

Competing Perspectives of Development

Yearbook for the History of Global Development

Competing Perspectives of Development

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Competing Perspectives of Development

Edited by
Iris Borowy and Matthias Heymann

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Contents

Iris Borowy and Matthias Heymann

Introduction — 1

Iris Borowy

How good or bad is global development and when will we know it? Some thoughts on complex assessments — 19

Paul Warde

“Fallacies of misplaced concreteness”? History in post-war environmental arguments — 47

Nicholas Ferns

A mixed blessing? Phosphate mining, development, and the discourse of Nauruan wealth — 73

Amit Das Gupta

Initial failure, late success? Short-term and long-term effects of Nehruvian development policy — 93

Paul Sprute

A Gateway of Development: San Pedro’s New Port project and continuing histories of Development in South-West Côte d’Ivoire — 115

Matthias Heymann

Narratives of global fat: Aarhus Oliefabrik and United Plantations Company — 139

Shakila Yacob

Ambivalent development: FELDA and the politics of smallholder welfare — 159

Felix Amoh-Siaw

Peacekeeping dilemmas and contested realities: The unraveling of MINUSMA amidst a perception crisis — 183

Claiton Marcio da Silva, Rômulo de Paula Andrade

Contesting tales and traditions: Two case studies of development ideals in Brazil (1940–1950) — 207

Michelle Mart

The perils of abundance: The unintended consequences of plentiful food in the modern United States — 227

Odinn Melsted

Finding oil for the developing world: Maurice Strong, the environment, and the International Energy Development Corporation (IEDC), 1979–1983 — 249

List of Contributors — 275

Iris Borowy and Matthias Heymann

Introduction

A Spanish study published in July 2024 found that ambient air pollution appeared to reduce live birth rates following In Vitro Fertilization (IVF) by up to 36 percent. Higher carbon dioxide concentration on the day of the frozen embryo transfer was positively associated with increased miscarriage rates of up to seventy-five percent.¹ The case seems like the perfect embodiment of the contradictions of modern development: the high standard of medical care, which presupposes a high level of technical expertise and equipment along with the consumption of large quantities of energy, provides complex medical care and at the same time contributes to conditions that obstruct the success of this care. In fact, in this case, it even contributes to conditions that create the problem in the first place. Hospitals have notoriously high energy requirements for which they usually use a mix of electricity (mostly derived from coal, gas, or oil-based power plants), natural gas, and oil, meaning that they generally have higher CO₂ emissions than residential and commercial buildings.² Fossil fuels release many chemicals into the environment which act as endocrine disruptors, affecting hormonal functions which are related to cancers, cardiovascular disease, and also infertility.³ To some degree, therefore, hospitals contribute to the infertility for which their IVF treatment offers a solution.

Doubtless, hospitals are an important outcome of long-term bio-medical, technological, and institutional development, and no sane person would suggest abolishing them. Hospitals save countless lives every year by providing surgery and other forms of care that would be impossible outside of highly professional hospital settings. In Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, for example, delivering babies in hospitals has measurably reduced neonatal mortality.⁴ However, at the

¹ Marina Solsona Caba, Sebastian Leathersich et al., “The Effect of Ambient Exposure to Air Pollutants on Live Birth Rates in Frozen Embryo Transfer Cycles,” *Human Reproduction* 39, no. 1 (2024), <https://doi.org/10.1093/humrep/deae108.182>.

² Justo García-Sanz-Calcedo, “Study of CO₂ emissions from energy consumption in Spanish hospitals,” *Vibroengineering PROCEDIA* 26 (2019): 46–51, <https://doi.org/10.21595/vp.2019.20965>.

³ Tracey J. Woodruff, “Health Effects of Fossil Fuel-Derived Endocrine Disruptors,” *New England Journal of Medicine* 390, no. 10 (6 March 2024): 922–33, <https://doi.org/10.1056/NEJMra2300476>; Julie Carré, Nicolas Gatimel, Jessica Moreau, et al. “Does Air Pollution Play a Role in Infertility?: A Systematic Review,” *Environmental Health* 16, no. 82 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12940-017-0291-8>.

