

Abstract

The consensus among scholars and policymakers that ‘institutions matter’ for development has led inexorably to a conclusion that ‘history matters’, since institutions clearly form and evolve over time. Unfortunately, however, the next logical step has not yet been taken, which is to recognise that historians (and not only economic historians) might also have useful and distinctive insights to offer. This paper endeavours to open and sustain a constructive dialogue between history—understood as both ‘the past’ and ‘the discipline’—and development policy by (a) providing a critique of recent ‘big picture’ accounts of comparative economic development (by economists, historians and others), (b) clarifying what the craft of historical scholarship entails, especially as it pertains to understanding causal mechanisms, contexts and complex processes of institutional change, (c) providing examples of historical research that support, qualify or challenge the most influential research (by economists and economic historians) in contemporary development policy, and (d) offering some general principles and specific implications that historians, on the basis of the distinctive content and method of their research, bring to development policy debates.

Keywords: History, Development policy, Institutions, Time, Contexts

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