Studying development since the sixties

The emergence of a new comparative political economy

PETER EVANS AND JOHN D. STEPHENS

University of California, San Diego and University of New Mexico; Kellogg Institute, University of Notre Dame and Northwestern University

Nowhere in the social sciences did the intellectual tumult of the sixties have more profound effects than in the study of development. The sixties saw dominant theoretical approaches to the analysis of development successfully challenged by dependency and world-system approaches, frameworks drawing on Marxist class analysis and on the work of Third World Scholars. By the mid-seventies, after a decade of sharp conflicts, the shifting content of citations and publications in major journals suggested that these new approaches had reached at least co-equal status with the traditional approaches. The field appeared divided theoretically with little promise of dialogue between contending approaches. In fact, what had happened was more complex. Gradually in the course of the conflict, a body of studies had grown up that combined the comparative historical method with certain of the insights of dependency and world-system thinking and even recovered some of the hypotheses of the modernization approach in altered form. We have labeled this work "the new comparative political economy."

As work has accumulated over the past ten to fifteen years, the new comparative political economy has emerged as a productive research program. Its practitioners constitute a community of scholars who share important heuristic assumptions. Their agreement on substance and approach has allowed them not only to engage fruitfully each other's work but also to generate a cumulative growth in both the range of developmental cases explained and in the degree of fit between expectations and outcomes. The new work composing this tradition includes a diverse set of studies on Latin America, Asia, Africa, and Europe. They attack a variety of substantive issues and are eclectic in their methodology but share a number of characteristics that in combination serve to distinguish them from earlier work. Like the classic tra-

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dition of political economy, the contemporary work on which we focus begins with the conviction that economic and political development cannot fruitfully be examined in isolation from each other. It has absorbed the lessons that grew out of work on dependency and world-system perspectives and is therefore much more sensitive to international factors than classic political economy, but it has rejected the idea that external factors determine the dynamics of domestic development. More generally, it rejects models that posit "necessary" outcomes, assuming instead that developmental paths are historically contingent. Multiple cases are preferred and when single cases are used they are set in a comparative framework. Quantitative and other cross-sectional data are located in the context of more historical evidence.

Our aim here is to chronicle the emergence of the new comparative political economy, tracing its roots in comparative historical work on Europe, the writings of the Latin American dependencistas, the thinking of world-system theorists, and in the modernization approach itself. Through the discussion of specific examples of the way in which the new comparative political economy uses the theoretical and conceptual building blocks it inherited from its predecessors in new ways, we show why this is a fruitful path for those attempting to contribute to the study of development. We also consider the challenge to the approach posed by "the new utilitarianism," which attempts to construct explanations of macrostructural change by modeling the "rational choices" of individual actors. Finally, we suggest ways practitioners of the new comparative political economy might enhance the future growth of the research program on which they have embarked.

The study of development in 1968

The political turmoil of the sixties was a world-wide phenomenon and the international character of the impact of the decade on intellectual life is perhaps clearer in the case of development theory than any other area. Intellectual currents originating in the Third World challenged accepted approaches to development issues. These new streams of thought found a receptive audience in the developed world among younger scholars and students radicalized by the events of the sixties. The tack taken by younger American scholars trying to forge a new approach to development was, however, fundamentally shaped by the theories they were attempting to supersede.2