⁴ Anna Gage et al., “Hospital Delivery and Neonatal Mortality in 37 Countries in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia: An Ecological Study,” *PLoS Med.* 2021 Dec 1;18(12):e1003843.

same time, hospital operation contributes to climate change and its negative health effects. To be precise, in industrialized countries, hospitals account for between three and eight percent of the climate change footprint.⁵ Their (health) effects will disproportionately be felt in low-income countries which have contributed only negligibly to climate change themselves. Thereby, this process adds to the way hospitals contribute to health inequalities, an aspect of many other reasons they have long been criticized for.

Already in the 1970s, development policies meant to improve healthcare provisions in low-income countries strongly focused on urban hospital infrastructure, a model that uncritically copied systems from high-income countries in the global North, where it made sense. But it was harmful to the majority of people in low-income countries who lived in rural areas and had only limited access to health infrastructures partly because so much of scarce funds and manpower was consumed in expensive urban institutions.⁶ Despite the propagation of primary health care by the World Health Organization and multiple healthcare services, such imbalances have proved difficult to eliminate. In Eastern Europe, for example, the concentration of specialists in high-prestige urban hospitals at the expense of community health services jeopardized achieving the Millennium Development Goals.⁷

This small example of hospitals illustrates ambiguous and often contradictory effects of development. Improvements, or what some experience or theories perceive as positive developments, often come at a price that others may experience or perceive as disadvantages and negative developments. These ambiguities matter. They open the ground for widely different, opposing and contradicting narratives that cause debate, tension, controversy, and conflict. This is true on a local scale, when a manufacturer in a village brings employment as well as economic inequality and environmental burdens, on a global scale, when production and trade have similar contradictory effects, and, in many instances, on mixed scales, as in the example of the hospital, when local circumstances interact with global conditions.

In the large picture of our contemporary world, ambiguity forms the foundational dilemma of modern development: the contradictory effects of unprecedented economic growth with widespread immense social benefits on the one hand

⁵ Justo García-Sanz-Calcedo, "Study of CO₂ Emissions From Energy Consumption in Spanish Hospitals," *Vibroengineering PROCEDIA* 26 (2019): 46–51, <https://doi.org/10.21595/vp.2019.20965>.

⁶ Marcos Cueto, "The Origins of Primary Health Care and Selective Primary Health Care," *American Journal of Public Health* 94, no.1 (2004): 1867.

⁷ Kaspar Wyss, "An Approach to Classifying Human Resources Constraints to Attaining Health-related Millennium Development Goals," *Human Resources for Health* 2, no. 11 (2004): 4.

and deteriorating environmental conditions and increasing social inequality on the other. This dilemma has led to harshly opposed master narratives about global development as well as drastically different interpretations of history and of the definition of “development” itself. The first master narrative portrays development as a global accomplishment that improved living conditions and human life around the world. The second portrays development as an imperialistic process of colonial and neo-colonial exploitation leading to significant global injustice and a North-South divide.⁸ These different narratives inform discussions about the state of the world today and about the relative responsibilities different stakeholders have for pressing problems and injustice.

An example of a positive narrative of development is provided by a comprehensive study commissioned by the OECD, published in 2014, which documented how human development had evolved since 1820. Based on socio-economic indicators it revealed the various ways in which life had progressed: per capita GDP, real wages, education, life expectancy, and human body height all had improved around the world, sometimes modestly, sometimes explosively so: Global average per capita GDP increased ten-fold between 1820 and 2010. While there were exceptional, temporary declines, notably in the former Soviet Union, in the long run all countries enjoyed real income growth. Similarly, literacy rates increased dramatically from less than twenty percent of the world population in 1820 to eighty percent in 2000. The average years of education of the global population increased from one year in 1820 to seven years in the twenty-first century. Notwithstanding large regional differences, overall, life expectancy at birth increased by approximately thirty years, thanks mainly to substantial decreases in infant mortality rates, and almost everywhere the study reported substantial improvements in multi-dimensional gender equality.⁹ These trends have continued since 2014. According to the United Nations Development Program, the Human Development Index, measuring a combination of GDP, education, and life expectancy, increased from 0.601 in 1990 to 0.739 in 2022.¹⁰ In this positive nar-

⁸ For discussions of the various strands see Corinna Unger, Iris Borowy and Corinne Pernet, “Introduction,” in *Routledge Handbook for the History of Development*, ed. Corinna Unger, Iris Borowy and Corinne Pernet (London: Routledge, 2022), 1–16; Corinna Unger, Iris Borowy and Corinne Pernet, “Introduction,” in *Routledge Handbook for the History of Development*, ed. Corinna Unger, Iris Borowy and Corinne Pernet (London: Routledge, 2022), 1–16. See also Corinna Unger. *International Development* (London: Bloomsbury Academic 2018); Ian Goldin, *Development. A very short introduction*, 2nd ed (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

