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Narratives of Development: Models, Spectacles, and Calculability in Nick Cullather's *The Hungry World*

To describe *The Hungry World: America's Cold War Battle Against Poverty in Asia* as a history of the green revolution does not begin to convey the ambition and rewards of Nick Cullather's new book. In less than three hundred pages, *Hungry World* offers a detailed diplomatic, intellectual, and cultural history that spans more than a century and three continents. Cullather deepens and revises our understanding of the "green revolution" as a history of the Rockefeller Foundation and its "transfer" of agricultural technology from Mexico to Asia, in part by showing how the green revolution's intellectual and political construction involved a wider cast of characters and a much less linear and far more contested story of competing expertise and domestic and transnational political struggles. *Hungry World* brings together population science, the emergence of a geopolitics of hunger, struggles over the meaning of the New Deal, postwar images of the peasant village, competing models of development, and the green revolution's political and social legacies. The enduring vision of the green revolution as a triumph of American science and technology requires, Cullather argues, the systematic forgetting of this complex history in favor of a simple narrative, a "heroic parable of population, food, and science" that ultimately fetters our ability to grapple honestly and effectively with poverty and hunger around the world (7-8).

Cullather draws upon an impressive range of archival and published primary sources to tell several important histories that have never been assembled before. Chapter 1 on the identification of a world food problem, chapter 4 on dam building in Afghanistan, and chapter 6 on the strategic uses of IR-8, the so-called "miracle rice," in the Vietnam War are essential reading for anyone interested in the history and politics of science, development, or the Cold War. *Hungry World* also builds fruitfully on an emerging body of scholarship on India as a central site and symbol of development during the Cold War.¹ As valuable as this new research is, Cullather's even more important contribution to diplomatic history may be the conceptual and methodological innovations of *Hungry World*. Cullather pushes diplomatic historians to think in new ways, not only about the historical construction of development practice, but also about the roles of calculability, models, spectacles, and narratives in the larger history of U.S. foreign relations.

Like Matthew Connelly, David Ekbladh, and other scholars who have published recently on the history of development, Cullather locates the "birth" of U.S. development policies not with the onset of the Cold War but in the early decades of the twentieth century.² What is new in Cullather's account is his conception of development as a "new style of diplomacy," one that involved the construction of new subjects and the entrance of new actors and institutions into international politics between the 1920s and 1940s (3). The problems of development-hunger and poverty, world economic integration, international agricultural policies, and national and

international control over rural people—all of these topics lay outside the traditional purview of diplomatic relations. To explain their incorporation into the field of diplomacy, Cullather stresses, in part, the ways in which the crises of World War I and the Great Depression generated within the U.S. foreign policy establishment a new alarm about the strategic consequences of hunger and international economic autarchy.

Yet, Cullather also argues that the very awareness of these as crises depended upon the emergence and political uses of new scientific ways of thinking about hunger and poverty. The first of these was calculation. Building on the work of historians of science who have examined how the rise of statistical reasoning reshaped the ways in which nation states governed, Cullather focuses on the assemblage and dissemination of new internationally commensurable aggregates such as the calorie and GNP per capita. In doing so, he helps us to see the power of numbers in international politics.³ These new measures created universal definitions of hunger and economic productivity, bred new awareness of distant threats and responsibilities, and also inculcated a confidence that quantitative tools wielded by experts could both identify and solve international problems. Thinking in aggregates helped provide policymakers with both means and ambitions to increase state control over the lives of ordinary people. They also initiated and accelerated a process of de-culturation and de-contextualization that Cullather sees as fundamental to the practice of development. No longer culturally bound or tied to specific, local contexts, food and food production, rewritten in units of calories and agricultural output, became "interchangeable parts...comparable across time and between nations and races" (18). While often presented as a more efficient and effective policymaking mechanism, calculability often hides critical political and moral choices. The decision of what to measure and the ability to calculate some things and not others structures and narrows the meaning of development. In one of many powerful examples, Cullather's discussion of interwar Mexico illuminates how national accounting figures, by documenting the efficiency of commercial agriculture rather than indicators of social advancement or local ownership, helped to erase social welfare and peasant autonomy as national and international goals.

