Introduction: Towards a Global History of Modernization

We seem to be living modernization twice, the first time as earnestness, the second time as irony.

—Frederick Cooper

The ironic tone of historians of modernization theory in the 1990s, as Africanist Frederick Cooper suggests, inverted the earnestness of the modernizers themselves. Economist and impresario Walt Whitman Rostow remains, much as he would have liked, a larger-than-life symbol of modernization programs. He fit the earnest believer role perfectly, promoting economic modernization as the cure to all ills in the newly named third world. Western capital and technical know-how, in this simplified model, would provide all countries with the chance to achieve the same prosperity and political freedoms that he identified with the United States. The vision was boldly and blithely universal: every nation, however poor, could become like the United States—and it was the job of Americans to make that happen. As Rostow famously quoted his poet namesake:

One thought ever at the fore
That in the Divine Ship, the World, breasting Time and Space,
All peoples of the globe sail together, sail the same voyage, are bound to the same destination.

The scholarship on modernization theory and development aid that came out of the 1990s took, as Cooper rightly suggests, an ironic tone. It relished the large gap between aspiration and achievement, between lofty goals of world prosperity and grinding poverty that worsened, in many cases, through the 1960s and 1970s. The 1960s, which the Kennedy administration declared the...
“Development Decade,” instead became the decade in which development programs and the technocratic optimism that motivated them, ran aground, dashing hopes and undermining the belief in the universal potential of modern, rational methods of socioeconomic progress. Accounts by Arturo Escobar, Wolfgang Sachs, and others emphasized the ways in which modernization functioned much like F. Scott Fitzgerald’s green light: it might define a historical narrative, but it could not be achieved. The promises of modernization were, in this telling, impossible, even unreal, goals because modernization could not be imposed or invited; efforts to do so were doomed to fail.

Cooper may have missed, among diplomatic historians, another stage of the return of modernization: cynicism. Drawing on some of the dependencia theories of the 1970s, cynics dismissed the seriousness with which development workers thought they were being altruistic and could help to improve peacefully and constructively not only local living conditions, but also make the world a safer and more prosperous place. Instead, critics have emphasized the other, ostensibly real functions of modernization: to win the newly independent nations for the “free world” while at the same time securing unfettered access to their considerable natural resources and using the decolonized regions as a social scientific laboratory without having to bear responsibility for their experiments’ effects. Modernization programs were at best plays for geopolitical loyalty, ploys to help the American economy, or playing fields for academics eager to try out their theoretical models in practice.

Perhaps we have passed through earnestness, irony, and cynicism to a new stage: modernization as history—make that global history. Nick Cullather announced in these pages that development had become “history” back in 2000, but that history could at times be quite circumscribed. It tended to be American-centered, saw modernization as a counterweight to superpower conflict, and focused on broad-brush programs rather than specifics. A global history of modernization transcends those limits: it explores modernization not

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as an American export, but as a global phenomenon that was hotly contested, between blocs but also within them; it examines the intersections between modernization and geopolitics, considering them analytically distinct but often overlapping; and it starts from the assumption that modernization was a global project in character and scope. Global here also implies transnational: modernization policies transcended national and regional borders, transferred knowledge across continents and established connections between societies and individuals that might not have come into existence otherwise. Finally, global histories of modernization must be written from the local—about specific projects and individuals. It is counterintuitive to suggest that the best way to understand a global process is by narrowing the focus, but as the following articles suggest, local studies offer an excellent avenue to the study of global studies of modernization without losing sight of regional, national, and international circumstances.

Previous scholarship set out some of the broad-brush parameters that make local studies possible. Thanks to pioneering works by Robert Packenham (begun in the late 1960s, when modernization still had many adherents) and more recently by Michael Latham, Nils Gilman, Amy Staples, and dozens of others, we have a clear sense of what modernization was. Gilman, like Packenham but with archival materials and a keener eye for institutions, plumbed the unspoken assumptions and the visible institutions that put it at the forefront of American social science in the postwar decades. Latham showed how the ideas of modernization made their way into the key elements of American policy towards the third world. Staples illuminated the perspective of development experts working in the world of intergovernmental agencies. Yet these works, for all of their power, imply that ideas about modernization emanate from the West to the rest; and they take place, by and large, above the level of the specific encounter between “modernizers” and their subjects (or is it their objects?).

