theories and policies that have been central to sociology of development dialogue, and the questions that set a foundation for future research. In doing so, we argue that a commitment to inclusive creativity and critique of established views not only can shape sociological discussions but also has the potential to impact the institutionalization of knowledge in the policy arena. **KEYWORDS** Development, Sociology of development, Policies, Feminist development, Global health, International political economy

The study of development has been fundamental for sociologists since the earliest days of the discipline. Marx’s and Weber’s exploration of the causes and consequences of economic organization and change had a significant impact on the development of sociological inquiry and the overall structure of the discipline as a whole. However, we know development extends beyond economic reasoning addressing the vast diversity of ways in which social change unfolds and how we strive for progress as human beings and as communities.

This special issue highlights how eclectic and inclusive the field of sociology of development has become in recent decades, illustrating the depth and proliferation of our sociological understanding of “development” through new theoretical and methodological approaches and through exploration of emerging topics, such as how the symbolic force of law and regulations impacts environmental justice and why some critical health and hygiene issues continue to be excluded from global agendas. This introduction, though by no means exhaustive, offers a general overview of the transformation of the field, illustrating how a diverse group of sociologists working in the United States, specifically under the auspices of the Sociology of Development Section of the American Sociological Association, constitute an intellectual community that is transformative, innovative, and increasingly inclusive. It speaks to the *development* of development.

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SOCIOLOGY, DEVELOPMENT, AND THE SOCIOLOGY OF DEVELOPMENT

As a discipline, sociology should be progressive. Fundamental issues such as power, progress, inequality, voice, and justice are at the heart of much sociological inquiry. Thus, any discussion of growth and modernity should also explore the often invisible and sometimes intentional aspects that stymie the blooming of societies as a whole. Yet, even well-meaning definitions of growth and advancement have been contested and controversial. Early contributions to development theory and practice were deeply rooted in modernization theory, which frames modernity in terms of parameters defined by Western institutions and values. Elements of structural functionalism (Parsons 1964) were embedded in many of the international policies and institutions of the late 1940s and 1950s. By the 1970s, a new generation of scholars entered the conversation with a more critical view of global structures, interactions, and development. World-system theorists (Chase-Dunn 1975; Wallerstein 1979) and dependency scholars (Cardoso and Faletto 1979) brought attention to the exploitative nature of global economic systems that hindered the advancement of periphery nations as resources were extracted for the benefit of core capitalist interests. Soon, sociologists of development were thinking about how additional social forces, such as informal economies (Castells and Portes 1989) and gender relations (Blumberg 1984) impacted development theory and praxis. Even during the 1980s and 1990s, when sociology featured less prominently in the interdisciplinary development discourse, sociologists were working on development issues, though often not identifying as “development sociologists” per se (Viterna and Robertson 2015). Despite recent efforts to identify boundaries in the field (Schrank 2023), this pattern continues to be a challenge today, as sociological work on critical issues related to development often falls through subdisciplinary cracks and intersections. It also presents an opportunity and an invitation to contribute to an interdisciplinary conversation. Paradoxically, the trend also invites academics, practitioners, activists, pundits, and other stakeholders to exchange views on development issues.

CREATING SPACE FOR SOCIOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT DIALOGUE

Since 2011, when Sociology of Development was instituted as an official section of the American Sociological Association, section members have constructed specialized sub-sections to look closely at three specific development issues: feminist development, global health and development, and the international political economy. Each of these represents a critical area of development in contemporary sociological exploration. Feminist development scholars have challenged traditional development tropes since the publication of Ester Boserup’s *Women’s Role in Economic Development* (1970). Since this seminal work, scholars and practitioners have pointed to the need to consider gender dynamics as part of any development discussion (e.g., Rathgeber 1990). Recent sociological research and intellectual inquiry have explored feminist encounters with authoritarianism (Roy 2023) and with technology (Valle 2023) and the relationship between women’s education and infant mortality (Shorette and Burroway 2022), to mention a few.

Global health continues to be a priority in the field of development. As the world saw with the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, public health challenges extend beyond national boundaries and the isolated expertise of any single nation-state. Access to vaccines and medications, malnutrition, health disparities, mental health, infectious diseases, and fractured healthcare systems continue to drive questions related to what counts as global health and how these issues relate to development. As the world awakens to the reality of the interdependent effects of transnational global health challenges, new opportunities have emerged for development sociologists to enter the conversation, ultimately allowing a new generation of scholars to stand on the shoulders of giants, as “sociological work on global health has accomplished much, enriching our understanding of how states, people, communities, and regional and international organizations participate in health policies, outcomes, and inequalities” (Noy 2019:5). Work on the racialization of labor pain (Murphy et al. 2023), global health policies (Swidler 2023), and the relationship between cultural transformations and vaccination rates (Cole, Schofer, and Velasco 2023) illustrate the diversity of research in this area.

