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Development, Modernization, and the Remaking of an Imperial World Order

The word “development” has many meanings and its use serves different purposes. Examining its varying deployments can give historians insight into important transformations in recent history.¹ Economic development, in some views, is a long-term, self-propelled process, as in “capitalist development,” or else it is self-conscious actions of a state or international financial institutions to correct failures in capitalist development.² Development can be a short-term intervention to enable poor states or regions to participate fully in a market economy or a long-term alternative to market mechanisms – socialist as opposed to capitalist development. Some view development positively as a global project of uplift, while others are negative. One negative view comes from the left: development continues the colonialist projects of imposing an unwanted modernity on subordinated people. Another negative view comes from the right: development is a deviation from market principles. Development has been called depoliticizing, turning conflict over control of resources into a technical question, and it has been deemed a political notion, a demand by impoverished people for the state to provide them with resources to improve their lot or a demand by impoverished states for the global redistribution of resources.³ Development initiatives

1 Previous assessments of the field include Frederick Cooper and Randall Packard, eds., *International Development and the Social Sciences: Essays in History and Knowledge* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Frederick Cooper, “Writing the History of Development,” *Journal of Modern European History* 8, no. 1 (2010): 5–23; Joseph Hodge, “On the Historiography of Development (Part 1: The First Wave),” *Humanity* 6, no. 3 (2015): 429–463; and Joseph Hodge, “Writing the History of Development (Part 2: Wider, Longer, Deeper),” *Humanity* 7, no. 1 (2016): 125–174.

2 Michael Cowen and Robert Shenton, *Doctrines of Development* (London: Routledge, 1996).

3 See the contrasting views, both based on studies of Lesotho, of James Ferguson, *The Anti-Politics Machine: Development, Depoliticization, and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), and John Aerni-Flessner, *Dreams for Lesotho: Independence, Foreign Assistance, and Development* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2018). Ferguson could be right about the depoliticizing tendencies in development organizations and bureaucracies, while Aerni-Flessner could be right about the importance of development in the politics of Lesotho. One could postulate that the argument *against* development programs – trying to shield world markets from intervention to benefit the poor – is the true anti-politics machine. See Quinn Slobodian, *The Globalists: The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2018).

have given rise to questions of who benefits – raising issues of race, class, and gender, as well as of patron-client relations. Some observers think of development more as a discourse – a reinscription of hierarchy – than a genuine effort to bring about material improvement for the poor.⁴ Others insist that as long as many people lack water, electricity, decent medical care, and good schools, development will be a claim by those who lack it and a moral obligation on those who have the means to help.

Development is both an actor's category and an analytic category. It has been an explicit demand and an explicit promise by political actors in different times and places. It is a category used by scholars to delineate a field of inquiry, a phenomenon to be explained, and a project that the possessors of knowledge can help to direct in fruitful ways – producing an overlap between the concept as actor's category and as analytic category.

This chapter brings out three themes, with emphasis on African examples: 1. the relationship of development history to another theme in historical studies, on empire, especially the end of colonial empires; 2. the continuity question – how much postcolonial development differed from the colonial variety; and 3. the alternative developments question, specifically whether “African” or “decolonized” versions can be usefully distinguished from a “western” or “orthodox” model of development. Behind these themes is a larger issue: the asymmetrical nature of global economic relations. Development presumes inequality. The question is whether thinking with this category suggests ways of reducing inequality – or at least ameliorating the lives of the worst off – or else reifies the distinction between developed and underdeveloped.⁵ I will be reflecting on the kinds of questions historians are asking about the changing nature of asymmetrical economic relationships.

Empire, Decolonization, and Development

The concept of development is essential to understanding one of the most important transformations of the twentieth century, the end of colonial empires and the formation of a world in which the territorial, national state is the general

⁴ Arturo Escobar, *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995); Wolfgang Sachs, *The Development Dictionary: A Guide to Knowledge as Power* (London: Zed Books, 1992).

⁵ The tension between the goal of reducing global inequality and that of meeting minimal needs is emphasized in Samuel Moyn, *Not Enough: Human Rights in an Unequal World* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2018).

norm. We need to understand not only the geopolitical conflicts and reconfigurations that this transition entailed, but how people at the time could think about it. Empires have been around for thousands of years, and ending them was more than the seizure of power by the colonized from the colonizer, but a transformation – a radical one – in the normative framework in which sovereignty, governance, and participation in international relations could be conceived of and talked about throughout the world.⁶ In the twentieth century, imperial elites had worked hard to cultivate the idea that the people of Africa or Asia were not capable of governing themselves. The development concept was critical to the contested process of turning static hierarchy into dynamic politics, a reformulation of inequality that seemed to promise its elimination or at least reduction. Development talk helped to formulate a language in which Africans and Asians could make claims and Europeans could convince themselves of their essential role in meeting them.

Historical studies of development and of the crisis in empire were mutually constitutive. Although useful studies of the administrative and political history of development programs of London and Paris go back to the late 1960s,⁷ by the 1990s and early 2000s historians were both broadening the inquiry to include the global crisis of empire and narrowing it to examine the politics of development projects as played out in specific parts of Africa.⁸ Imperial rulers had long sought to channel wealth into their own hands, and sometimes took action to enhance the wealth-producing capacity of the territories over which they gained control – think of the roads and aqueducts built by the Roman Empire. When British prime minister Joseph Chamberlain wrote in 1895 of the need to develop the Empire’s “estates” he was thinking like a landlord investing in fences or fruit trees.⁹ European empires were not the only political entities that acted to increase material resources. Cyrus Schayegh points out that in Chamberlain’s

⁶ On empire history, see Peter Fibiger Bang, C. A. Bayly, and Walter Scheidel, eds., *The Oxford World History of Empire*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021); and Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

⁷ J. M. Lee, *Colonial Development and Good Government* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967); Michael Havinden and David Meredith, *Colonialism and Development: Britain and Its Tropical Colonies, 1850–1960* (London: Routledge, 1993).