To the extent that this encounter has been the subject of scholarly analysis, it is usually at the hands of anthropologists or ethnographically inclined social scientists: Timothy Mitchell, Tania Li, Akhil Gupta, and especially James Ferguson. These anthropological accounts have wielded their influence outside their field, as historians investigated development highly attuned to the

assumptions that each actor brings to the encounter, as well as the formal and informal structures of knowledge and power involved. As this last phrase suggests, the anthropological accounts are also the ones most likely to attempt discourse analysis along the lines suggested by Michel Foucault.

One of the hallmarks of a new global history of modernization is the willingness to look beyond the United States; for all of its power in the Cold War, it was not everywhere and at every moment the most important part of the “battle for the hearts and minds” of the third world. In dividing the late twentieth-century world along the North-South axis rather than the East-West one, scholars are examining modernization as a project that engaged not just the United States, but the whole northern hemisphere. Western European programs have received the most attention. As the European empires dissolved—whether the result of war, insurgency, or geopolitical machinations—the European metropoles maintained special relationships with their former colonies: conflicted, even antagonistic, but special nonetheless. West Germany presented a special case as it sought to export its Wirtschaftswunder to the third world in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The principal English-language scholarship on West European aid has been focused on outlining the institutions and forms of aid at a macro level. This important task now completed, historians of Europe have been delving more deeply into the history of the development and modernization programs. They are writing not just the history of colonialism and decolonization or the history of the superpower antagonism, but the ways in which these two landmark processes of the twentieth century coincided and intersected. The legacies of colonialism—recently analyzed under the paradigm of transnational history—have started to gain more attention in recent years, reminding historians of Europe of the existence of relationships and


interdependencies with the non-European world that had been forgotten in the wake of World War II and the tumultuous postwar period.\footnote{See Sebastian Conrad and Jürgen Osterhammel, eds., \textit{Das Kaiserreich transnational: Deutschland in der Welt 1871–1914} (Göttingen, Germany, 2004). For recent research on Germany's colonial legacies, see Andreas Eckert and Albert Wirtz, “Wir nicht, die Anderen auch: Deutschland und der Kolonialismus,” in \textit{Jenseits des Eurozentrismus: Postkoloniale Perspektiven in den Geschichts- und Kulturwissenschaften}, ed. Sebastian Conrad and Shalini Randeria (Frankfurt am Main, Germany, 2002), 372–92; Dirk van Laak, \textit{Imperiale Infrastruktur: Deutsche Planungen für eine Erschließung Afrikas 1880 bis 1960} (Paderborn, Germany, 2004); Boris Barth and Jürgen Osterhammel, eds., \textit{Zivilisierungsmissionen: Imperiale Weltverbesserung seit dem 18. Jahrhundert} (Konstanz, Germany, 2005).}


Before turning to local studies, then, some of the basic
parameters of aid programs need to be well documented. The same applies for
studies on Japan and the so-called Asian tigers; English publications on these
nations have focused on Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea as objects of
modernization—recipients rather than donors.20

By narrowing its scope to a single country and often a single project, works
in this new global history of modernization are best able to include the principal
actors in a given moment. With this comes scholarship that uses multiple
archives and, more importantly, multiple perspectives. Jeffrey James Byrne’s
article on Algeria in the 1960s, for instance, follows French, American, and
Soviet officials as they pursue national goals in Algeria—as well as how factions
within Algeria sought their own aims in each relationship. Similarly, Massimil-
iano Trentin’s article follows Syrian policymakers, as well as those from the two
Germanies, as they pursued their nation’s goals in the complicated interactions
between them. And Bradley Simpson’s analysis of modernization programs in
Indonesia looks from the archipelago northward to the Cold War superpowers,
rather than from Washington south.

At the same time, explorations of the local ensure careful analysis of specific
projects and practices. Historians thus far know much more about moderniza-
tion as an intellectual framework than about modernization on the ground: what
actual programs operated in the name of modernization? What impacts did
these programs have on the countries involved—donor as well as recipient? And
how did these experiences shape the ideas from which they emerged? This last
item in particular allows us to more fully consider modernization as a dynamic
enterprise, not a single unchanging set of ideas but a determined effort to
improve the third world (“improve” of course being a loaded term) and under-
stand how social change happens and how to make it happen.

