

# Modernization and Development in U.S. Foreign Relations

Daniel Immerwahr

*Editor's note: This is the first in a series of focused historiographical essays commissioned by Passport. Future essays will assess the state of the field in areas including public diplomacy; the nexus of foreign policy and domestic politics; sport and foreign relations; and human rights and international relations. AJ*

The problem of development has emerged to become one of the most pressing concerns in the world today. Over ten percent of the world's people live on less than the equivalent of a dollar a day, eighty percent make do with less than ten dollars, and about a billion adults in the world are illiterate. Such issues have been of concern for the prosperous nations of the global North, including the United States, for decades, but it is not clear how much help those nations have been. Living conditions in most parts of the world have improved since World War II, but economists have found it hard to ascribe that improvement to foreign assistance. Countries that have received a great deal of aid, such as India, are not doing better on the whole than countries that have received relatively little, such as China, which currently has a per capita GDP almost four times that of India. What is more, development aid since World War II has often turned out to be counterproductive, propping up authoritarian governments, subverting democracy, launching environmentally and socially destructive modernization projects, and shading uncomfortably into military repression.<sup>1</sup>

Historians who have taken up the topic of development have acknowledged its failures and sought to explain them in terms of a single cause. Developmental efforts have failed, they argue, because those efforts have been technocratic, designed from an Olympian perch by experts with imperfect knowledge of the culture, politics, or even economies of the places they sought to improve. The imperfection in that knowledge was a consequence of the limited and flawed nature of the quantitative or abstract information that experts relied on to comprehend the global South. But it was compounded by their faith in numbers, in sociological abstracts, and above all in their ability to comprehend the basic forces of history. Working from a partial understanding of a few societies, and from a tacit and unquestioned set of biases stemming from their home cultures, they nevertheless extrapolated widely and with surprising confidence, secure in the belief that they had identified universal laws of history governing the transition of poor, tradition-bound, and agrarian societies into rich, modern, urban ones. Their confidence proved to be their undoing, or, more precisely, the undoing of the places in which they operated, because as planners built development campaigns around abstract sociological models or numbers-driven economic ones, they inevitably blinded themselves to conditions on the ground and triggered massive, disruptive, and often violent conflicts between metropolitan plans and local realities.

This understanding of development as a technocratic process draws heavily on the critical scholarship on empire and particularly on the work of the Subaltern Studies Collective, which has focused on the destructive clash of epistemologies between imperial and indigenous forms

of knowledge. Indeed, much of the existing literature on international development regards it as empire by other means—yet another way for the global North to intervene in and control societies in the global South.<sup>2</sup> But the touchstone work that best encapsulates the basic approach that historians of development have taken is surely James C. Scott's *Seeing Like a State* (1998), which identifies a common predisposition among rulers to remake societies so that they will be legible to and governable by the center, however much havoc such a refashioning wreaks on localities. Scott argues that although many rulers have aspired toward such "high modernist" state-building throughout history, it has only been since the Enlightenment that an unbounded faith in science and technology, plus greater technologies of governing, have unleashed social engineering projects upon a prostrate civil society.<sup>3</sup> Working in a similar vein, Michael Adas has extended that point by arguing that the United States, which largely avoided the humiliations of the two world wars, emerged in the post-1945 period possessing an unusual amount of "technohubris," especially when it came to its development campaigns in the Third World.<sup>4</sup>

Within U.S. history, the development-as-technocracy thesis has been adopted by a group of historians who have clustered around the topic of modernization theory, which, they argue, is the specific form that the general high modernist push identified by Scott and others took in the postwar United States.<sup>5</sup> Drawing together postwar developments in the academic fields of economics, sociology, political science, psychology, and anthropology, modernization theory emerged in the late 1950s as a sort of unified field theory for the social sciences, explaining how traditional societies moved along a convergent path toward a universal condition of modernity that, not coincidentally, strongly resembled the United States at midcentury. This was a propitious time, because just as social scientists were fastening upon a shared theoretical matrix, the appetite for academic wisdom among politicians was growing. Especially during the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, policymakers came to depend on social scientists both for legitimation and for guidance, inviting many leading modernization theorists into the foreign policy administration. Not since the late eighteenth century had the life of the mind and the world of politics come into such close contact in the United States, and modernization theory was the bridge that joined the two.