⁸ On the empire perspective, see Frederick Cooper, “Reconstructing Empire in Post-War French and British Africa,” *Past and Present* 210, no. 6 (2011): 196–210. A pioneering study focused on a mega-project in Africa is Monica van Buesekom, *Negotiating Development: African Farmers and Colonial Experts at the Office du Niger, 1920–1960* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2002).

⁹ Corinna R. Unger, *International Development: A Postwar History* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 34.

time the Ottoman empire sought to enhance the productive capacity of its frontier regions, investing in railroads and telegraph lines as part of its competition with rival empires.¹⁰ African empires – most strikingly Ethiopia in the late nineteenth century – could mount projects to improve technology and expand production.¹¹

Whether the actions that European empires took in the early twentieth century to improve transportation or healthcare amount to a development policy is not clear. When some of the most influential British and French colonial officials of the 1920s proposed to pull together various initiatives intended to increase the productivity of the colonies into a coherent policy funded with revenue from the French or British taxpayer, both governments rejected the plans, and further attempts along these lines were either refused or put forth in limited form. Resources were supposed to go from colony to metropole, not the reverse.¹²

Historians of development have made clear that ideas of “improving” colonized people had roots outside of government policies. European missionaries and other humanitarian activists promoted conversion and education and sometimes fought back against the claims of settlers, business interests, and colonial officials that Africans were inferior beings who could be exploited – even worked to death – at will.¹³ However authoritarian and exploitative, empires were also incorporative. Having made certain peoples into British or French subjects and insisting that they remain that way, rulers needed to convince people at home of the legitimacy of the project done in their name, and in certain circumstances they wanted to give fractions of conquered people a stake in the imperial order. They sometimes claimed to pursue a “civilizing mission.” Recent scholarship has

10 Cyrus Schayegh, “Imperial and Transnational Developmentalism: Middle Eastern Interplays, 1880s-1960s,” in *The Development Century: A Global History*, ed. Stephen J. Macekura and Erez Manela (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 61–82, esp. 61–67.

11 Ruth Rempel, “Colonialism and Development in Africa,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of African Colonial and Postcolonial History*, ed. Martin Shanguhya and Toyin Falola (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 569–619, esp. 570–572. While it makes sense to look beyond a narrow and Eurocentric definition of development, there is a danger in putting any kind of innovation or enhancement of productive resources into that framework, since it could cease to be clear what the added value of the development concept is.

12 For concise reviews of development in colonial Africa (on which the following paragraphs are based), see Unger, *International Development*; Rempel, “Colonialism and Development in Africa”; and Corrie Decker and Elizabeth MacMahon, *The Idea of Development in Africa: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

13 On the other side—the death and misery caused by European attempts to construct an infrastructure for extracting African commodities—see James P. Daughton, *In the Forest of No Joy: The Congo-Océan Railroad and the Tragedy of French Colonialism* (New York: Norton, 2021).

emphasized how contested the ideas were that Africans were permanently locked in a state of racial subservience. Colonizing elites sometimes claimed that Africans could be advanced in the scale of civilization – perhaps part way, perhaps eventually to a position of equality – if only the proper policies were applied.¹⁴ All this can be fit into the *longue-durée* of development history, and the relationship of projects of improvement and progress at home and overseas can be fruitfully debated.¹⁵ Meanwhile, Africans were economic actors in their own right, particularly in expansion and innovation in cash crop production – histories that might be seen as within a development framework or as an alternative to it.¹⁶

The strands of stories about economic initiatives of different actors and political conflict and change come together in the late 1930s and 1940s. It was then that the colonial regimes of France and Great Britain put their money where their mouth was: The Colonial Development and Welfare Act of 1940 in the British case and the creation of the *Fonds d'Investissement pour le Développement Economique et Sociale* of 1946 in the French case. Both of these enactments – controversial in their respective countries – marked a crucial break with the doctrine of colonial self-sufficiency.

The new legislation, bureaucracies, and funding came together when the future of empire was in question in a way it had not been before. Strikes and riots in the British West Indies and African cities after 1935 were the direct impetus for the Development Act of 1940; the French act was part of an attempt to reconfigure imperial rule, including the granting of citizenship rights to the inhabitants of the colonies. Erupting in a long-colonized region and in urban centers in Africa, the anger at living conditions could hardly be attributed to the “primitive” nature of the people involved. Poverty – especially the poverty of wage laborers

14 On the relevance to development history of doctrines of racial thinking, see Decker and MacMahon, *Idea of Development in Africa*, 58–78. Helen Tilley and Alice Conklin have complicated the picture by showing that “scientific racism” never achieved consensus among scientists in both Britain and France. Helen Tilley, *Africa as a Living Laboratory: Empire, Development, and the Problem of Scientific Knowledge, 1870–1950* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011); Alice Conklin, *In the Museum of Man: Race, Anthropology, and Empire in France, 1850–1950* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013).

15 On the influence – both ideas and personnel – of colonial development initiatives on development projects in the metropole, see Matthew Wendeln, “Contested Territory: Regional Development in France, 1934–1968” (PhD diss., New York University, 2011).