The new scholarship on modernization as a global project also denaturalizes
the nation. Thomas Bender declared one of the main tasks of a transnational
American history was to decenter the nation—not to eliminate it as a category
of historical analysis, but to contextualize it and interrogate it.21 The same

20. Victor Koschmann, “Modernization and Democratic Values: The ‘Japanese Model’ in
the 1960s,” in Staging Growth: Modernization, Development, and the Global Cold War, ed. David
C. Engerman et al. (Amherst, MA, 2003), 225–49 and Gregg Andrew Brazinsky, “Koreanizing
Modernization: Modernization ‘Theory and South Korean Intellectuals,” in Staging Growth,
251–73; Nick Cullather, “Fuel for the Good Dragon: The United States and Industrial Policy
in Taiwan,” Diplomatic History 20, no. 1 (1996), 1–26; Pradip K. Gosh, Developing South Asia: A
Modernization Perspective (Westport, CT, 1984).

21. Thomas Bender, “Historians, the Nation, and the Plenitude of Narratives,” in Rethink-
ing American History in a Global Age, ed. Thomas Bender (Berkeley, CA, 2002).
dictum applies to the new histories of modernization. International organs played an important role in shaping both the theories and practices of modernization. Global institutions founded in the 1940s—World Bank/International Monetary Fund (IMF), Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), and World Health Organization (WHO), for instance—took a leading role. Thus Daniel Maul’s article about the International Labor Organization gives some indication of the role of intergovernmental agencies—and one not typically associated with development programs. Regional organizations like the European Development Fund (EDF) also became important features of the global development landscape. American philanthropies—especially the Ford and Rockefeller foundations and the Carnegie Corporation—played an especially important role. As Matthew Connelly argued vis-à-vis population control, these organizations were part of an extraordinary network that also encompassed third world elites, national states, and intergovernmental agencies. Contextualizing the nation furthermore entails taking full account of the internal divisions within it—geographical as well as physical. Daniel Speich accomplishes this by showing how differences in visions of modernization within Kenya shaped differences in political affiliation and eventually Kenyan politics. Looking below the national level, as well as above it, does not deny the existence or power of nations and states, but allows a deeper understanding of personal and institutional networks of knowledge that encompassed but were not limited to sovereign states.

The new global histories of modernization, furthermore, examine the relationship between ideas and actions. This relationship, much beloved by Rostow himself, has long been central to modernization, which was an intellectual agenda as much as it was a set of aid programs. Historians writing about the Cold War university have recently drawn attention to the tight connections between scholars and policy. These connections were nowhere closer than in

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26. Walt Rostow, for instance, published a number of works under the rubric of the “Ideas and Action” series at the University of Texas Press.
the world of development and modernization, where international fieldwork and government advising were common activities for scholars. Jason Pribilsky’s article on the Cornell-Peru Project in Vicos shows how scholars saw the third world as a laboratory for modernization; the process would benefit not only those living in newly modern societies, but also the scholars who studied them. The ideas that were most central to shaping development were designed and presented as neutral and technical measures, but usually amounted to much more. Pursuing economic growth meant raising the gross national product, a measure that in turn shaped development programs.

These six articles, of course, hardly exhaust the possibilities for a new global history of modernization; indeed, they hardly introduce all of the innovations currently under way. All six of these articles, along with ten others, were first presented at a March 2008 workshop sponsored by the German Historical Institute in Washington. At least four innovations necessary for a fuller history of “Modernization as a Global Project” that emerged at that workshop are not fully accounted for in these articles. First is the expansion of chronological boundaries, taking the history out of the 1950s and early 1960s, which marked the peak of American hopes for and commitments to modernizing the third world. Indeed, this chronological focus makes sense only for American aid programs; European programs—in both east and west—expanded primarily in the 1960s. And perhaps it does not even work well for American programs; David Ekbladh has identified parallels between the Tennessee Valley Authority of the 1930s and American modernization programs in the Cold War. But the links between European colonial personnel and programs and infrastructure—Speich, for instance, mentions the British Million Acre Plan for East Africa only in passing—require much fuller investigation. By the same token, historians need to extend their studies of development past the optimism that lasted

