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ways that outline their complexities, while providing deep and vivid portraits of their activities. Separated into three sections, including short summaries and a comprehensive introduction and conclusion that situate this work within the broader field, this book is useful for academics, students and others who seek to understand social change in its complexity. Providing such theoretically informed and thoughtful books is critical to demonstrating the rich subtleties and nuances of everyday life and struggle at the edges of the development project, rather than simply relegating these issues to overly simplistic understandings of social change.

Andrew Gibbs, Health Economics & HIV/AIDS Research Division, University of KwaZulu-Natal


In Economic Sociology Alejandro Portes elucidates the core assumptions and explanatory concepts of economic sociology. He begins with a discussion of socially-oriented actors, unintended consequences, and power—what he views as the building blocks of economic sociology’s explanatory concepts. The concepts themselves consist of: (1) social capital; (2) social class; and (3) social institutions. Portes puts these explanatory concepts into action by examining the socioeconomic activity in the informal economy, ethnic enclaves, and transnational communities—areas he calls the “strategic sites of research” for economic sociology.

Portes’ discussion of social capital is grounded in the original sociological conception: the advantages that accrue to actors due to their social relations. Readers will find Portes’ sensitivity to the ideological misuse of the social capital concept to be refreshing. Portes argues that scholars outside of sociology have failed to use social capital as an explanatory concept of individual advantage, but instead these scholars use social capital as a community value. This ideologized meaning is far different from the original explanatory concept of social capital. Portes also discusses the negative and perverse consequences of social capital. For example, white ethnics’ social capital of
strong network ties is the negative outcome from the perspective of the social exclusion of minority groups. An example of a perverse use of social capital would be a mafia leader who uses his social capital to better organize a criminal gang. To be sure, Portes regards social capital as a useful explanatory concept for economic sociology, but it is carefully used and understood as an analytical rather than ideological concept.

Portes' makes the case that an economic sociology that does not take account of social class is bound to make what he calls the "classless fallacy," which mistakenly envisions economic action as taking place on a level playing field. Portes develops the concept of a social institution and relates institutions to social class and politics in an interesting analysis of globalization.

Portes uses the explanatory concepts to give plausible sociological accounts of such important socioeconomic topics as globalization, income inequality, politics, illegal markets and the informal economy, socioeconomic ethnic relations, and government regulation. Portes' discussion of these topics should be of great use to researchers and practitioners trying to understand and improve the conditions faced by many people in today's world.

Although the book provides an excellent overview of economic sociology, readers looking for a discussion of social welfare related policies and issues will not explicitly find that kind of discussion here. Readers looking to get a grasp of economic sociology's vast literature using a few core assumptions and explanatory concepts will find the book to be very helpful. Educators looking for a text outlining the core ideas that give sociologists a unique perspective of the economy and its processes and outcomes will find the book to be a valued pedagogical source.

The organization of the book around these basic assumptions—socially oriented actors, unintended consequences, and power—and explanatory concepts—social capital, social class and social institutions—makes Portes' book different from other books that claim to present the field. Portes has written a fine book that presents a good case for the sociological perspective of economic processes and outcomes.

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