

# Bringing development back into (economic) sociology

## Andrew Schrank interviewed by Felipe González and Aldo Madariaga

**Andrew Schrank** (Olive C. Watson Professor of Sociology and International and Public Affairs at Brown University) is one of the few academics with a true interdisciplinary trajectory and an exceptionally wide variety of interests in economic sociology and adjacent fields working on Latin America. Although he defines himself as an organizational sociologist, Andrew has held positions in both sociology and political science departments and has written about issues ranging from supply chains to foreign investment and labor standards, from healthcare to industrial policy and urban studies, and from varieties of capitalism to the role of culture in development, doing both broad comparative work and more focused case studies of small Mesoamerican countries like the Dominican Republic. Andrew co-authored the article that became the manifesto for the re-foundation of Latin America's political economy tradition in what is now the Red Economía Política América Latina (REPAL) and is currently working on a book on economic sociology and development. Andrew agreed to talk about his views on the discipline, the challenges of interdisciplinarity, and his focus on Latin America. This is the result of a deeply engaged discussion over a Skype conversation and several e-mail exchanges where he calls for a return to sociology's early motivation of studying societies through the lens of development and claims that "what we need is an economic sociology that takes Latin America seriously." We thank Andrew for his generosity in sharing his thoughts with us. [andrew\\_schrank@brown.edu](mailto:andrew_schrank@brown.edu)

### Disciplinary thoughts

**Economic sociology has acquired a marked micro and meso approach, which contrasts with some of the classics in sociology that study the economy and capitalism from a more macro approach, or to paraphrase Charles Tilly, study "big structures, large processes, huge comparisons." What is your take on this process?**

I don't think the *discipline* of sociology as a whole was ever committed to "big structures, large processes, huge comparisons." That was "comparative historical sociology" (CHS) which was never hegemonic (or close to hegemonic) in US sociology; it is distinct from economic sociology; and probably overlaps more with political sociology than economic sociology. You can get a sense of this from looking at overlapping section memberships in the American Sociological Association.<sup>1</sup> Economic Sociology has far more overlap with Organizations, Occupations and Work than Comparative Historical Sociology or Political Sociology, and they're probably more tightly coupled to each other.

Your question is phrased in such a way that it implies that there was a Time A when economic sociology was focused on "big structures, large processes, huge comparisons," and then a Time B at which it went more micro. But there was no Time A when eco-

economic sociology was macro; there was a Time A when CHS was macro, which it still is, but at that time there was (in the US) no economic sociology to speak of, or at least no Economic Sociology section of ASA. In fact, the founding dates for the ASA sections on CHS and economic sociology are 1983 and 2000 respectively.<sup>2</sup> And insofar as the formal sections reflect what's going on in the discipline as a whole, I think it's safe to say there was just less economic sociology in US sociology at that point.

One obvious follow-up question would be, "Why wasn't there as much economic sociology in the US before then?" Another would be, "When economic sociology finally did emerge, why was it more micro than macro? More organizations and networks than macro political economy?" I think the answer would demand a simultaneous internalist and externalist account. Externally, I suspect it has a lot to do with the shape of the US economy in the Fordist and post-Fordist eras. Back when the commanding heights of the economy were dominated by large organizations (e.g., Ford, IBM, GE), it was easier to let organizational sociologists do the work; when Fordism breaks down and networks begin to flourish (e.g., the Third Italy, Silicon Valley, decentralized production networks, etc.), you need an approach that takes things like relationships and culture more seriously. Internally, I

think it's more complicated but related in part to the passing of Parsons—who wanted to leave the economy to the economists—and in part to the diminishing returns to macro (and often Marxist) political economy of the sort practiced in CHS and political sociology. If you see wide variation within a single polity/nation-state (e.g., Silicon Valley v. Appalachia, Monterey v. Chiapas) you probably have to dig deeper than national politics to figure out what's going on. I also think that the end of the Cold War and the rise of organizational studies/economic sociology programs in business schools helped.

**As a sociologist, where did the focus on Latin America and development come from? And why the smaller Latin American countries?**

When I was in college in the 1980s, the US was spending a lot of time and resources mucking around in Central America. And having grown up in the US, in a left-leaning family that had opposed US intervention in Southeast Asia, I was—like many of my peers at that time—skeptical—to say the least—of US policy in Central America, which felt frighteningly familiar. And that's really where my interest in Latin America and development issues came from.