16 On cash crop production, see Gareth Austin, *Labour, Land, and Capital in Ghana: From Slavery to Free Labour in Asante* (Rochester: Rochester University Press, 2005).

– was a crisis of empire.¹⁷ In short, the initiative for an active – and funded – project of development on the scale of empire did not come from on high, but from contestation. Development was very much a political question.

In 1945, thoughtful people around the world understood that empire had come into question, but they didn't know if the empires would reconfigure themselves, weather the storm as they had after World War One, break up along the boundaries set by the colonizing states, or give way to some kind of federal or confederal grouping larger than the former colonies. Who should control economic development – where to find capital and where to invest it, in what kinds of projects, with what kinds of provisions for social welfare – was at the heart of debates at the time. Colonial regimes tried to take the initiative, but whether their efforts would ward off challenges or produce more conflict was an open question. To the extent that development gave opportunities to European and indigenous elites to exploit more land with greater efficiency it deprived people with weak land rights of access and produced alienation and anger – a major factor in the Mau Mau revolt in Kenya in the early 1950s. Development politics fostered the idea that control of the state was crucial to economic progress, raising the stake in the argument that only Africans could ensure that the state would organize development in the interests of the majority.

During the 1950s, anthropologists and other social scientists became fascinated with social change, looking beyond the old conception of “tribal” Africa, investigating the effects of labor migration on family lives, the harshness of living conditions in mushrooming cities, and also the adaptation of people and social structures to the situation. Publications from that era are now primary sources for both social and intellectual history: on-the-ground inquiries into development in action and analysis of the categories through which western – and eventually African – social scientists tried to intellectually tame a world whose trajectories were not clear. A critical literature has exposed the limitations of the “modernization” concept, but the point remains that it emerged in the context of radical uncertainty, in which western intellectuals both welcomed and

17 Frederick Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society: The Labor Question in French and British Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). Rempel points out that nutrition also came under consideration as a problem of empire in the mid-1930s: Rempel, “Colonialism and Development,” 580–581. On development and nationalist politics in India, see Sugata Bose, “Instruments and Idioms of Colonial and National Development: India's Historical Experience in Comparative Perspective,” in *International Development*, ed. Cooper and Packard, 45–63.

feared the emergence of colonized people from the political, social, and cultural constraints of the colonial situation.¹⁸

The politics of independence was not just about national liberation, but of making something of political liberation, and that required transforming international order – what Adom Getachew calls “worldmaking.”¹⁹ The leaders of the already “developed” states greeted the collapse of colonial empires with anxiety as well as a sense of new possibilities. Some hoped that a world of nation-states would be more stable than a world of rival imperial powers and that a new order could be constructed without rigid racial hierarchy.²⁰ For economic liberals, a post-imperial world promised open markets rather than imperial preference – a potential advantage to American businesses and perhaps an easing of burdens on former colonial powers that had recently assumed the cost of development.

For rulers of the new states, as well as some of the elites of the Latin American states that had experienced their own “decolonization” around 140 years earlier, the end of empire opened the possibility of reconfiguring international institutions, through the UN and the ILO for instance, to promote the raising of the standard of living of ex-colonial states, not their exploitation. Whether ex-colonial states could act collectively against global inequality was an intensely debated political issue between the Afro-Asian Conference in Bandung in 1955 and the defeat of the drive by Asian, African, and Latin American states for reform of global economic relations known as the New International Economic Order (NIEO) around 1980. Among the demands coming from the ex-colonial states were for each country to have control of its economic resources and more favorable rules for participation in world markets, for restrictions on multinational corporations to claim property rights to minerals and unchecked opportunities for acquiring property and repatriating profits, and for additional funds to promote development directed from the richer countries to the poorer.²¹

18 Frederick Cooper, “Development, Modernization, and the Social Sciences in the Era of Decolonization: The Examples of British and French Africa,” *Revue d'Histoire des Sciences Humaines* 10 (2004): 9–38; Michael Latham, *Modernization as Ideology: American Social Science and “Nation-Building” in the Kennedy Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); George Steinmetz, *Sociology and Empire: The Imperial Entanglements of a Discipline* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013).

19 Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019).

20 Giuliano Garavini, *After Empires: European Integration, Decolonization, and the Challenge from the Global South 1957–1986* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

21 Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire*.

Development and modernization were all part of a necessary process of rethinking the world's political order, deployed by bureaucrats and politicians as well as social scientists. Modernization and development allowed European elites to embrace the possibility that enough Africans, in a not too distant future, could make the transition from uncivilized to sufficiently educated for Europeans to enter a post-colonial relationship with them conducive to continued economic ties and to common participation in international organizations. It also implied that Africans who failed to make this transition had themselves to blame.²²

Britain and France, in particular, had thought that seizing the initiative on development would enable them to relegitimize colonialism, at least until an indefinite future date. Instead, it both made control of development into a more compelling issue and its escalating costs forced colonial officials to undertake for the first time a serious account of the benefits and costs of colonial rule.²³ The accounting exercises favored maintaining British or French interests by means other than direct rule. Equally important, the assertion that Africans could be turned into modern men and women with a western education and a desire to participate in industrial employment, market economies, and parliamentary governance helped Europeans to imagine – in however problematic a relation to reality – that they could cede power to the people they could claim to have molded.