But although the historians of modernization theory have focused especially on the social scientific complex in the 1950s and 1960s—and in so doing have forced diplomatic history to engage with fairly abstruse problems in high intellectual history—they also understand the fundamental worldview encompassed by modernization theory to have had a "wider, more enduring trajectory" than its academic expression.<sup>6</sup> Modernization theory was not just a theory, some argue, but an ideology, one that has been deeply embedded in the basic thought patterns of U.S. leaders for much of the twentieth century. For Nick Cullather, the "ideals of modernization" took root

in U.S. thought as soon as scientists began to understand the most basic component of development, food, in terms of the quantifiable and globally commensurable unit of the calorie in the late nineteenth century. Once qualitative questions become quantitative, international comparisons become not only possible but inevitable, and the notion of development as an attempt to bring poorer nations up to the measured standards of richer ones followed almost as a matter of logic.<sup>7</sup> David Ekbladh offers a stronger and more controversial version of the *longue durée* modernization argument, insisting that the United States has since the New Deal been committed not just to abstract and quantitative modes of international comparison but to a specific mode of development: state-directed, top-down industrialization projects, modeled on the Tennessee Valley Authority.<sup>8</sup> Those who argue that the modernization impulse predated the Kennedy and Johnson administrations tend to take a wider view of the phenomenon in space as well as time and look beyond the State Department and the key Cold War universities toward other modernizing agents: philanthropic foundations, United Nations institutions, foreign governments, and networks of professionals.

The interpretation of modernization as an ideology has been a valuable contribution to our understanding of foreign relations. In response to earlier grand theories that have explained the postwar behavior of the United States in terms of a zeal for democracy, a desire to secure corporate profits, a quest for security, or a strong allergy to Communism, we now have a framework that explains U.S. policymaking in terms of the urge to modernize. Scratch a Cold War policymaker, recent scholars contend, and you will find an underlying layer of modernization theory that shapes his fundamental view of the world. Of course, the basic drive to replace traditional societies with modern ones was by no means incompatible with a Cold War agenda; the most influential formulation of modernization theory, W. W. Rostow's *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto* (1960), defined the normative end-state of modernization as a market society with high mass consumption and regarded Communism as a perilous deviation. But modernization was also capacious enough to accommodate five-year plans, exchange controls, and exactly the sort of market incursions that Cold Warriors found so intolerable domestically. Once one uses modernization as a lens through which to observe postwar history, the East-West axis, which divided the warring superpowers, seems less prominent than the North-South one, which united them. For all the intensity of the rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union, when it came to development aid the two hegemony pursued remarkably similar strategies, often in the same countries.<sup>9</sup> While the Cold War no doubt supplied the basic impulse of the United States to intervene in the Third World, the ideology of modernization justified and determined the shape of that intervention.

Historians of development and modernization have made yet another contribution to U.S. foreign relations by enhancing our understanding of the period of the 1970s, with its remarkable concatenation of economic and political disruptions. Clearly, this was a multifaceted moment of crisis, with major components including the breakdown of the Bretton Woods economic system, the erosion of U.S. hegemony, the puncturing of the sovereignty of the nation-state, the transition of the U.S. economy from production to finance, and the loss of trust in national authority following multiple revelations of illicit, covert govern-

ment operations, from the CIA's funding of intellectuals to Nixon's involvement in Watergate. But prominent among these crises was the sudden loss of faith in modernization. Although it appears from the historical literature that U.S.-led modernization campaigns were more disruptive than effective from the very start, for reasons adumbrated by critics like James C. Scott, their violence appears to have increased as liberal modernization's failures become evident and policymakers turned toward more coercive forms of modernization. This is a point that is made or at least acknowledged by nearly every U.S. historian of

development, most of whom note how the leading lights of modernization theory came to occupy important positions in the prosecution of the Vietnam War.<sup>10</sup> But the point is given the most sustained theoretical elaboration by Bradley Simpson's study of Indonesia, *Economists with Guns* (2008). Simpson traces the theoretical adjustments by which intellectuals turned a liberal version of modernization theory into "military modernization," which singled out military dictatorships as a key agent of modernization, particularly for their ability to overcome democratic resistance.<sup>11</sup> Modernization projects

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became simultaneously more violent and less tethered to local conditions. From the perspective of any number of emerging perspectives—including human rights, environmentalism, participatory democracy, pacifism, and peasant movements—modernization projects became harder and harder to justify. Policymakers turned away from them and toward alternative modes of development that focused on poverty alleviation, ecological sustainability, cultural pluralism, popular participation, gender issues, and, above all, market solutions.