Now, you also asked why smaller Latin American countries in particular. I think that's a less important issue in US sociology than one may think, or at least a different issue than one may think, and I'll explain why I think so. I spent almost half of my professional life in political science departments—for idiosyncratic reasons. In US political science, it's very hard to study small countries in Latin America, but there's a lot of space to study Latin America more generally. Comparative politics is one of the main subfields, along with American politics, international relations, and perhaps theory and methods, and in the subfield of comparative politics, every major department has a Latin Americanist, almost all of whom study Mexico, Argentina or Brazil—sometimes in comparison—and you might get away with Chile. But Central America's not even part of the conversation, let alone the Dominican Republic.<sup>3</sup> Sociology is different, in part because there's no formal—and very little informal—space for Latin America at all in US sociology. US sociology is about the US and kind of Western Europe. The default assumption is that research occurs in the US; anything else has to be justified; and there's not much space at all for the Global South. So the best way to carve out space for Latin America in the core of US sociology is to show that it's relevant to a theory that US sociology cares about. If you can show that there are lessons to be learned about stratification by studying Mexico or Chile, as Andres Villarreal and Florencia Torche have done, you're fine; if you can show that

there are lessons for understanding race by looking at Brazil—as Edward Telles and Mara Loveman have done—you'll be fine. But jobs aren't advertised by region, and departments don't need a Latin Americanist or an Africanist, and many don't have them.

That has a cost as well as a benefit. The cost is that most US sociology departments are, almost by definition, parochial or Eurocentric. Incredibly so. The benefit is that if you can show that your work is relevant to these theories, they don't care whether it's in a smaller developing country, like the Dominican Republic, or a larger one, like Brazil, Nigeria, or South Africa. Your average US-based sociologist is less concerned with the country or location than the theoretical implications. They're not trying to understand places; they're trying to build theories. So, when I was in graduate school and I drifted into studying the Dominican Republic, I got scared that no one could find it on a map. I went to a faculty member and said: "I think I need to shift, and either do Mexico or Brazil or something." And he said: "No! You know a lot about the Dominican Republic, you have spent time there, you understand it, why would you shift?" And I said: "Well, it's so small!"; and he said: "Well, nobody cares how small it is! They care if you can find an interesting question there and whether you can answer it in a rigorous way." And you know, when I've been in political science, people look at me funny and say: "Why the Dominican Republic?" No-one has ever asked that question in sociology. It never comes up.

**This explains why you studied Latin America, and the smaller countries in Latin America, but not why you did so in organizational sociology rather than a different field or subfield. In Latin America, we tend not to study the classics of organizational sociology in our undergraduate studies, so the connection between organizations, economic sociology, and development may seem a priori less clear. Do you think the US is different in that respect?**

No, I think US sociology has a similar issue in the following sense. I never heard of Meyer and Rowan or Viviana Zelizer or whomever when I was an undergraduate. Actually, I never heard about most of the classics in sociology, let alone recent sociology, when I was an undergraduate. Partly because I wasn't a sociology major. But even in sociology class, I didn't get much of it. Arthur Stinchcombe has a couple of articles where he makes the following point: The gap between the way sociology is taught at the undergraduate and graduate levels in the US is enormous and is much greater than the gap between the way political science and economics are taught. An undergraduate in US political science or economics is essentially doing what the graduate students do but at a more elementary level.<sup>4</sup> And Stinchcombe's point—which to

some degree I buy and probably reproduce in my own pedagogy—is that undergraduate sociology in the US is essentially about activism. It's about getting you pissed off about an inequitable and oppressive social system. (One that I happen to believe is *demonstrably* and *increasingly* inequitable and oppressive.) But if you go to graduate school in most major sociology departments you're somehow supposed to become a scientist (or perhaps “scientist”) in relatively short order. In undergraduate sociology, you're reading all these polemical works that are documenting the social problems in the US—and to some degree in Latin America, but mostly in the US—and much less sociological theory, especially more recent theory like the works of Meyer and Rowan, Granovetter, Zelizer, or people like that. And, yet, somehow you're supposed to go to graduate school, become a scientist, and know (or quickly learn) all this theoretical (and methodological) stuff. It's hard! And it's especially hard now that we're deliberately trying to limit the time to do a PhD. I'm not saying that's good or bad. There are obviously costs and benefits no matter what you do, and it's not clear that there's a “right” or “wrong” way to teach these things. My point is just that, in general, I don't think undergraduate students in US sociology get a lot of organizational studies either.

And this leads to a clarification in terms of the first part of your question: I didn't enter Latin America through organizational sociology; I entered organizational sociology through Latin America. Given the aforementioned gap between undergraduate and graduate training in the US, I came to graduate school unfamiliar with organization theory, committed to Marxism, and prone toward “huge comparisons.” But I set out to write a dissertation on maquiladoras in the Dominican Republic, and those commitments and comparisons weren't helping me make sense of the variation I saw there, where the key actors were organizations like multinational garment firms, local suppliers and subcontractors, and government agencies. So I came to embed that research in organizational and economic sociology.<sup>5</sup> (This is broadly true of related research on network failures that I've been doing with Josh Whitford at Columbia.) By the time I finished the maquila research, however, and started to study labor inspectorates in Latin America, with Michael Piore at MIT, I was more self-consciously thinking of myself as an organizational sociologist. For instance, I'd already started teaching graduate courses on organizations. And labor inspectorates are pretty clearly organizations. So the literature on organizations—where Mike had already made signal contributions—provided a natural home. More recently, I've begun to study health ministries and pharmaceutical firms in Latin America, and once again I'm self-con-

sciously thinking about organizational studies. So I think the common denominator here is organizations, but I got there through the back door: Latin America came first, organizations came later.