If calculability converted local knowledge into universal data, then the practice of model-building allowed experts to package data into formulas that could be replicated, ostensibly, around the world. Model building emerged as an essential tool of science and social science that U.S. policymakers found a "reassuring template to guide their actions in [rural] Asia," a region they imagined as particularly dangerous and impenetrable in the context of peasant revolts from the Philippines to Vietnam. Cullather defines development modeling as the "mapp[ing of] complex social functions onto simplified frames" in which a nation's history is reduced to "a sequence of strategic moves open to imitation" (69). Essential to such actions is the act of "selective forgetting" of social contexts and political motives (45). Cullather is especially effective in showing how the Rockefeller Foundation's Mexican Agricultural Program and the American Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) became stripped of history and political context to become international formulas. But he is also careful to demonstrate that the act of model building did not end political struggles. Indeed, the *Hungry World* paints a picture of international policymakers and experts struggling to shape the direction of development through competing models. My own favorite example of this is famine modeling. In the mid-1960s, U.S. and Indian policymakers clashed over agricultural policy in India, in part because they appealed to different models for how to identify and define famine. One of the essential components of the

conventional green revolution story is that a famine crisis precipitated and justified the application of new agricultural technology. Cullather argues that U.S. policymakers hyped a crisis by relying on new U.S. statistical models that assumed a causal relationship between population growth and food availability and increased the latitude of forecasters to identify "famine." Indian policymakers, on the other hand, used British colonial models of famine that privileged local reporting and came to the conclusion that no such famine existed. In such ways, Cullather shows that the very creation of facts and events in the green revolution depended on the nature of the models used to discern them.

While numerical charts and abstract models may have helped to convince policymakers, development practitioners recognized that development was no mere process but a deliberate effort at social control and political persuasion that required compelling, vivid illustrations of its own efficacy. The *Hungry World* is one of the first books on the history of development, and in the larger field of diplomatic history, to capture the importance of the politics of spectacle in international policymaking.⁴ From the Rockefeller Foundation's hookworm campaign to the Etawah village development project in India, would-be modernizers designed targeted initiatives and field sites as "carefully staged spectacles dramatizing the fruits of modernity" (5). The logic of development privileged the act of witnessing and participating in demonstration projects as critical to converting "underdeveloped" people to modern practices. Cullather best captures this propensity toward "showcasing" in his work on the Rockefeller- and Ford-funded International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) at Los Baños in the Philippines. He gives us an indelible image of IRRI's modernist, suburban-style campus, "[l]ooking like an Ohio consolidated high school perched on a volcano" and its attached eighty-hectare farm with "[s]oil imported from Java, the Mekong Delta, and the Plain of Jars." The farm was "laid out in separate national paddies, making the farm a miniature Asia, an agricultural war room where scenarios could be gamed out in virtual space" (165, 163). The contrast between acres planted with IR-8, the "miracle" seed strain developed at IRRI and ordinary seeds, offered stark, "visible boundaries between tradition and modernity" (160).

The campus and farm were available for public tours, but it was the plethora of international press accounts of IRRI that transformed IR-8 into an internationally circulating "parable of seeds." A parable is, of course, a simple allegorical story intended to illustrate a particular object lesson. In this case, spectacles, like numbers, were intended to enforce a lesson about the power of technology by simplifying and telescoping disparate events that played over many years—"the spread of irrigation and market arrangements, new political relations between farmers and the state, and the rise and fall of developmental regimes"—and reducing them to a process that could be enacted before one's eyes (179).