International political economy scholars no longer just call attention to the roles of states or political culture; they frequently focus on the social construction of markets, broadening explorations in the development agenda. In addition to exploring more traditional questions tied to economic growth, income inequality, political globalization, and institutions, they have expanded our understanding of complex environmental issues (Jorgenson 2003, Shandra 2007), social movements (Almeida 2016), military expenditures (Kentor, Clark, and Jorgenson 2023), and why some bureaucratic structures are more effective than others (McDonnell 2020). This work frequently illustrates the ways in which contention and controlling mechanisms are embedded and dispersed through society.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Taken together, these specialized areas only address a few elements of contemporary sociological development dialogue. However, they provide a series of questions for the future that must be unpacked, including why some development projects work while so many others fail or are less effective. After almost a century of sociological inquiry, how much do we know? And perhaps most importantly, what is the future of development from a sociological perspective? It remains to be seen to what extent exploring these lines of inquiry from diverse perspectives will challenge the stratification of knowledge that continues to plague sociology and the social sciences in general.

Recently, Rina Agarwala (2023) proposed that the terms “global North” and “global South,” while useful for both scholars and politicians, suffer from deficiencies. Agarwala points out that binary distinctions have confused explorations, trivialized race-based hierarchies within and across nations, and lacked leverage when trying to discern emerging geopolitical configurations (3–4). In calling for a fuller range of cases, including examining “development challenges” in the West as well as regions overlooked throughout the development literature, Agarwala stresses the benefits of

bringing together less explored cases in dialogue with findings from North America and Europe.

THE SPECIAL ISSUE

The articles in this issue represent the work of sociologists engaging in that dialogue. Each began as a conversation at the Sociology of Development Pre-conference, “Dislocation, Development, and Democracy,” which was held on August 5, 2022. They illustrate how social scientists use a variety of research tools and perspectives to explore relations of development across societies. The five papers put diverse and provocative voices, ideas, and approaches front and center to push for what Bourdieu has called “epistemological ruptures” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992).

The issue begins with an evocative and radical call to re-evaluate the traditional approach to development work and social change. Keahey blends feminist theory with testimony to deliver a manifesto for development in both praxis and practice. Using work from intersectional, postcolonial, and decolonial literatures, she illustrates the ways in which transnational feminisms are rethinking development from below, before critically reflecting on her own experiences as a white feminist scholar engaged with antiracist and decolonial praxis. In doing so, she identifies six pathways for emancipation, which she presents as her own personal commitment to decentering whiteman logic in research and practice. In sharing her journey, Keahey encourages all of us to explore and share our own, arguing that through knowledge sharing we may reclaim institutional spaces for the purpose of healing justice and addressing oppression from within and beyond.

Roberts invites the reader to contemplate the extent to which inequality within countries affects inequality between countries. In this macro-level study, Roberts addresses an apparent paradox: in recent decades global income inequality has eased because of a reduction in income disparities between countries, but income disparities within countries have increased, which has led to concerns over the sustainability of this “growth trend.” Based on dynamic panel models of 108 countries from 1981 and 2017, he finds that the rate of convergence in national incomes is moderated by the income inequality within countries, indicating that during this period the national incomes of egalitarian countries were converging, while the national incomes of inegalitarian countries were diverging. Ultimately, Roberts argues that these findings illustrate that national redistribution policies are increasingly important, not only to mitigate income disparities within countries but also to reduce income disparities between countries in the twenty-first century.

Jalali questions what constitutes development issues for the twenty-first century and why some critical agendas fail to include significant issues of importance for both global health and the common good. She finds that the “taboo” topic of menstruation management and menstrual hygiene has been largely excluded from the global development agenda, despite its significant impact on women’s health, education, income, and well-being. Using archival research and qualitative documentary analyses of key multilateral organizations, Jalali identifies three issue attributes that have hindered the recognition

and prioritization of this matter: measurability, cultural sensitivity, and background characteristics of the affected population.

Martins Dias examines how those engaged in ecological disputes use symbolic embeddedness—the manipulation of symbolic resources to mobilize symbolic mechanisms and organizations when mediating conflicts—to advance environmental concerns related to Brazil’s Amazon region. Through participant observation and in-depth and semi-structured interviewing, Dias focuses on how the framing of the law and interactions during climate change negotiations can either facilitate or constrain actions to address social-ecological concerns. In doing so, he illustrates how agencies in the global South catalyze action and maintain social order in situations marked by ecological, institutional, and organizational contentiousness.

Rademacher explores corruption and fraudulent activities within local-level NGOs in developing countries. She questions to what extent the established social science literature provides insights that help us understand the complexities associated with corrupt practices. Her study suggests that to better understand corruption, one must consider that the impacts of globalization and neoliberalism, environments of uncertainty, organizational frames, and national structures of inequality often create incentives for corruption and fraud practices both within and among NGOs. In doing so she argues for an integrated global North–global South framework that would provide more reliable understandings of the complex relations of corruption and fraud within and beyond local organizations throughout the developing world.

Taken together, these articles illustrate how eclectic contemporary development perspectives recontour boundaries in our field. The commitment to inclusive creativity and critique of established views impacts not only sociological discussions but also (we hope) the institutionalization of knowledge in the policy arena. Our call to embrace the contemporary eclecticism in the sociology of development follows Albert O. Hirschman’s (1970:340) warning about “the despair of the paradigm-obsessed social scientists.” ■

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