The thing that's interesting to me now that I think about it is that in graduate school I also studied demography, and did my exams in demography. And while I never worked as a demographer, a lot of my thinking about these issues is influenced by demography and demographic methods. To take one example, a fair bit of the work that I did on these garment firms in Latin America was essentially organizational ecology, which is a field of organization studies that draws heavily upon demographic concepts and methods to understand the life courses of organizations and population dynamics among organizations. I did a fair bit of that in my studies of these Dominican garment firms. In my study of the Dominican labor inspectorate, moreover, I examined the life courses of these individual labor inspectors—how they entered the labor ministry, stayed with the ministry, exited the ministry, etc.—and again, the concepts and techniques applicable there are very much from demography.<sup>6</sup>

## Studying Latin American (political) economies and the challenges of interdisciplinarity

**What is it like to study (economic) sociology in Latin America from a US university? How do you make sense of the concepts from different fields of sociology (organizational, economic), which are developed for US or Western European societies, in Latin America? Was this one of your main concerns when you wrote the article with Juan Pablo Luna and Vicky Murillo that became a key reference for the foundation of REPAL?**

First, I think US sociology *is* Eurocentric and parochial, at least insofar as: (i) the bulk of what gets studied are European societies and their wealthier (and seemingly more similar) offshoots, including the US; (ii) the discipline's underlying assumptions are broadly modernizationist; and (iii) departments and hiring decisions tend to be structured thematically rather than geographically. Compare US political science and sociology in that regard. As I mentioned above, US political science has a vibrant subfield of comparative politics: large departments tend to have at least one Europeanist, Latin Americanist, Asianist, etc. and to offer courses in their respective areas; and hiring is structured accordingly (e.g., you'll see ads for “Latin Americanists”). Sociology's subfields and courses tend to be thematic—organizations, inequality, family,

etc.—and jobs and positions are allocated with that in mind. Occasionally you'll see an ad for a "Latin Americanist" or "China expert," but not often; people frequently study regions where they don't speak the native language; and large departments frequently leave large parts of the world uncovered—note that I'm making no claim as to whether this is good or bad; I'm simply noting the difference.

With regard to the application of concepts that are developed in a North American context to Latin America, I think it's an empirical question. Sometimes they travel really well and sometimes they travel rather badly. I think that they probably travel better in organizational or in economic sociology than they do in political science. The story of that article Juan Pablo [Luna], Vicky [Murillo] and I wrote is illustrative of this. Vicky, Juan Pablo and I wrote that article because we found ourselves frustrated by the fact that Latin America was a net exporter of concepts in the 1950s and 1960s and was by the 1990s–2000s a net importer. And so, for example, the people we always come back to in the article, and in informal discussions, like Guillermo O'Donnell, Albert Hirschman and Fernando Henrique Cardoso, are prominent, represent political science, economics and sociology respectively, and are the tip of the iceberg—insofar as there were many more Latin American social scientists (and/or social scientists who studied Latin America) who were incredibly productive and influential beyond Latin America in the postwar era. But by the early twenty-first century, you have people taking models from North American political science and applying them to the Argentine Congress, for example, publishing articles in the *American Journal of Political Science* (AJPS) in that way without paying any attention as to whether the Argentine Congress is a meaningful institution in a hyper-presidential system or anything like that. And we were very frustrated by that.

Part of the reason for this, we thought, was that US-based political scientists had a career incentive to get into the top US journals—AJPS, *American Political Science Review*, *Journal of Politics*—and those journals were familiar with the study of Congress, and the study of voting behavior, and things like that. They weren't familiar with studying informal politics or weak institutions or things like that. And they weren't familiar with the methods used to study those things. So we thought that the combination of democratization and the globalization of research had been ironically perverse for Latin American political science; democratization was good for Latin America but bad for Latin American political science, as we argued, because up until democratization you couldn't study the Argentine Congress, it didn't exist—at least not in a meaningful way. But with democratization you could

bring this North American political science into Latin America and you had a career incentive to do so. I don't have a problem with that per se, but as far as it crowds out a type of political science that I thought was potentially more meaningful for Latin America, I thought it was upsetting.

Sociology is very different in part because many of the organizations and the institutions that are being studied in the US context are present in Latin America and have always been present in Latin America. It's not like there was a pre-democratic era when you didn't have firms and bureaucracies and social movements and all of these things. They existed in 1965, in 1970, in 1975; they might have been different, but they existed. And so a concept that is developed to understand a firm or the diffusion of a management strategy or a social movement strategy or something like that is, at least broadly, potentially applicable to Latin America. Now, whether it actually applies in a given context is an empirical question that merits investigation. But I don't think the institutional break is as sharp.