The study of the history of U.S. development has reached something of a natural resting place. One of the first historical investigations, which defined the agenda for the field, anticipating and triggering numerous studies of modernization, was Michael Latham's *Modernization as Ideology* (2000). Latham recently published a second book on the topic, *The Right Kind of Revolution* (2012), which is not a monograph but the first real synthesis that the field has seen. Ably stitching together the recent literature in the field, it is perfectly suited for assignment to undergraduates. The twelve-year period between Latham's two books can be taken as marking the first wave of writing on U.S. development. So what will the second wave look like? I have two suggestions, which fall somewhere between hopes and predictions.

### Beyond the Modernization Consensus

The first step forward for scholarship is to map the boundaries of the modernization project. So much attention has been given to describing the magnetic pull of modernization as an ideology, and technocracy as a mode of operation, that it can seem from a casual reading of the literature that that is all there was to development. We are currently in a historiographical position that is not unlike that of the "consensus school" of U.S. political history, whose practitioners—Richard Hofstadter, Daniel Boorstin, Louis Hartz, David Potter—argued that the most interesting feature about U.S. politics was that all of its conflicts were contained within a tightly bounded ideological space. The price of admission to serious political debates, the consensus school argued, was subscription to the basic tenets of liberalism: individualism, property rights, representative government, and so forth. The consensus school exposed a durable and undoubtedly important trend with-

in the U.S. political tradition. But the cost of that insight was a homogenization of the past. Abolitionists, populists, Southern agrarians, and radical Jacksonians who did not seem to fit the consensus were ignored, deemed pathological, or explained only in terms of their relation to the overriding theme of liberalism.<sup>12</sup> The consensus school of development history has focused less on liberalism than on modernization as the central strain of U.S. thought, but it has, like the original consensus school, stressed ideological coherence and continuity, at least up until the 1970s. But has development policy been governed so thoroughly by an ideological consensus, or were there other strains of developmental thought and practice that coexisted with modernization?

On the face of it, the latter seems plausible, especially given the sudden disintegration of the modernization project in the 1970s. It is likely that those rivals to modernization theory, which were strong enough to dispatch it in the 1970s, had earlier histories stretching back into the immediate postwar period. One suggestive study in this regard is Michele Alacevich's *The Political Economy of the World Bank* (2009), which examines the first experiments that the Bank made with development starting in the late 1940s. It is not entirely surprising that Alacevich finds disagreements, often heated, among U.S. experts about what development ought to look like. Such debates were largely about the scale of projects and whether they would prioritize production or distribution—questions that were orthogonal to the question of modernization. But Alacevich makes an intriguing observation about the structure of those arguments, which is that the dissenters were not so much defeated as pushed toward the periphery, where they often found a comfortable berth. When orthodoxy reigned in Washington, heterodox thinkers were able to gain recognition and support working directly with Southern nations.<sup>13</sup>

Joseph Hodge's study of British colonial development policy in Africa, *Triumph of the Expert* (2007), notes a similar dynamic. Like the United States, Britain adopted top-down, expert-driven, centrally implemented development policies in many times and places. But Hodge argues that such development, which is obviously a form of the modernization project, was never uncontested within the Colonial Office. Rather, developers who pushed grand and radical schemes to transform traditional societies had to compete with seasoned colonial hands, possessing in-country knowledge, who favored a colonial policy that would preserve existing cultures and economies. The "conservatives" urged decentralized schemes, reliance on native institutions, and a general gradualism that is hard to square with modernization in its canonical form.<sup>14</sup>