⁹ Jan Luiten van Zanden et al. (eds.), *How Was Life? Global Well-being Since 1820* (OECD Publishing, 2014), <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264214262-en>;

¹⁰ UNDP 2024, The Human Development Index, accessed January 3, 2025, <https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/human-development-index#/indicies/HDI>.

rative, disparities are considered inevitable but temporary conditions resulting from unequal development. Since any positive change needs to begin somewhere before it spreads widely, improvements inevitably cause inequality.

Others disagree. They argue that taking a bird's eye view glosses over the extent to which people in different places have experienced development in radically different ways. According to them global development produced winners and losers, and losers have been the majority of the world population. They see growing inequality not as a process in which some fortunate societies take the lead in improvements that enable them to enjoy better living conditions and, tangentially, to extend power over other territories that, eventually, will benefit everybody. Instead, they regard imperialism and the exploitation of the majority of the world population by a minority as the central cause of inequality, both directly and indirectly, as the resources and manpower gained through colonialism bolster economic development. These are the perspectives of global exploitation narratives that posit colonial and neo-colonial exploitation as central forces of global development and the creation and perpetuation of global inequality.

These different narratives have existed for a long time and continue to feed lively, sometimes acerbic debate. In India, versions of the “drain theory”—the belief in a massive colonial drain of wealth from the colonized to the colonizers—go back (at least) to 1901 when Dadabhai Naoroji, the first Indian Member of British Parliament, as part of a campaign for Indian independence accused Britain of exploiting Indian wealth.¹¹ This line of reasoning has been taken up repeatedly since, most recently by the Indian intellectual and politician Shashi Tharoor. In a debate and subsequent book that attracted a lot of attention in 2016, he argued that the relative rise of the British economy's share of world GDP and the concomitant decline of the Indian economy was due to systematic colonial plunder. He suggested that Britain pay a symbolic sum of one pound for each of 200 years of colonial rule as compensation, an idea that was seconded by the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi.¹² However, Marxist Indian economists Utsa and Prabhat Patnaik had little enthusiasm for such symbolic gestures. They calculated that the wealth British colonial policies drained from the Indian economy amount-

¹¹ Charles Allen, “Who Owns India's History? A Critique of Shashi Tharoor's Inglorious' Empire,” *Asian Affairs* 49, no. 3 (2018): 355–69, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03068374.2018.1487685>.

¹² Priyanka Shrivastava, “Shashi Tharoor demands reparations and revisits the dark historical past,” *Asian Voice* July 28, 2015, accessed January 8, 2025, <https://www.asian-voice.com/News/India/Shashi-Tharoor-demands-reparations-and-revisits-the-dark-historical-past>.

ed to £369.65 billion until the country's independence, corresponding to £12,400 billion by 2020, assuming a yearly interest rate of five percent.¹³

Similar arguments have been raised for other parts of the world. In 1944, Caribbean historian and, subsequently, the first Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago Eric Williams argued that profits made from slave labor in Caribbean sugar plantations provided much of the capital used for investments in the emerging industrialization in Britain.¹⁴ While discussions of this study remained largely within academia, a book written by Uruguayan journalist Eduardo Galeano in 1971, *Las Venas abiertas de América Latina* (*Open Veins of Latin America*) tied into the third-worldism movement of the time and triggered lively debate when he portrayed the history of South America since European colonization as a succession of European appropriation of resources, notably gold, sugar, and coffee, while exploiting local labor and destroying the natural environment.¹⁵ Thirty years later, Colombian-American anthropologist Arturo Escobar tied these accusations to a general critique of the concept of development. Rather than a goal universally shared by people around the world, he considered it a label given to a process designed to "bring about modernity – the ensemble of values, institutions, economic systems and social relations that originated in Europe in the seventeenth century, if not before – to what until recently was known as the 'Third World'".¹⁶ In addition to the personal violence of colonial actors, Escobar saw structural violence in the transformation of space including the displacement of indigenous people for plantations and sprawling urban areas.