To be clear, I don't want to say that sociology or political science are better or worse, but they're different. In political science, comparative politics (CP) is an encompassing subfield. So, someone like Vicky [Murillo] or Steven Levitsky, or going back a generation, David Collier, might be at the top of the field, but CP might still be second to American politics in the status ordering of the subfields. Still, being at the top of a subfield like CP is a big deal. Consider, by way of contrast, sociology, where developing countries are relegated to the sociology of development section of ASA, or the world-system section. Those aren't likely to be the largest or highest-status subfields, because there are 50 different sections in ASA. So winning that battle is just not going to get a foot in the door of US sociology for Latin America or the Global South. Which is one reason why I think people who really want to get US sociology to take the Global South seriously should think about whether, in spending that much time building sections like development or world-systems, they're mainstreaming the Global South or marginalizing it. I think the real way to get Latin America or the developing world taken seriously in US sociology is precisely by penetrating the organizations section, the inequality section, the gender section, the family section; these are the sections that more people care about. And if these sections do not have anyone working on the Global South, US sociology will stay parochial.

There is an irony here, and it is the following: I think US political science is much less parochial than US sociology; it has a very large section, comparative politics, that is explicitly dedicated to studying other parts of the world. Within it, the Global South is

prominent. And, like I said, every major department has a Latin Americanist, an Africanist, etc. In that sense, it's a much more globalized, much less parochial field. Whereas in sociology, the vast majority of people in US departments work on the US. The irony is that I actually think that US sociological concepts travel to the Global South much better than US political science concepts. Like I said, developing countries have organizations and social movements whether or not they have elections or bicameral legislatures. So there is a huge opportunity for two-way interchange between the Global South and the Global North that is not being fully exploited.

**In the first number of our three-issue editorship of this Newsletter, we asked ourselves whether there is something like a "Latin American economic sociology"? What do you think about this?**

I think your question leads to other questions. What do you mean by Latin America? Do you mean "based in Latin America"? Do you mean "practiced by Latin Americans"? Do you mean "about Latin America"? Depending on your answers to those questions I might have different answers myself. I also think it depends on what you mean by "economic sociology." But I think my gut answer to your question is that if sociology in general—definitely in the US but I think not just in the US—is not regionally defined—in the way political science is—then, there can't be a Latin American economic sociology. There is *an* economic sociology and it addresses similar questions in different parts of the world. I think there may be a "Latin American politics", because US political science is regionally defined and politics in Latin America are in myriad ways different from politics in North America. The concepts don't travel in the same way, and the discipline is organized differently. But as far as I believe that the concepts travel better in sociology, which isn't organized by region anyway, I think that walling off a Latin American economic sociology could well do more harm than good. *What we need is an economic sociology that takes Latin America seriously and learns from (and with and in) Latin America*, which is a different thing. I can explain this further.

In sociology, one finds thematically and at times methodologically similar work on different regions being carried out under different labels in different institutions, e.g., when a US-based sociologist publishes an article on deindustrialization in the US it's "economic sociology" and in all likelihood published under that banner; however, when she publishes an article on deindustrialization in Argentina, it's "sociology of development" and placed accordingly.

But this is to some degree a *choice*. If she wanted to cast her article on deindustrialization in Argentina

as "economic sociology," and try to publish it under that banner, she could. She could frame and pitch it either way: as "development sociology" or "economic sociology." The choice is largely hers, and the question is therefore, "Why does she make the choice she makes?" And the answer, I think, is that US-based sociologists who study non-US (and all the more so non-OECD) countries are trapped in a dilemma by the very parochialism of US sociology. They can either carve out their own thematic or regional space in the ASA, create their own journals, hold their own conferences, etc., or try to force their way into the "mainstream" institutions. It's easier to do the former: call it "development sociology," present it on a "development sociology" (or "world systems") panel at ASA, and publish it in a specialist journal focused on the Global South. But the returns to doing so are lower, because in making that choice they're almost guaranteeing that most US-based sociologists will ignore their work. Of course, the alternative—labeling it "economic sociology" and trying to publish it in the mainstream US journals—is much harder: There's more competition for a finite amount of space, and the reviewer pool is unfamiliar with (and potentially uninterested in) the regional context; their default response will be, "Why are you studying this in Argentina if there's plenty of deindustrialization to study in the US?" (Often this is followed by, "where the data are better.") So the hypothetical student of deindustrialization has to make the case for studying it in Argentina, and that case will have to begin with the unique theoretical (or perhaps methodological) insights brought by the (empirical) case. Most editors and reviewers won't find the fact that 45 million people live in Argentina, or that Argentina might lend insights into deindustrialization in the rest of Latin America, good enough. They're interested in the theory, and the case is only interesting insofar as it pushes the theoretical framework further.<sup>7</sup> Again, note the contrast with political science where you might have to justify your choice of cases within the subfield of comparative politics, but you're less likely to be asked what that case teaches students of American politics or political theory.