30. Other participants included Ragna Boden (University of Bochum), David E. Hamilton (University of Kentucky), Joseph M. Hodge (West Virginia University), Young-sun Hong (SUNY Stony Brook), Constantin Katsakioris (École des hautes études en sciences sociales), Sara Lorenzini (University of Trento), Lorenz M. Luthi (McGill University), Joy Rohde (American Academy of Arts and Sciences), Bernd Schaefer (Woodrow Wilson International Center), Perrin Selcer (University of Pennsylvania), Bradley R. Simpson (University of Maryland), and James P. Woodard (Montclair State University). See the conference report at http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/tagungsberichte/id=2083.
through the early 1960s and study the problems that modernization faced, both as an intellectual agenda and a set of policies and practices. While archival materials on modernization from the 1970s and beyond do not abound, there are sufficient resources to explore the demise—and not just rise—of modernization.

Secondly, historians have for too long imitated the modernizers’ obsessions with heavy industry—and especially steel production—as the mark of modern society. Programs for agriculture and rural modernization, though, were just as important to many modernizers, and debatably had a broader impact. As Nick Cullather’s articles have shown so well, the Green Revolution was in large part a development effort—to solve problems of hunger by transforming rural economies and societies throughout the third world.33 Rostow himself hoped that rural development would be the route to thoroughgoing modernization—and a way to distinguish American programs from Soviet ones. “Marx was a city boy,” Rostow wrote in one of his favorite articles, whereas Americans understood that the path to modernity ran through the countryside.34 The short- and long-term consequences modernization projects had on the environment were mostly ignored or exculpated in the name of progress. Historians will have to pay more attention to the environmental impacts and to their meaning for the rural populations. Hydroelectric dams, artificial fertilizers, roads, monocultures—all these changed the “traditional” ways of living in often unforeseen ways, both with and without links to Cold War geostrategic interests.35

Thirdly, we will have to take into account the importance of gender, which has all too long been ignored—not only by the modernizers but also by historians of modernization.36 The assumption that modernization was a universal process that “made men modern” really was based on a simplified notion of “man.” With exception of a few cases in which women were considered “target groups” of modernization by (post)colonial modernizers37, women received minimal attention, as did gender structures in general. Only in the late 1960s did Western development experts implement programs that sought to integrate women in the process of development without reducing them to instruments of

37. See Malinowski, “Modernisierungskriege,” 229–35. Malinowski portrays French programs in Algeria to reach Muslim women through “female” modernization campaigns in an effort to “stabilize” the colony.
nation-building and political stability. Women were now recognized as being their families’ principal wage earners, as those taking responsibility for hygiene and birth control, and as that segment of society that was most adept to create grassroots institutions to further self-help. Overcoming the gender blindness of modernizers and modernizing institutions in the South and the North is a central task of future research.

Finally, a global history of modernization will account more fully for religion. While the most energetic of the modernizers saw religion as merely one component of “tradition” that needed to be overcome, others explored the relationship of religion and economic change. The goal was not to produce a new Weber thesis but to understand the complex role that religious belief played in shaping the economics and politics of modernization in the third world. Here, again, anthropologists’ attention to local cultures and contexts will be important. Back when anthropologist Clifford Geertz was a mere scholar, not an academic icon, he wrote widely on religion; alongside his well-known article “Ideology as a Cultural System” was a parallel article on religion, the subject of his second book. And before that, Geertz was a modernization theorist, dispatched by adviser Talcott Parsons, the incomprehensible sage of modernization theory, to explore the relationship between modernization and social change in Indonesia. The relationship of Islam to modernization projects, which especially interested Geertz, appears as a sub-theme in Byrne’s essay and is of obvious relevance today—especially in a comparative perspective that examines religious beliefs and institutions in a multiconfessional and multinational framework.

We are still at the beginning of the study of modernization as global history. The following essays represent some of the many ways to proceed; they are each once local and global, multilingual and multiperspectival. Taken together, they enrich our understanding of the relations between North and South that shaped the East-West conflict of the late twentieth century—and much else besides, including the self-perception of societies whose representatives sought to


project their own ideals of modernity onto the “less developed” societies. Walt Rostow’s famous five stages of modernization ended with the “age of high mass consumption.” We anticipate no such end of histories of modernization and look forward to seeing how these young scholars, and those who follow them, both broaden and deepen our understanding of the twentieth century—and our own time.