There were other threads in the development story. Eric Helleiner points to one coming out of Latin America in the aftermath of the depression and world war, where intellectuals and a few statesmen, the proud inheritors of sovereignty over a century previously, were aware of economic dependence on the United States and Europe and the prevalence of poverty. They sought to influence new international institutions – including the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund – to address global economic order. For a time, the United States saw possibilities in such initiatives for better trade and diplomatic relations, but by the early 1950s that viewpoint was eclipsed by political reaction at home and Cold War priorities abroad.²⁴ Leaders in India also looked to development to strengthen a new nation coming into being, and sought both to influence international organizations and to make its exit from empire into an opportunity to

²² On the politics of blame for failed development initiatives, see Felicitas Becker, *The Politics of Poverty: Policy-Making and Development in Rural Tanzania* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 6, 195.

²³ Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society*.

²⁴ Eric Helleiner, *Forgotten Foundations of Bretton Woods: International Development and the Making of the Postwar Order* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014).

benefit from different development models and access to multiple sources of investment and aid instead of just one.²⁵

That development shifted from an imperial construct to a national one marked both a set of new possibilities and a constraint. The national form in which political movements in the colonies gained power – after attempts at federal structures or other forms of wider groupings – put into place vulnerable states, some small, most poor, facing a world of wealthy states, corporations, and international financial institutions that could exercise choice in where they would invest, whom they would aid, and whom they might attempt to undermine. The leaders of each new state had to worry about the fragility of their power base at home and their need for favorable relations with “developed” states that were pursuing their own interests and rivalries. The quest for the NIEO reflected many leaders’ awareness of the problem, but the failure of the initiative reflected the fragility of their connection to each other and the dependence on wealthy nations that development was supposed to overcome.

The Continuity Question

Whether political decolonization implied economic decolonization was a question posed shortly after most of Africa became independent. Kwame Nkrumah’s book of 1965, *Neo-colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism*, encapsulated in a single word the argument that the exploitation of Africa’s material resources and people was continuing.²⁶ This has been a controversial argument, but it has led to more nuanced questions about different elements of post-colonial relationships. The question is complicated by the argument, cited above, that the “colonial economy” was itself not fixed, but was changing in particularly important ways after 1945. Some people, as I did in 2002, posited a “development era” that extended from the 1940s to the mid-1970s, when the advocates of free market orthodoxy gained the upper hand in international policy debates and international financial institutions preached austerity, free movement of capital, removal of tariff barriers, and other such measures, while pressuring indebted governments

25 David Engerman, *The Price of Aid: The Economic Cold War in India* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2018). Engerman points out that both the US and the USSR started out with condescending views of India and only slowly came to see it as an important element in the postwar world. On the framing of development questions in post-war British Asia, see Unger, *International Development*, 64–66.

26 Kwame Nkrumah, *Neo-colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism* (London: Nelson and Sons, 1965).

– including most of Africa – to pull back from government efforts to improve the standard of living of Africans. But the apparent closing of a development era was followed by its apparent reopening in the early 2000s, as some of the same institutions and economists who had backed away from development two decades before proposed ambitious global initiatives. The effect of this shift was overshadowed by the impact of China's surge in demand for African raw materials and its investment in projects in Africa, something considered by some to be a new element and others a repeat of an old pattern, with more than a tinge of colonialist attitudes and the same orientation toward extraction as western development strategies.²⁷ In some eyes, China was itself a model of successful development as well as a source of investment; since the 1970s, it has reduced poverty by historically extraordinary levels. While China in the days of Mao had been a model for some radical Africans, today it is not altogether clear what it is a model of. Rapid growth and poverty reduction in China did not come about through either the liberal capitalism that ideologues in the West promoted or the social democratic variant that promised to correct capitalism's ills, but via a decidedly authoritarian version of state-controlled capitalism that provides an alternative that is, to some political elites, attractive and to others frightening.²⁸

A point so obvious that it is rarely made is that the effects of decolonization were shaped by the particular form it took: to nation-states based on colonial boundaries. The pattern enhanced the fragmentation of the African continent and made politics into a zero-sum for the maintenance of control of each territorial unit. African leaders in the 1950s, including Nkrumah and Léopold Sédar Senghor, had warned of these dangers, but their attempts at forging larger units – Nkrumah's United States of Africa or Senghor's Franco-African confederation – did not win out. Colonial development policies enhanced the role of the state; sovereignty took the process further. The extremes of inequality between the internal economy of each African state and the outside world encouraged elites to use the biggest asset they controlled – sovereignty – to pursue strategies of gate-keeping to cement their role at the interface of the two, a strategy that often led to conflict over control of the gate. Senghor had urged Africans to combine “hor-

²⁷ Compare the two editions of my book *Africa since 1940: The Past of the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, 2019). The rise, decline, and resurrection of development initiatives are catalogued in Ruth Rempel, “Development History and Postcolonial African Experience,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of African Colonial and Postcolonial History*, ed. Shanguhya and Falola, 881–926.

²⁸ Literature on Chinese-African relations is growing. See for example Ching Kwan Lee, *The Specter of Global China: Politics, Labor, and Foreign Investment in Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018).

horizontal solidarity” – Africans with each other – with “vertical solidarity” – relations with the most affluent and powerful parts of the world – to avoid the choice between unity in poverty and continued dependence. Decolonizing into nation-states made horizontal solidarity a more difficult objective, underscoring the power of the vertical. African leaders have at times tried to put together alternatives, through the Organization of African Unity and later the African Union and regional organizations like ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States), but the jealousy with which elites guard their sovereignty combined with the extremes of structural inequality in the world makes this a difficult task.²⁹ Such questions have come to the fore in an international arena in demands such as that in the 1970s for the NIEO, a demand by poorer nations working together that could not overcome the horizontal solidarity of the rich and the dependence of the poor on vertical relations for immediate survival.³⁰

Independence did not end asymmetrical economic relations, but it did give African states choices among would-be patrons. Abou Bamba has shown how the Côte d’Ivoire, sometimes considered a client-state of France, skillfully played the United States against France and diversified its possibilities for investment and trade.³¹ Cold War rivalries created competition among patrons, at the risk of making states subject to political tests for aid or investment as well as getting caught in shifting rivalries.