It is likely, following Alacevich and Hodge, that modernization appeared to reign unchallenged during the first twenty years after World War II simply because we were looking in the wrong places. Many of the pathbreaking studies of modernization theory, including Latham's *Modernization as Ideology* and Nils Gilman's *Mandarins of the Future* (2003), are really studies of the metropole. They examine the plans of policymakers in Washington, not the work of politicians or U.S. officials in the developing world. But, as the scholarship on empire has shown, the imperial mind usually exhibits a great deal more coherence and purpose than does the imperial arm, and those operating from the centers of power often see things differently from those toiling in the fields. It is possible, indeed likely, that low- and mid-level development experts, living in-country and bargaining daily with foreign leaders, were not the high modernists that their superiors in Washington were. It is also likely that, even if U.S. experts were uniformly governed by the tenets of modernization theory, the foreign politicians with whom they dealt were not. As students of U.S. development turn increasingly to

foreign archives, we will have a fuller sense of where and when the modernization consensus operated, and where and when it did not.

## Beyond Moral Accounting

Since William Appleman Williams and the birth of the revisionist school of U.S. diplomatic history, much writing on the topic of U.S. foreign relations has been implicitly concerned with a sort of national soul-searching, in which the sins and hypocrisies of the United States—particularly those pertaining to its actions in the Third World—are laid bare. Indeed, one of the reasons that the modernization/technocracy focus has been so compelling is that it traces the failures of U.S. foreign policy to an ethical flaw: hubris, particularly the hubris to suppose that the rest of the world could be known and manipulated with ease by men whose understanding of global affairs came from abstract models rather than deep familiarity with other places. While ethical questions make for high moral drama, we must remember that, because the United States has been the predominant global superpower since 1945, its actions in the field of development are significant not merely as reflections of its moral character but as events in global history.

The suggestion that U.S. development assistance might look different when viewed from another perspective is sustained, to take one example, by the writings of Africanist Frederick Cooper. In a series of works, Cooper argues that the availability of foreign aid and the peculiar rhythm of African decolonization led together to the formation of "gatekeeper states," governments whose strength derived not from popular legitimacy or even control of the interior but rather from their ability to "sit astride the interface between a territory and the rest of the world, collecting and distributing resources that derived from the gate itself," including customs revenue, entry and exit visas, currency controls, and, most important, foreign aid and investment.<sup>15</sup> Here the story is not about the exportation of U.S. scripts or the rule of experts, but about the role that foreign aid played in African state formation. As Cooper stresses, this is a joint history, not something that the global North "did" to Africa, but something that happened as the result of a confluence of forces, some internal to Africa and some not.

Rather than seeking merely to defend or condemn the modernization project on ethical grounds, we might, following Cooper, ask questions about how it contributed to the development of states and economies in the global South. Cooper's account makes room for the larger contours of international history: decolonization, the rise of international institutions, the multiplicity of developers and the rivalries among them, and the Bretton Woods system of relative national autonomy in the international realm. By contrast, most studies of development by U.S. historians are based on a hub-and-spoke model according to which the agents of the United States circulate through the world and intervene in various places. That model pays little attention to connections between Southern nations or indeed to any part of the international system. Finally, by allowing themselves to move beyond moral accounting, U.S. historians might begin to take up the technical aspects of development projects. Currently, modernization is understood primarily as an ideology and assessed as such, but in fact many aspects of actual modernization projects were highly technical, with non-ideological dimensions that might be understood as episodes in the history of science and technology studies rather than solely in the history of U.S. foreign relations.<sup>16</sup>

Both of the suggestions I have made seek to transcend the development-as-modernization paradigm. They proceed, however, not from dissatisfaction with it, but from

an appreciation of what it has achieved. Development has risen in our estimation from being a special and largely peripheral subject within the study of Cold War diplomacy to a central feature of the postwar international system. Historians have used it to promote an entirely novel framework for understanding U.S. foreign relations throughout the twentieth century, one that has brought the history of social science into the field in an unexpected way. What remains is to consolidate the gains of the modernization literature, to probe its extent and to weave it into the larger fabric of international history.