Calculations, models, and spectacles—all of these are, for Cullather, variations of a critical mechanism that produces and justifies development: the act of storytelling. Earlier scholars of development took their theoretical cues from Foucault and plumbed the discursive power of terms like "progress" and "underdevelopment." The very utterance of particular words seemed, at times in these accounts, to hold enormous transformative power. Cullather, although he does not cite him explicitly, seems instead to derive his inspiration from Hayden White and his explorations of the power of narrative form to shape content of meaning.⁵ Cullather's most original and exciting contribution to the history of development is to trace how the "narratives"

of development got written by particular people in particular places and contexts. Competing policymakers pursued different "narrative strateg[ies]," or to use Cullather's other metaphor, wrote different "script[s]" for how modernization should unfold (183, 5). Yet Cullather shows that only some become naturalized as models or parables whose ascendance obscured the more contested and diverse origins from which they arose. Cullather's methodology invites other diplomatic historians to consider investigating the role of narrative in a wide range of other topics and time periods.

One of the particular strengths of Cullather's work is to show how for Americans, the competition of narratives often involved the continuation and international projection of domestic debates about the virtues and signature features of the New Deal. Through his accounts of U.S. experts, foundation officers, and policymakers in interwar Mexico and postwar Afghanistan, *Hungry World* illustrates the ways in which various Americans picked from the New Deal's constellation of programs and reforms to build the models and scripts that best fit their own visions of international development. This contest over the meaning of the New Deal comes through most clearly in Cullather's section on agricultural economist Wolf Ladejinsky and the politics of land reform in the 1950s. Through a careful attention to domestic agricultural politics and policies, Cullather reveals the ways in which accusations about Ladejinsky's supposedly "un-American" reforms in postwar Japan, and subsequent defenses of Ladejinsky, mapped onto U.S. debates about the New Deal's agricultural production limits, price supports, and subsidies. At times, however, Cullather says that domestic ideological camps could cooperate in the international arena. Both Democratic and Republican administrations sold the "TVA model" as an ideal solution for developing nations even as they criticized the actual TVA and refused to replicate it within U.S. borders. The reality and the narrative myth of development projects could diverge substantially from one another.

In Cullather's account, U.S. debates over the New Deal, once projected outward, encountered a postwar world of postcolonial elites and international institutions with their own agendas and models for development. *Hungry World*, elegantly captures some of "the interchange of figures-American, Asian, and transnational" in this postwar field (6). Cullather traces the "commingling of legends, American and Filipino" at Los Baños, the clash of the Rockefeller Foundation model with the Indian Planning Commission's model of agricultural development, and the efforts of Afghani Prime Minister Mohammed Daoud to use U.S. dam-building efforts to construct his own vision of a Pashtun-controlled Afghanistan (166). Yet, because the book covers so much ground temporally and spatially (Mexico, India, Afghanistan, the Philippines, Vietnam and West Africa), it, by necessity perhaps, skirts the detailed negotiations between Americans and other actors that produced development projects and practice on the ground. Focused on the construction of narrative myths, Cullather emphasizes the assertion of U.S. power and hubris but says little about how experience in the field might have reshaped or revised how U.S. experts thought about development. Cullather's Americans never learn much; their models never change.

By emphasizing the New Deal origins of U.S. international development efforts, Cullather often skirts the ways in which the New Deal and supposedly "American" visions of development were themselves built from transnational interchanges. The New Deal's rural reform efforts played out at the same time as European colonial administrators and experts confronted what they saw as an increasingly restive colonial world. U.S. policymakers and experts, from American Indian commissioner John Collier to experts on the Anglo-American Caribbean commission, observed

and contributed to new efforts at colonial and nationalist "rural reconstruction" (7). Cullather only briefly mentions the colonial context of this interwar story. At the same time, he misses an opportunity, afforded by his own discussion of émigré economists Paul Rosenstein-Rodan, Ragnar Nurkse, and Albert Hirschman, to explain how the making of U.S. development expertise involved not only the projection outward of American models but also the absorption into the postwar United States of international ideas and expertise.