There's an irony here, which is that the dilemma faced by students of Latin America (or developing countries more generally) in US sociology is a lot like the dilemma faced by Latin American producers more generally: to protect and compete for potentially smaller returns in a smaller market or open and compete for potentially larger returns in a larger (and thus more difficult) market? This contrast is obviously overdrawn. The nature and level of the returns depends largely on your goals (or target audience). Hybrid strategies are available. And I think there are costs as well as benefits to both approaches. The piece that

Juan Pablo [Luna], Vicky [Murillo], and I wrote outlined some of the costs to “opening” in political science, but I think there are real benefits as well and that they extend to the North and the South. Now, in thinking about which strategy to choose, I think we’d do well to remember the large and growing number of (economic and non-economic) sociologists studying Latin America in the *core* of US sociology today: Javier Auyero and Gianpaolo Baiocchi in urban, Florencia Torche and Andres Villarreal in inequality, Laura Doring, Daniel Fridman, and Steve Samford in economic, Edward Telles and Mara Loveman in race and ethnicity, Miguel Centeno, Rob Jansen, and Jocelyn Viterna in political, etc. And these are just the names that come to mind off the top of my head, not the product of a systematic review. They’re people who are working in Latin America but aren’t necessarily or primarily (let alone exclusively) identified with “development sociology” or “world systems,” in thematic terms, which if nothing else suggests to me that there’s space for Latin America in US sociology. Whether people want to occupy that space, which people, how to do so, what they’ll get out of it, etc.: these are all questions that need answers. I don’t claim to have them. But I think the mere existence of the aforementioned people suggests that the space for Latin America in US sociology may be broader than we’ve been led to believe.

**There is a tradition of studying the economy in Latin America that has been lost in the current research of Latin American economic sociologists: the old structuralism, dependency theory, etc. What happened with it?**

Insofar as that tradition has been eclipsed or has not flourished as much recently as it did once upon a time, I think there are at least three questions that one may have to ask: First, is that because of the growth of a US-style economic sociology? It might be that this tradition was going to decline on its own and it didn’t need any help. The second is whether the real blow to Latin American economic sociology of that sort was less US-style economic sociology than US-based structuralism in the following sense: I think that the Latin American structuralists were doing much more interesting and productive work than most of the people in North America who picked up that label, those ideas and concepts—in general, there are probably exceptions. And in some ways, those Latin American ideas and approaches were discredited by their adoption in vulgar form by people in North America. I think this is the point Cardoso made thirty or forty years ago.<sup>8</sup> And I think he was absolutely right. And, third, insofar as Latin American structuralism and the like have faded, whether due to their eclipse by US-based economic sociology, their corruption by US-based structuralists, the arrival of their “past due” date,

or whatever, should we care? What, if anything, has been lost?

So, insofar as Latin American structuralism has faded, three questions: Was that a good or a bad thing? Maybe it just ran its course. Insofar as it was a bad thing, was it because of the new economic sociology or not? And, finally, might it actually have been due to the failings of North-American structuralism? And I think that if I were a Latin American structuralist, and I was annoyed that my ideas weren’t taken as seriously as my uncle’s ideas, I wouldn’t be pointing my finger at the new economic sociology, which I think is just a fundamentally different project. I’d be more pissed at the people in US universities who took these ideas and made them vulnerable.

**The foundation of REPAL was partly—as you yourself recognized—a reaction to the need to go back to that tradition of interdisciplinary Latin American political economy where sociologists had an important role. However, today REPAL is mostly attended by political scientists. Why do you think this is the case?**

I think that sociologists can find a home in REPAL, but I think that it partly depends on what they want from their careers. Most of what happens in REPAL is not particularly sociological. So, if you’re a sociologist based in the US or even based in Latin America, I think that you’re most likely to find a home at REPAL if you’re not particularly at home in your sociology department. And I think the reason for that is that REPAL, deep down—and I don’t think people would acknowledge this—repalistas are implicitly rational choice in orientation—much as I think most US political science has become implicitly rational choice in orientation. You find almost entirely materialist analyses in REPAL; they might not be rational choice in the most narrow sense—self-interested utility maximization, methodological individualism—but you don’t hear words like “culture” or “ideology” or “nationalism” or “values” very often. And I think, getting back to Stinchcombe, the big difference between sociology and economics is that economics tends to treat rationality as an assumption and sociology tends to treat it as a variable. That’s not to say that sociologists doubt people are *ever* self-interested utility maximizers, or think everyone’s an altruist, but they think this is a variable that needs to be investigated and not readily assumed. In economics, rationality is the baseline assumption, and departures from rationality are surprising. Insofar as political science in the US has moved closer and closer to economics, moreover, I think it has moved closer and closer to the rationality assumption.