Also revealing is what became known in the late 1970s as the “Kenya debate.” Both sides drew on a process that began at the end of the 1940s: as the colonial government of Kenya loosened racial restrictions that prevented Africans from growing the most lucrative export crops, small to mid-sized African producers began to grow higher proportions of these crops. After independence, the government supported land acquisitions by Kenyans, particularly those close to President Jomo Kenyatta, and as part of the independence agreement Great Britain provided financing to enable some of these Kenyans to buy out white

29 Frederick Cooper, *Citizenship between Empire and Nation: Remaking France and French Africa, 1945–1960* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), and Cooper, *Africa since 1940: the Past of the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019). Decker and McMahon pick up Senghor’s use of these metaphors in a speech from 1961, but don’t mention that he first used this language in 1948 and that it lay behind his efforts throughout the 1950s to find an alternative to both colonial empire and the nation-state: Decker and McMahon, *Idea of Development in Africa*, 143.

30 On the NIEO, see Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire*.

31 Abou Bamba, *African Miracle, African Mirage: Transnational Politics and the Paradox of Modernization in Ivory Coast* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2016). Engerman makes the point that independence gave India the possibility of looking to multiple sources of investment and aid: Engerman, *Price of Aid*, 6.

farmers. Some Kenyans moved into other sectors of the economy. The Kenya debate focused on whether this pattern constituted a form of development that was truly capitalist: African capitalists gaining control of the means of production. Advocates of a classic Marxism said yes. Scholars influenced by dependency theory – a Latin American school that was acquiring followers in Africa – argued that Kenya’s capitalists remained dependent on multinational corporations, who controlled the export markets and whose investments in import substitution industrialization put Kenyans in secondary roles.³² This argument tacked close to others being made at the time: that most Africans entered into a “state bourgeoisie” whose position depended solely on their position relative to a sovereign state. In those terms, sovereignty had its consequences, but not as a step toward capitalist development. The Kenya debate was resolved not by academic combat, but by political events in Kenya: after Kenyatta’s death and the coming to power of Daniel arap Moi – from a different region with a different set of connections – the entrepreneurs connected to the old regime were systematically pushed out in favor of a new batch of entrepreneurs, demonstrating – or else creating – a class more akin to a state bourgeoisie than a semi-autonomous capitalist class.³³

The overtaking of an academic debate by an historical process makes clear the need not to treat the “post-colony” as a singular entity and the post-colonial period as a single period, but to trace dynamics in all their complexity. Other studies have shown how people in different contexts work with whatever possibilities they have. Kara Moskovitz for example finds that neither a state-centered model nor a prefabricated notion of capitalist development fits ways in which rural people in western Kenya developed their own networks, sought out relations with organizations that might provide resources, struggled against land grabbing by other Kenyans, and tried to work within a regional context toward a modest measure of economic resilience. Felicitas Becker points out that people in the middle in Tanzania – mid-level bureaucrats and party cadres – are not embodiments of “the state” but actors in their own right, working in a region not

32 A pioneering text bringing Latin American dependency theory to Africa comes from the Guyanese historian Walter Rodney, who taught for a time in Tanzania: Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (London: Bogle-L’Ouverture Publications, 1972). Dependency arguments were applied to Kenya in Colin Leys, *Underdevelopment in Kenya: The Political Economy of Neo-Colonialism, 1964–1971* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974).

33 For a recent retrospective noting the durable influence of this scholarship, see John Harbeson and Frank Holmquist, “The Lessons and Legacies of the ‘Kenya Debate’,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Kenyan Politics*, ed. Nic Cheeseman, Karuti Kanyinga, and Gabrielle Lynch (Oxford: Oxford Handbooks Online, 2020), 451–464.

well endowed with resources or transportation infrastructure, improvising more than following a development script.³⁴

Studies such as these point to neither an African miracle (as claimed in the “Africa rising” thesis) nor an African debacle (as Africa has been viewed by many for decades). There are certainly examples of the latter, particularly in zones beset by armed conflict, and there are examples of successful African entrepreneurs and businesses (for example cell phones) that not only make their owners rich but provide a useful service to vast numbers of people. Such examples point to the value of focusing on the specifics of place and time, at how people confront possibilities and constraints, how situations change, how people do something with what they have and struggle against others trying to take that away. To do so is to examine both the particularity of social relations in local context and connections – regional, national, global. Relations of inequality are relations nonetheless, and they produce different trajectories.

Historical research has also pointed to continuities in personnel. Véronique Dimier and Joseph Hodge describe the movement with decolonization of significant numbers of colonial civil servants into European or international institutions engaged in fields like economic development, health, and education.³⁵ These civil servants were coming out of the final phase of colonial bureaucracy, when administrations had shifted away from the “man who knew his natives” to the technical expert – someone who had something to offer other than his race and his skill at keeping Africans in their place. Given the miserable record of colonial regimes until their very last years in providing advanced education to Africans, newly independent countries as well as international institutions had reason to seek their services. Whether these veterans of colonial service were bringing a colonial outlook to development work or whether development work was bringing them into a new conception of international order is more complicated than an either-or question. Dimier makes clear that European Economic Community bureaucrats built on personal connections to African elites who were also taking an initiative in shaping the interaction, underscoring the importance of relationships to the study of development.

