



The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare

Volume 32
Issue 2 June

Article 20

2005

The Mystery of Economic Growth. Elhanan Helpman.

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw>

 Part of the [Social Work Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

(2005) "*The Mystery of Economic Growth.* Elhanan Helpman.," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 32 : Iss. 2 , Article 20.
Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol32/iss2/20>

This Book Note is brought to you for free and open access by the Social Work at ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact maira.bundza@wmich.edu.



discourage and even prohibit union activities. As union membership has continued to decline, unions have been challenged to address these challenges and to reinvent themselves in order to enhance their relevance not only to their members but to the wider community.

In this significant book, David Reynolds shows how unions are working more closely with community organizations to create coalitions that address social and economic justice issues and to promote progressive causes. The book consists of 14 chapters organized into four sections. The first deals with the way unions and community organizations have established coalitions, while the second focused on a number of areas of fields of activity in which these partnerships have been successful. This section forms the core of the book and shows how union-community partners have worked together to promote living wage campaigns, foster corporate accountability, assist progressive urban development policies and programs and build political coalitions. The next section deals with institution building while the final section discusses cooperation with employers.

This book makes an important contribution to the literature on union-community partnerships and it should be widely consulted by anyone involved in community practice either as educators or practitioners. The link between union and community activism has not been widely discussed in the literature on community practice and this book will certainly help fill the gap. Its coverage of issues such as living wage campaigns is particularly informative and useful. Its deserves to be widely read.

Elhanan Helpman, *The Mystery of Economic Growth*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004. \$5.95 hardcover.

Although previously neglected, the topic of economic growth (or economic development) has gained prominence not only in economic and social science circles but more widely in popular discourse. Reports of growth rates, and the factors likely to impede continued growth, are regularly presented in the news media, and ordinary people are now more likely to pay attention when reports of sluggish economic growth are headlined. In academic circles, a concern with growth was previously thought to be the appropriate purview of social scientists working in the

field of international development, but today, the topic has been mainstreamed. Indeed, the volume of publications concerned with economic growth has increased significantly in recent years and many more theoretical accounts of the factors responsible for rapid economic growth have become available.

Despite greater interest and scholarship in the field, Elhanan Helpman believes that the subject is still a mysterious one. He points out that no single theoretical account has satisfactorily explained the factors responsible for the remarkable rates of economic growth that have characterized the 19th and 20th centuries and transformed traditional economies in many parts of the world. Tracing the history of economic growth and the way that growth has increased incomes and created previously unimagined wealth, he believes that the causes of economic growth can be discovered and that this knowledge can be used to formulate effective policies designed to promote prosperity. The bulk of the book describes and assesses the diverse theoretical explanations that have been offered to discover and explain the causes of growth. Successive chapters review the work that has been done on capital accumulation, the role of human capital, the contribution of technological innovation, entrepreneurship and international trade. The author also examines the question of whether inequality hinders economic growth and whether policies designed to address the problem are needed. Finally, the author focuses on the relevance of social and cultural institutions in fostering growth. He points out that economic scholarship on the role of institutions is still underdeveloped but he notes that further research on this topic offers promising directions for unraveling the mystery of economic growth.

This is an engaging book and it should be read by anyone interested in bridging the divide between economics and social policy. As many more social policy scholars have recognized, the study of human welfare needs to make greater use of economics and the insights that economists have provided. Helpman provides an interesting account of the most important contemporary theories of economic growth, and his book will be a useful resource for those who would like to know more on the subject. Mathematical notation is kept to a minimum and much of the book's subject matter is directly relevant to the concerns of social

policy and social work educators. The book not only provides much useful and relevant information but is enjoyable and very readable.

Robin H. Rogers-Dillon, *The Welfare Experiments: Politics and Policy Evaluation*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004. \$55.00 hardcover, \$21.95 papercover.

The idea that social science knowledge can be applied to inform and even shape public policy is an old one. Inspired by the positivist belief that the methods of the natural sciences can be effectively employed to study social phenomena, 19th century American social reformers engaged in scientific “fact gathering” to reveal the extent of poverty and deprivation in the country’s rapidly growing cities. The hope that their discoveries would foster progressive social change succeeded and paved the way for the more extensive application of social science knowledge in the 1930s when the New Deal implemented policies that reflected decades of policy relevant social science research. During the 1960s, research played a major role in social policy formulation, and it appeared that social scientists had attained widespread respect for their dispassionate efforts to provide politicians with sound data and information on which to base policy making.

These developments have fostered what Robin Rogers-Dillon believes is the myth that social policies are rational, non-ideological and largely based on carefully formulated research. In her erudite and readable book, she shows that the waiver experiments carried out by many states and evaluated by a variety of think tanks, universities and research organizations during the late 1980s and early 1990s to test “what works” in welfare, were in fact shaped by political agendas. The welfare experiments conducted under these waiver programs negate the view that social science research informs policy making in a technocratic and neutral way. Indeed, the waiver programs turned out to be an effective way of promoting a partisan policy agenda in the face of Congressional intransigence. Rogers-Dillon points out that attempts to significantly alter the AFDC program through legislative action had repeatedly failed, and there seemed little prospect that the system could be reformed through the Congress. The introduction of waiver projects during the late 1980s at the behest of the