To be frank, I think REPAL and its members face a “legitimacy-loyalty” dilemma—for lack of a better term. The way to legitimate what you’re doing in

the American Political Science Association, or in the very high-status political science departments, is to look like US political science: it's to be studying formal institutions and electoral behavior, adopting mainstream assumptions, using quantitative methods and increasingly experimental and quasi-experimental methods, etc. REPAL started in an effort to push back against that and be loyal to a tradition in Latin America that's quite distinct from that. Not so much opposed to these things but eclectic in orientation. But the sweet spot is hard to find. If you're too far down the road of loyalty to that tradition, you're so isolated from US political science that you're completely marginal. If you go too far down the road of legitimating yourself in US political science, then you're abandoning the goals that led you to create REPAL in the first place—which was loyalty to a prior tradition of Latin American politics. I think that's a real dilemma and has been a dilemma since REPAL's very formation. I don't go to REPAL anymore for a variety of reasons, so I don't know for sure, but I think the legitimacy side has been winning.<sup>9</sup>

**Has the institutionalization of these fields prevented the interdisciplinarity of today's efforts to rethinking a sociology of the economy as in the past?**

I think it's true. I myself have been very ambivalent about the two disciplines [political science and sociology]. When I'm in political science, I wish I was in sociology; when I'm in sociology, I wish I was in political science. When we wrote that manifesto, and helped found REPAL, I was in political science. In political science, there's a vibrant field of Latin American politics, and when we wrote that we wanted to contribute to that field, and that led to interdisciplinarity. You can't understand Latin America *as a region* without economists, sociologists, or anthropologists who also study Latin America. Insofar as the other social sciences turn inward, however, it doesn't matter what comparative political scientists do; they're going to have fewer and fewer non-political scientists to play with.<sup>10</sup> It takes two to tango. Now that I'm back in sociology, where my goal is less to understand Latin America as a region than to understand firms and bureaucracies in general, I see it from the other side. I still love Latin America, and care deeply about what happens there, but my job is defined thematically rather than regionally. So Latin America is a place from which to draw ideas, from which to draw data, from and toward which to contribute and collaborate, hopefully, but not a field of study in and of itself. And what that means for me personally is that—like it or not—I feel less of an incentive to be interdisciplinary, or to interact with Latin Americanists beyond sociology; on the contrary, my interdisciplinary ventures will most

likely be thematic rather than geographic in orientation.<sup>11</sup> In short, I'm much more influenced by disciplinary themes when I'm in sociology, which isn't organized by region, and by geography and region when I'm in political science, which is organized by region—and I don't think this is coincidental.

## Economic sociology and development

**For a couple of years, there has been a trend for incorporating insights and concepts from the varieties of capitalism literature (VoC) to understand Latin America, particularly its development challenges. What do you think of this?**

There is a quote from Weber that the social sciences have advanced not through debates over findings but through debates over concepts. The point I've always taken from this quote is that the real contributions of the social sciences are the concepts not the findings; the findings come and go. People don't believe in the Protestant Ethic the way Weber talked about it, but we still talk about the Protestant Ethic; most people don't talk about charisma the way Weber talked about charisma, but they still talk about it. Exploitation, etc. Various concepts that we know. You don't have to go back to Marx and Weber: VoC is an example. I don't know too many people who are true believers in VoC; but I know tons of people who talk about liberal market economies or semi-specific skills or concepts that we got from VoC.

VoC itself gets some of these ideas from other places—John Zysman, Andrew Shonfield, Ronald Dore, etc. These ideas were percolating long before Hall and Soskice refined, revolutionized, and packaged them in the VoC volume. And I think that in doing so they did us a great favor. You know, when I teach it to my students, I tell them: if you plug VoC into Google Scholar you find thousands of references—almost all of them critical—but the fact is that you have to engage it. And by engaging with it, our knowledge grows. Another way to think about it is: If you want an incredibly blunt account of differences across the OECD, it's probably as good as you're going to do. The question is whether you want that blunt an account. Some people want a really blunt account, and that's fine. I just see room for a little more subtlety. I think in terms of the original varieties of capitalism framework, one of my concerns is that the ideal types of the US, UK, Japan, and Germany are reasonably described by these concepts—again there are big differences between these countries, so it depends on what you mean by “reasonably.” (It might also depend on what you mean by “ideal type.”) But once you start go-

ing to country number 5 in the pool of liberal market economies; country number 8 in the pool of coordinated market economies, it doesn't really look like it's doing a lot of work for you. Another way to put it is: I think that the variation within these categories is as great as the variation between, and that could easily be obscured.

I think the same thing applies to Latin America. You can come up with a Latin American VoC—and it's interesting that more than one person has tried and they don't seem to produce the same typology. But if you spend time in Chile and you spend time in Honduras, the idea that these countries are part of the same VoC starts to feel a little bit sketchy. So I think it is an interesting approach to be in dialogue with, but I think most of what we learn is going to come from the critiques and not from the approach itself—but I say that incredibly respectfully, and I have all the respect in the world for this. It's a very friendly debate and I think it derives in part from how much you want a single package to put the region in. But I'm probably not a regionalist, instinctively or institutionally; I'm a sociologist, so I want to learn this from the Dominican Republic, and that from Chile, and this from Mexico, etc. And if you think of it not as a region but as somewhere you're going to get concepts to understand family, organizations, or inequality, you're less worried about having a type of package like this in the first place.