On the African side is a generational question. In the last years of colonial rule, panicked colonial administrators grasped the need to “Africanize” their

³⁴ Kara Moskowitz, *Seeing like a Citizen: Decolonization, Development, and the Making of Kenya, 1946–1980* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2019); Becker, *Politics of Poverty*.

³⁵ Véronique Dimier, *The Invention of a European Development Aid Bureaucracy: Recycling Empire* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Joseph Hodge, *Triumph of the Expert: Agrarian Doctrines of Development and the Legacies of British Colonialism* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2007).

civil services if their claims to presiding over a more inclusive and progressive colonialism were to have any plausibility.³⁶ The regimes that replaced them had good political reason to put their constituents as rapidly as possible into positions of responsibility. The United States, the Soviet Union, and allies of both sides in the Cold War put in programs of training and university education in the hope of getting people who thought the proper way into important positions in Africa.³⁷ Most people who seized these opportunities were young and would be in their positions – or better ones – for years. Taken together, the generation coming of age in the late 1950s and 1960s had an opportunity for upward mobility available to neither an older nor a younger generation.

Decolonization put an end to the rivalry, often deadly, of European empires, but that rivalry had been cross-cut by a shared notion of European competence and superiority and the possibility of collaboration. From the 1890s, the International Colonial Institute brought together people from administrations, businesses, and academia to discuss what might be termed best practices of colonial rule.³⁸ After World War One, the League of Nations Permanent Mandates Commission, the International Labour Office, and other international organizations became sites where laws and actions of colonial regimes could be discussed, with some input – usually sidelined – from humanitarian organizations and activists and petitioners from the colonies themselves. After World War Two, international organizations followed the technical direction of colonial policies, resulting in new forms of inter-empire cooperation, not without tension. Jessica Pearson has shown how French officials hesitated between welcoming the help of the World Health Organization and the United Nations in addressing the enormous burden of bringing decent healthcare to the colonies and insisting that France must do things its own way. After decolonization, the question became whether the relationship of new states to international organizations would ratify their sovereignty or undermine its substance.³⁹

36 Michelle Pinto, “Employment, Education, and the Reconfiguration of Empire: Africanization in Postwar French Africa” (PhD diss., New York University, 2013).

37 Constantin Katsakioris, “Creating a Socialist Intelligentsia: Soviet Educational Aid and Its Impact on Africa (1960–1991),” *Cahiers d’Études Africaines* 226 (2017): 259–288; Robyn D’Avisnon, Elizabeth Banks, and Asif Saddiqi, eds., “An African-Soviet Modern,” Special Issue of *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 41, no. 1 (2021).

38 Florian Wagner, *Colonial Internationalism and the Governmentality of Empire, 1893–1982* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

39 Jessica Lynne Pearson, *The Colonial Politics of Global Health: France and the United Nations in Postwar Africa* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2018). See also Eva-Maria Muschik, “Managing the World: The United Nations, Decolonization, and the Strange Triumph of State Sovereignty in the 1950s and 1960s,” *Journal of Global History* 13, no. 1 (2018): 121–144.

Independence did not bring a rapid end to the masculine bias of development thinking in colonial regimes. Even if there had long been a complex gender division of labor in many agricultural systems and women's role in food production was well known, colonial agronomists tended to see export production as an affair for men, supposedly more oriented toward markets and technological innovation. The view of the male as the "modern" producer tended to die hard, but it has long been questioned. Ester Boserup published a book on women and development in 1970⁴⁰ the journal *Gender and Development* is now in its twenty-ninth year. Studies of microcredit, sustainable agriculture, and "informal" economies point to the importance of the gender dimension in a wide range of development questions.⁴¹ The "experts" who plan development and the scholars who examine the process come from their own regimes of gender relations, with their burdens of inequality and prejudices and struggles to overcome them, and they intersect with the gender regimes of the diverse societies that are the object of intervention. Efforts to bring together advocates of approaches to development that take gender equality seriously confront layers of assumptions about the gendered nature of "traditional" and "modern" values.

Was development becoming an international industry that would bring the theories, administrative practices, personnel, and capital – as well as biases – of Europe and North America to fulfill claims of improving the lives of Africans, or would internationalization follow what the word implied and include – in its operations as well as goals – people from the former colonial world? The organizations themselves attracted personnel from the former colonies. Eventually, a Ghanaian became head of the United Nations and an Ethiopian head of the World Health Organization, but the question of how much of a new perspective personnel at all levels brought to such institutions and how much the institu-

40 Ester Boserup, *Woman's Role in Economic Development* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1970). For more recent interventions, see Martha Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Barbara Bush, "Motherhood, Morality, and Social Order, Gender and Development Discourse in Late Colonial Africa," in *Developing Africa: Concepts and Practices in Twentieth-Century Colonialism*, ed. Martina Kopf, Gerald Hödl, and Joseph Hodge (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014): 270 – 291; Janet Momsen, *Gender and Development* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020³).

41 A notable insight into the relevance of gender to economic change is Aili Mari Tripp's finding that women's economic role in the "informal sector" of an African country became more prominent in a situation where global recession and structural adjustment policies cut into wage employment, where men had predominated: Aili Mari Tripp, *Changing the Rules: The Politics of Liberalization and the Urban Informal Economy in Tanzania* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997). A Kenyan woman's powerful role in the politics of the environment was recognized in the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to Wangari Maathai in 2004.

tions created a framework of thinking and practice into which people from the former colonies had to fit does not have a simple answer.