Notes:

1. On the failures of development aid, see William Easterly, *The White Man's Burden: Why the West's Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done So Much Ill and So Little Good* (New York, 2006).
2. On the continuities between the colonial and developmental state as seen from the Subaltern Studies perspective, see Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?* (London, 1986); Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton, 1993); and Gyan Prakash, *Another Reason: Science and the Imagination of Modern India* (Princeton, 1999). Two influential works that offer a similar criticism of development but that stress economic aspects as well as the power-knowledge compound are Wolfgang Sachs, ed., *The Development Dictionary: A Guide to Knowledge as Power* (London, 1992) and Arturo Escobar, *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World* (Princeton, 1994).
3. James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven, 1998). Other key works in critical development studies that deal with the technocratic character of development schemes are James Ferguson, *The Anti-Politics Machine: "Development," Depoliticization, and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho* (Minneapolis, 1994); Timothy Mitchell, *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity* (Berkeley, 2002); and Tania Murray Li, *The Will to Improve: Governmentality, Development, and the Practice of Politics* (Durham, NC, 2007).
4. Michael Adas, *Machines as the Measure of Men: Science, Technology, and Ideologies of Western Dominance* (Ithaca, 1989); Michael Adas, *Dominance by Design: Technological Imperatives and America's Civilizing Mission* (Cambridge, MA, 2006).
5. Besides the works on modernization cited below, important books include Michael E. Latham, *Modernization as Ideology: American Social Science and 'Nation Building' in the Kennedy Era* (Chapel Hill, 2000); David C. Engerman, Nils Gilman, Mark H. Haefele, and Michael E. Latham, eds., *Staging Growth: Modernization, Development, and the Global Cold War* (Amherst, 2003); Nils Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future: Modernization Theory in Cold War America* (Baltimore, 2003); Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge, 2005); Larry Grubbs, *Secular Missionaries: Americans and African Development in the 1960s* (Boston, 2009); and Inderjeet Parmar, *Foundations of the American Century: The Ford, Carnegie, and Rockefeller Foundations in the Rise of American Power* (New York, 2012).
6. Michael E. Latham, *The Right Kind of Revolution: Modernization, Development, and U.S. Foreign Policy from the Cold War to the Present* (Ithaca, 2011), 2. See also, besides the texts cited below in this paragraph, David C. Engerman, *Modernization from the Other Shore: American Intellectuals and the Romance of Russian Development* (Cambridge, MA, 2003); Adas, *Dominance by Design*; and Matthew Connelly, *Fatal Misconception: The Struggle to Control World Population* (Cambridge, MA, 2008).
7. Nick Cullather, *The Hungry World: America's Cold War Battle against Poverty in Asia* (Cambridge, MA, 2010), 41. A similar but more general argument, built in part on Cullather's research, can be found in David C. Engerman, "American Knowledge and Global Power," *Diplomatic History* 31 (2007): 599–622.
8. David Ekbladh, *The Great American Mission: Modernization and the Construction of an American World Order* (Princeton, 2009).
9. A work that discusses the roots of that convergence is David C. Engerman, *Modernization from the Other Shore: American Intellectuals and the Romance of Russian Development* (Cambridge, MA, 2003).
10. See particularly Bruce Kuklick, *Blind Oracles: Intellectuals and War from Kennan to Kissinger* (Princeton, 2006).
11. Bradley R. Simpson, *Economists with Guns: Authoritarian Development and U.S.-Indonesian Relations, 1960–1968* (Stanford, 2008).

12. John Higham, "The Cult of the 'American Consensus': Homogenizing Our History," *Commentary* (February 1959): 93–100.
13. Michele Alacevich, *The Political Economy of the World Bank: The Early Years* (Stanford, 2009). See also Michele Alacevich, "The World Bank and the Politics of Productivity: The Debate on Economic Growth, Poverty, and Living Standards in the 1950s," *Journal of Global History* 6 (2011): 53–74.
14. Joseph Morgan Hodge, *Triumph of the Expert: Agrarian Doctrines of Development and the Legacies of British Colonialism* (Athens, OH, 2007).
15. Frederick Cooper, *Africa since 1940: The Past of the Present* (Cambridge, 2002), 157. See also Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society: The Labor Question in French and British Africa* (Cambridge, 1996); and Cooper, "Writing the History of Development," *Journal of Modern European History* 8 (2010): 5–23.
16. This possibility is explored in Gabrielle Hecht, ed., *Entangled Geographies: Empire and Technopolitics in the Global Cold War* (Cambridge: 2011). In her introduction, Hecht rightly singles out and praises Nick Cullather as one U.S. historian who has engaged fruitfully with the technological aspects of development.