**In some of your recent works you advocate for a new economic sociology of development. What does that look like?**

I'm finishing a book that elaborates on the article where I develop these ideas.<sup>12</sup> One of the points that I make is that the two big assumptions behind neoclassical economics—the hegemonic field—are diminishing returns and rationality. If you've got both these things, you should get convergence of incomes around the world, and given that income is everything in economics, everything else will converge and you suddenly have international equality. And the obvious problem is that this hasn't happened, at least not yet, despite the fact that neoclassical economics assumes rationality and diminishing returns. So, what's wrong?

What I say in that article and the book is: There are two different answers to that question, each of which has given up one—but not both—of these assumptions. World-systems analysts believe in rationality—they're not worried about culture, ideology, etc.—but they think there are no diminishing returns; they think there are increasing returns, and that's why the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. On the other hand, you've got modernization theorists and traditional development economists. They think that

in traditional societies—pre-capitalist, pre-modern, etc.—people aren't self-interested actors; they're driven by family norms, community values, etc., but they become rational once they adopt western culture and embrace these ideas, at which point they'll act like self-interested utility maximizers, and because there are diminishing returns, then the neoclassical predictions will come true: you'll get convergence. So for the world-systems analysts, the problem is that the whole system is stacked against poor countries, and that has nothing to do with culture and values; and for the modernization theorists and traditional development economists, the problem is a cultural one: if the culture changes, everything is going to be OK. But what's missing from that two-by-two table is the fourth cell: where you can't assume that people are rational and you can't assume diminishing returns. Both of these are variables, they're not (or shouldn't be) assumptions, and that's sociology's natural habitat.

I think that the new economic sociology should occupy that cell and say: We need to study under what conditions there are diminishing returns, and under what conditions there aren't, which is a traditional concern of urban sociology, a traditional concern of a variety of subfields in mainstream sociology that have tried to understand why rents keep going up in New York when you'd think they'd diminish, why people and firms keep moving to Silicon Valley even though costs are high there, etc. That's urban sociology 101 going back to Park and Burgess and the concentric zone model. Perhaps earlier (e.g., Von Thünen in geography). And the other part of that cell is under what conditions are people self-interested utility maximizers and under what conditions are they more prone to cooperation. And that's cultural sociology 101, family sociology 101, etc. All of these things have a bad name in development sociology because they're associated with modernization theory. And I think part of what the economic sociology of development needs to do is to recognize that there were all sorts of horrible things associated with modernization theory, but not all of it was horrible. There are actually some things that we can learn from modernization theory, and I'll give you one example: No one doubts the demographic transition, at least in broad outline. No one doubts that fertility rates start out very high, mortality rates start out very high, and that over time, everywhere we've observed, they've declined. There are debates about which comes down first, fertility or mortality, etc. But when I was a kid, I'd read articles with titles like "World Population: 50 Billion!" It didn't come true! And it didn't come true because something like the demographic transition occurred even in places where people thought it wouldn't occur. That is consistent with modernization theory, and it's not really consistent

with world-systems theory or dependency theory, and it's interesting to me that people affiliated with world-systems theory don't really talk to demographers that much. Why? I don't know, but I suspect one of the reasons is that they don't want to acknowledge that, in this place, modernization theory was right—and that gets us to other issues like: education, and shifting resource transfers, what does fertility (or for that matter morality) decline do to human capital and labor markets, where and how do gender relations fit into all this, and things like that. And at the same time, the world-systems theorists have a lot of valuable contributions as well, but if people don't talk to each other across these divides, we're foregoing a huge opportunity for sociology to make really valuable contributions in a cell—can't assume rationality, can't assume diminishing returns—that is currently completely unoccupied. So why should economic sociology not occupy that cell, and people begin to talk to people they don't currently talk to within their own discipline? This is one of the reasons I studied demography. And, unlike a lot of my colleagues in development sociology, I like demography, and believe there are many things that can be learned from intra-disciplinary dialogues of this sort. The modernization debate is more than fifty years old. It's 2019. We have bigger problems to take care of: Bolsonaro, Trump, Le Pen... I'm not going to waste my time fighting some fight about modernization theory; instead I'll take what's useful and leave the rest behind.

More generally: I never cease to be amazed by how much time we spend in the US forcing our students to read Marx, Weber, and Durkheim without mentioning that they were sociologists of development. In every major sociology department, you have to take at least one or perhaps two theory courses to get your PhD. The first of these is typically Marx, Weber and Durkheim. And they were basically studying development, right? That is what they did! The roots of sociology lie in understanding development. Whether it is bureaucratization for Weber, industry and the growth of the factory for Marx, or the division of labor for Durkheim, this is development! So somehow development has become a marginal subfield in the discipline, as practiced in the US, when the only thing that everyone reads and has in common is in large part about development.<sup>13</sup> It's incumbent upon sociologists interested in the Global South to force that back into

the mainstream of US sociology; as I said before, I don't think that carving out space in the margins of US sociology would be the solution. We need to bring it back into the mainstream.