Africa and Development Knowledge

Is there a “development discourse” or a “development episteme,” a shared vision emerging out of the asymmetrical international order? Or is there more of a “development arena,” in which different conceptions of what goals should be and how they should be attained are in play, albeit without equal chances of being implemented?

The free-market critique of development in the 1980s had powerful backing in the world of finance, although even in that world the eclipse of development was temporary.⁴² During the same period, critique of development also came from the left, but it had more impact on the academy than on institutions that actually had resources. Historians’ reception of these arguments has been mixed, for the anti-development arguments of both left and right have one important dimension that goes in a different direction from the predilections of historians: both operate at a level of abstraction that leaves little room for locatedness in time and space.

The most widely cited development-bashing (and state-bashing) text is James Scott’s *Seeing Like a State*. Scott contrasted “high-modernism” – systematic development directed by a state – with what he called, using the Greek expression, *mētis*: ideals and practices based on the messiness and personal interchange of local life. He argued that states seek to make complex situations “legible” so that they could intervene in them. He did not see all development efforts as high modernism – that concept demanded an ideological consistency not always found – but his examples revealed the problematic nature of his approach.⁴³ His African example is the program of forced villagization by Tanzania in 1970s, a policy which had few defenders after the fact. But specialists in Tanzanian history find his portrayal of high modernism to have little basis. Politics

⁴² Among the academic critics of development from the standpoint of market economics is 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: Penguin, 2006). On the historical context in which such arguments developed, see Slobodian, *The Globalists*. A leading economist who at one time pushed market discipline but returned to the development fold is Jeffrey Sachs, *The End of Poverty: Economic Possibilities for Our Time* (New York: Penguin, 2005).

⁴³ James Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

in Tanzania was messy, pulled in different directions by regional political party leaders, by young men in search of a role. Much of what happened on ground level was improvised, as people confronted the impediments to improving production or marketing. The Tanzanian case is hardly a developmental success but not because of the excesses of ideological purity or state quests for legibility.⁴⁴ On the other end of Scott's spectrum, one could cite examples of *mētis* that exhibit the complexity and interactivity Scott seems to advocate, but with decidedly awful results. Mobutu's Zaire comes to mind – a domestic politics built on patron-client political relations and predatory economic actions, connections to affluent states and corporations revealing considerable skill in playing off the obscurity of international relations and domestic politics.

The best example of high-modernism in Scott's book is Scott himself, who forces complex politics into "legible" containers.⁴⁵ But dichotomies like his have had considerable appeal. The recent book of Corrie Decker and Elisabeth McMahon discusses stages and instances of the history of development in Africa with considerable subtlety and narrative complexity, but at the beginning and end they insist on a neat separation of "African" conceptions and the "development episteme."⁴⁶ The dichotomy understates the complexity of both sides. They can accurately point to ethnographic work that suggests African communities could look at progress in terms of the collective good. But they could have cited examples of African kings who enriched themselves in the slave trade and colonial-era chiefs who accumulated land at the expense of "their" people. As in most of the world, the mix of individual (or familial) greed and commitment to a collectivity in Africa is too varied and too embedded in historical circumstances to fit a continent-wide generalization. The "development episteme" is also hard to pin down, for theories and approaches have come and gone over the decades – for and against central planning, for and against industrialization,

⁴⁴ Priya Lal, *African Socialism in Postcolonial Tanzania: Between the Village and the World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Leander Schneider, *Government of Development: Peasants and Politicians in Postcolonial Tanzania* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014); Becker, *Politics of Poverty*.

⁴⁵ I put a critique of Scott in the context of a more extensive discussion of the concept of "modernity": Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 140–142. See also Fernando Coronil, "Smelling Like a Market," *American Historical Review* 106 (2001): 119–130.

⁴⁶ Decker and McMahon trace the development episteme from the Enlightenment, through the racial ideologies of the nineteenth century, and civilizing missions of the colonial era. At one point they refer to development programs being "inflicted on Africans": Decker and McMahon, *Idea of Development in Africa*, 15.

for participatory development schemes or for meeting basic needs.⁴⁷ The critique of trade policy developed since the 1940s by Raúl Prebisch and the Economic Commission for Latin America has as much claim to be part of development discourse as the pro-trade policies they criticized. International NGOs can be rightfully criticized, as Decker and McMahon do, but such organizations have brought different imaginaries, recruited people with different agendas, and to greater or lesser degrees worked with African organizations and individuals.⁴⁸ The basic problem with NGO involvement isn't that they think or act within a certain episteme but that they are accountable to their donors rather than the people whom they claim to help. And what does one do with African development economists, whether trained at the University of Chicago or in Moscow, or with organizations like the Economic Commission for Africa or the African Development Bank, whose intellectual underpinnings might come from western universities or financial institutions mixed in with individual and collective experiences and goals rooted in their personal, political, and social connections in different parts of Africa? On the ground level, as Felicitas Becker makes clear, understanding development in the light of regional ecology, the intersecting trajectories of different people, the ups and downs of markets, and the vagaries of state policies calls for an analytic strategy that emphasizes interaction, adaptation, and confrontation, with outcomes that might range from mutual benefit to heightened exploitation, modest reductions in poverty to immiseration.⁴⁹

The development question is not going away. It is hard to see how a country like Niger could educate its people or provide for their health with its own resources. The institutions with resources will have more power to shape not only the interaction but the ideological and cultural framing of it than the people and places in need. That is the development dilemma, and the study of development history is part of the history of global inequality.

