

# Possibilities in Constraints: From Linkages to Micro-Marxism and Beyond

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## Abstract

Classical development economists, in particular those inspired by a Marxist and structuralist perspective, understood production transformation as central to social and economic development. Albert Hirschman's linkage approach also took characteristic features of technology and production processes as points of departure for understanding social events, but it did so in an original way, that is, by embracing "possibilism" against determinism, context-specificity against general rules. In this paper we build on Hirschman's generalised linkage or – as he called it – "Micro-Marxist" approach to investigate the complex micro-structural nexus linking production transformation to broader social and economic development. In line with the work of economic and technology historians like Alexander Gerschenkron, Harold Innis and Nathan Rosenberg, we argue that Hirschman's focus on linkages is indeed about the interdependent possibilities embedded in production constraints and how these constraints can be turned into opportunities for structural transformation. In our analysis, possibilism is, thus, intrinsically linked to "structural learning" in production, that is, a continuous interplay between agency and structures of production, in which structures constraint agency as much as enable and induce agency towards discovering feasible production transformation pathways. Going beyond simplistic characterisations of production activities contrasting the "all-around villain" against the "all-around-hero" of production, Hirschman also points to the fact that there is "nothing intrinsically inconceivable in one particular commodity acting as a multidimensional conspiracy in favour of or against development within a certain historical and socio-political setting" (Hirschman, 2013:185). The extent to which the production of a certain commodity acts as multidimensional conspiracy in favour of or against development depends on the extent to which new modes of production are developed and "new technological news" have an impact on social and economic institutions. Overall, Hirschman offers a possibilist framework for a new productionist development agenda. He does so by recognising how production of a certain staple will imprint certain patterns of its own, but also how there is no one to one correspondence between a staple and its socio-political environment. This position challenges standard resource-course narratives, or those development perspectives undermining possibilities in so called low-tech sectors. We conclude arguing that possibilism is central in imagining new worlds of production for peripheral and least developed countries, and in inspiring industrial policies targeting possibilities in constraints.