I'd like to conclude by discussing the way these artificial or ill-considered boundaries manifest themselves from the southern side of things: I was visiting a Latin American university recently and a former student who was back on the faculty there said to me: "The problem is that no one here studies development. I'm all alone because no one studies development." And I said: "Wait, what do you mean? You're in a sociology department in a Latin American country. What do you mean no one studies development? Is there anyone in your department studying healthcare? Is there anyone in your country studying professions? Is there someone in this department studying inequality?" And he said "Yes." But this leads to the obvious follow-ups: If you study healthcare in Latin America in a US sociology department, what would you be considered? A sociologist of development. If you study inequality, professions, etc.? Same thing. So why are these people in Latin America not sociologists of development? Because they don't cite Wallerstein or Peter Evans, etc.? No, they study development even though they don't think of themselves as sociologists of development. So I think those of you in Chile or Argentina or Mexico, whether the people in your department think of themselves as development sociologists or not, many of them are by US standards development sociologists! We need to learn more from each other, and I think we should care less about the label and be more concerned about countries undergoing these changes.

Last related point: One consequence of this mislabeling, or perhaps different labeling, is that I frequently learn much more about "development" from talking to people who don't think of themselves as development sociologists in Chile, Mexico and Argentina, than I do from talking to people who do think of themselves as development sociologists in the US. Give me 24 hours with someone who studies healthcare in Chile in Santiago, versus someone who studies healthcare in Chile in New York, and I'll take Santiago everyday whether they're citing Wallerstein, Evans, etc. or not. I don't care who they cite, I care what they know. And Latin Americans know way more about their societies than I ever will, however they label it.

## Endnotes

- 1 See: [http://www.asanet.org/sites/default/files/section\\_membership\\_overlap\\_matrix\\_2018\\_0.pdf](http://www.asanet.org/sites/default/files/section_membership_overlap_matrix_2018_0.pdf)
- 2 See <http://www.asanet.org/asa-communities/asa-sections/history-sections>
- 3 Marcus Kurtz, a political scientist at Ohio State University, tells me this has changed a bit in light of the “credibility revolution” that has overtaken political science in recent years and, in so doing, shifted the discipline’s focus from external to internal validity.
- 4 See the recent piece by Dylan Matthews, “The Radical Plan to Change How Harvard Teaches Economics,” *Vox*, May 22, 2019, on the evolution of undergraduate economics training. <https://www.vox.com/the-highlight/2019/5/14/18520783/harvard-economics-chetty>
- 5 In this respect I owe an enormous debt of gratitude to John Padgett, Gary Herrigel, and the late Roger Gould at Chicago, who let me participate in their Organizations and State Formation workshop when I was finishing my PhD at Wisconsin. Until that point I didn’t know the first thing about organizations.
- 6 Like many others, I’ve been heavily influenced in this regard by Arthur Stinchcombe’s classic work on “social structure and organizations,” which also goes a long way toward bridging the aforementioned micro–macro divide. See Michael Lounsbury and Marc Ventresca, “Social Structure and Organizations Revisited,” in M. Lounsbury and M. Ventresca, eds., *Social Structure and Organizations Revisited*, Research in the Sociology of Organizations (vol. 19), New York: JAI/Elsevier Science, 2002, 3–36, for a review and references.
- 7 A plausible response would be that the mainstream US journals and associations *should* treat the US as the default precisely because they’re in the US, just as the mainstream Latin American journals and associations can treat Latin America as the default because they’re in Latin America. But insofar as the mainstream US journals and associations are located in a hegemonic power, and purport to arbitrate the quality and importance of work in the discipline as a whole, this rings hollow (and parochial) to me.
- 8 Cardoso, F. (1977). The Consumption of Dependency Theory in the United States. *Latin American Research Review* 12 (3), 7–24.
- 9 I should add that I’ve been challenged on this score by a number of trusted friends and colleagues who’ve continued to attend the meetings—up to and including those held in May of 2019, which occurred after the interview—and thus have better information than I do. In that light I’ll reconsider.
- 10 Steve Samford reminds me that US political scientists have traditionally been far more supportive of area studies and language programs than sociologists and economists, and I’m grateful for their efforts in this regard.
- 11 One clear exception is the Cambridge Elements series on “Politics and Society in Latin America,” which I’m co-editing with Tullia Falletti, Juan Pablo Luna, and Vicky Murillo, which is very much designed to animate and propagate interdisciplinary scholarship from across the North-South divide.
- 12 Andrew Schrank, “Toward a New Economic Sociology of Development,” *Sociology of Development* 1 (2) 2015, 233–58.
- 13 This is no less true of more recent additions to the canon. See, e.g., Lawrence J. Oliver, “W. E. B. Du Bois and the Dismal Science: Economic Theory and Social Justice,” *American Studies* 53 (2) 2014, 49–70 on DuBois and the question of development.