As soon as one tries to explain why some places lack what others have or how projects to lessen inequality are conceived, one is looking beyond any

⁴⁷ Different approaches and programs are described in Unger, *International Development*; Rempel, "Development Experience."

⁴⁸ See also Gregory Mann, *From Empires to NGOs in the West African Sahel: The Road to Non-governmentality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Benedetta Rossi, *From Slavery to Aid: Politics, Labour, and Ecology in the Nigerian Sahel, 1800–2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

⁴⁹ Becker, *Politics of Poverty*. Becker points out that even in a very poor part of Tanzania, development programs produce some winners as well as losers. She sees the process "bumping along" rather than producing a decisive breakthrough or complete failure. Becker, *Politics of Poverty*, 268, 276.

one place, with all its particularities, and at questions of political economy that entail all scales of connection, from the neighborhood to the globe. Development history is closely linked to the study of how some parts of the world came to be wealthier than others, and how inequality is reproduced or reduced. Divergent trajectories across the world have intrigued scholars, for example Kenneth Pomeranz, Thomas Piketty, and Walter Scheidel.⁵⁰ In the post-World War Two era, the remarkable divergence between South Korea and other Southeast Asian countries from most countries in Africa raises questions about the effectiveness of different strategies. The Southeast Asian story is not one of market miracles, but of a relationship of interventionist state policies, international connections, and specific forms of class relations.

Meanwhile, the economic historian Morton Jerven has reposed the question of Africa's trajectory. He argues that what needs to be explained is not "slow growth" but "growth spurts," triggered mostly by positive responses to external demands for a succession of African products (slaves, palm oil, cocoa, minerals) followed by periods of stagnation or retrogression.⁵¹ That leaves the question of whether this or any other analysis of when African economies grow – which must be refined by region and even locality – has implications for how, in the future, states and international institutions might affect strategies to promote equitable growth or mitigate adverse affects. To understand the origins, processes, and consequences of development initiatives is to look beyond the study of "development" as a specific object and toward a wider analysis of political economy. At the same time, looking broadly at the history of economic interaction and change requires going beyond self-propelled economic processes and toward the action of collective and individual actors, that is to "development."

That question is much more complicated than growth. "Underdeveloped" countries exhibit extremes of inequality, between a small number of people whose lifestyles and connections are those of a global and cosmopolitan bourgeoisie, versus people living with extreme deprivation. Africanists are now giving due attention to land issues, including the land grabbing in the past by white settlers, the land-grabbing in independent countries like Kenya of elites connect-

⁵⁰ Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Thomas Piketty, *The Economics of Inequality*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2015); Walter Scheidel, *The Great Leveler: Violence and the History of Inequality from the Stone Age to the Twenty-First Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).

⁵¹ Morton Jerven, "African Economic Growth Recurring: An Economic History Perspective on African Growth Episodes, 1690–2010," *Economic History of Developing Regions* 25 (2010): 127–154.

ed to power, and the recent influx of foreign investment in large land parcels in some African countries. Some have argued that various forms of communal land tenure stand in the way of potentially progressive farmers who could use land more productively, but it is far from clear that individual land titles will result in the economic dynamic that decades after the generalization of private land ownership led to prosperous economies in western Europe or only to the immiseration that accompanied that process. Studies based on extensive fieldwork are showing how small-scale cultivators try not only to defend their land rights, but to grow new crops and use new techniques when those possibilities arise, that they engage with state development projects when they have something to offer, and they can work collectively among themselves or with local or international NGOs when the state abdicates its responsibilities to its citizens.⁵² One can make similar observations about urban economies: the “official” economy and the “informal” economy are not clearly demarcated; development projects, individual entrepreneurship, collective self-help, gangs, and protection rackets are overlapping modes of action as many people struggle to get by and others to enrich themselves.

Conclusion

Economic relations are rarely symmetrical. How this unevenness affects people in different circumstances and whether asymmetry is contained or reproduces itself are difficult questions. Development, as the word came to be used in mid-twentieth century to delineate a project of state governments and international agencies, comes into the picture because market mechanisms will not in themselves correct asymmetries. Whether such actions work to reduce or augment inequality is the crucial question. One can on the one hand point to the modest gains, especially in education and health, that came about during the “development era” of 1945 to 1975 and to the way in which the anti-development politics imposed on African states in the era of structural adjustment (late 1970s and 1980s) made the destructive effects of global economic crisis in the 1970s worse. Neither structural adjustment policies nor autarchy – withdrawal from economic relations, however asymmetrical they were – has been of much help to poor countries.⁵³ Denouncing or defending development at a high level of generality does not get us very far.

⁵² For example, Moskowitz, *Seeing Like a Citizen*.

⁵³ Thandika Mkandawire, *Africa Beyond Recovery* (Legon-Accra: Sub-Saharan Publishers, 2015).

Historians of development have brought out the intersections of different conceptions and interests at local, national, regional, and global levels. “Development” became a concept distinguishable from “economy”—over the resistance of many economists⁵⁴—at a moment when the imperial order was under challenge. It remains a definable and controversial concept because its central premise is the need for intervention to do what market mechanisms do not. Because so much of the once-colonized world bears the weight of a colonial histories and often lack basic resources, development necessarily poses the problem of relationships across lines of difference and inequality. Development is a quintessentially political concept, a quintessentially human one. To understand what development has meant historically and what it can mean in the future is to probe human thought and action across the divisions that are themselves produced historically—across continents, differences of language and culture, hierarchies, affinities, and antagonisms.

54 Robert Tignor, *W. Arthur Lewis and the Birth of Development Economics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