The treatment of social science expertise is the weakest element of *Hungry World*. Cullather sees U.S. development projects as fundamentally grounded in a faith in technocracy. Even debates among experts are charted as a story of *techne* vs. *techné* (183). While social scientists appear often in Cullather's account, they are placed in a policymaking framework and generally removed from the intellectual and disciplinary contexts that shaped them. Cullather repeatedly insists that U.S. social science, ostensibly focused on the city, had little to say about rural places and that only in the early 1960s did "modernization theory" crystallize into the social scientists' narrative about development. This characterization misses debates among U.S. rural sociologists, anthropologists, and institutional economists about the "psychology" and living conditions of "the peasant" that preceded the crystallization of the modernization paradigm and continued even as scientists proffered technological solutions to development. Like most accounts of U.S. development practice, it conflates U.S. policymakers' awareness of social science—notably their enthrallment with Walt Rostow's "take-off" model—with the more diverse, complicated, and transnational exchanges of U.S. social scientists in the development field. There are many references to Rostow in *Hungry World*. While Rostow certainly demands a space in any story of how U.S. experts reshaped international development, his political influence need not obscure the rest of the story. There were many social scientific narratives of development.

These are relatively minor critiques of what is a truly exemplary work of scholarship. Cullather has made a seminal contribution to the flourishing specialty of development history and, methodologically, to the wider field of diplomatic history. But, Cullather also aims to reach beyond a scholarly audience to address current experts and officials who make decisions for the Third World. Animating this book is a political passion and anger about the injustices and social costs of development's reigning narratives. Ultimately, Cullather offers his scholarship as an "antidote to the fallacy" of simplified technocratic models and a corrective "against both utopian expectations and neo-realist defeatism" (270). He closes *Hungry World* with a sharp critique of the rosy amnesia of current campaigns against hunger in Africa, appealing to international policymakers and institutions to cease using technology and technocrats to "escape historical responsibility" and instead allow ordinary people to help chart their own futures and destinies (271). This reviewer seconds this appeal and hopes very much that *Hungry World* is reviewed widely and read carefully in circles of international power.

Notes

1 Kristin L. Ahlberg, "'Machiavelli with a Heart': The Johnson Administration's Food for Peace Program in India, 1965-1966," *Diplomatic History* 31:4 (September 2007): 665-701; Matthew Connelly, *Fatal Misconception: The Struggle to Control World Population* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008); David Engerman, "West Meets East: The

Center for International Studies and Indian Economic Development" in David Engerman et al, *Staging Growth: Modernization, Development and the Global Cold War* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003), 199-223; Dennis Merrill, *Bread and the Ballot: The United States and India's Economic Development* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1990); John H. Perkins, *Geopolitics and the Green Revolution: Wheat, Genes, and the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Nicole Sackley, "Passage to Modernity: American Social Scientists, India, and the Pursuit of Development, 1945-1961" PhD dissertation, Princeton University, 2004; Corinna Unger, "Industrialization or Agrarian Reform? West German Modernization Policies in India in the 1950s and 1960s," *Journal of Modern European History* 8:1 (2010): 47-65.

2 Connelly, *Fatal Misconception*; David Ekbladh, *The Great American Mission: Modernization & the Construction of an American World Order* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).

3 Alain Desrosières, *The Politics of Large Numbers: A History of Statistical Reasoning* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998); Theodore Porter, *Trust in Numbers: The Pursuit of Objectivity in Science and Public Life* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995).

4 For an interesting exception, see Leila J. Rupp and Ian Tyrrell on the role of parades and the spectacles of international meetings in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century transnational social reform. Leila J. Rupp, *Worlds of Women: The Making of an International Women's Movement* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997); Ian Tyrrell, *Women's World/Woman's Empire: The Woman's Christian Temperance Union in International Perspective, 1880-1930* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1991).

5 Arturo Escobar, *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994); Frédérique Apffel Marglin and Stephen A. Marglin, eds. *Dominating Knowledge: Development, Culture, and Resistance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990); Wolfgang Sachs, *The Development Dictionary: A Guide to Knowledge as Power* (London: Zed Books, 1991); Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987).