The African equivalent was the monograph by Walter Rodney on *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, which appeared just one year after Galeano's book. Connecting the colonial project more directly to its effects on Europe, Rodney argued that the economic rise of Europe depended substantially on the exploitation of African resources and labor, including slave labor, so that European and African development, which were roughly at par in the fourteenth century, subsequently took radically different trajectories.¹⁷ Moreover, according to several authors, the imperial drain continued after decolonization. The Malaysian economist K. S.

¹³ Shashi Tharoor, *An Era of Darkness: The British Empire in India* (Delhi: Aleph, 2016); Utsa Patnaik and Prabhat Patnaik, "The Drain of Wealth. Colonialism Before the First World War," *Monthly Review* 72, no. 8 (2021), <https://monthlyreview.org/2021/02/01/the-drain-of-wealth/>.

¹⁴ Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1944).

¹⁵ Eduardo Galeano, *Las venas abiertas de América Latina* (México: siglo xxi editores, 1971).

¹⁶ Arturo Escobar, "Development, Violence and the New Imperial Order." *Development* 47 (2004): 15–21, 15, <https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.development.1100014>.

¹⁷ Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (London: Bogle-l'Ouverture Publications, 1972).

Jomo has described a “post-colonial imperial order” perpetuating global inequality,¹⁸ while historians William Roger Louis and Ronald Robinson called it “imperialism of decolonization.” As formal empires were dismantled, “the thraldom of international economy” remained.¹⁹

Other historians have challenged the views that put colonial exploitation at the center of industrialization and increasing European wealth. For instance, C.A Bayly and Robert Allen acknowledge the important global context of industrialization in Britain, notably the demand for Indian cotton by European consumers and the mercantilist policies by the British governmental that excluded Indian clothes from domestic markets in the early eighteenth century. However, they argue that the subsequent growth of the British textile industry to a point that it could outcompete Indian production (a stunning reversal to the previous relation) was the result of a specific combination of domestic factors, including high salaries that encouraged the invention of labor-saving technologies, generous deposits of coal that energized such technologies, and a government that encouraged individual initiatives actively intervening in economic affairs. As steam engines and industrial production became more efficient, they spread to countries with similar conditions, mostly in Europe, while creating a growing wealth gap to countries whose environmental and social circumstances made industrialization uneconomical.²⁰

This perspective has been both the result and the driver of a growing body of studies of economic history. Specifically, the development of India and its fall from one of the strongest to a very weak economy within one century has been the subject of often very technical research, aimed at establishing, among others, the per capita income, wage levels, investments, and transfer payments to Britain. These studies have qualified or even doubted the drain theory.²¹ In an example of

¹⁸ K. S. Jomo, ed., *The Great Divergence, Hegemony, Uneven Development, and Global Inequality* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005), Introduction, 6.

¹⁹ William Roger Louis and Ronald Robinson, “The Imperialism of Decolonization,” *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 22, no. 3 (1994): 495.

²⁰ C.A. Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World 1780–1914* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004): 172–83; Robert Allen, *Global Economic History. A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011): 27–52.

²¹ Charles Allen, “Who Owns India’s History? A Critique of Shashi Tharoor’s Inglorious’ Empire,” *Asian Affairs* 49, no. 3 (2018): 355–69, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03068374.2018.1487685>; Animesh Gadre, “Deindustrialisation and the Drain Theory: The Contours of Economic Degradation in British India,” MPRA Paper No. 108977, August 4, 2021, <https://mpra.ub.uni-muenchen.de/108977/>; Tirthankar Roy, “The British Empire and the Economic Development of India (1858–1947),” *Revista de Historia Económica, Journal of Iberian and Latin American Economic History* 34, no. 2 (2015): 209–36, doi:10.1017/S0212610915000336.

interpretation seeking to balance contradictory data, Brijesh K. Mishra and Siddhartha Rastogi argue that the British left valuable investment such as “railways, irrigation, efficient administration, abolition of sati, legalisation of widow remarriage, extinguishing Pindaris, breaking up the privileged position of aristocrats and nawabs and so on” but that these efforts were inadequate for developing India and “a significant degree of drain took place during the British rule over India.”²² Collectively, these scholars paint a picture of development that favored Britain, since circumstances on its territory pushed it to industrialize and then allowed it to take advantage of its growing control over India. In this view, the sharp relative decline of the role of India in the global economy resulted mainly from shifting relative productivity after industrialization in Britain, though both the extent and its form could have taken more benign forms under different British policies.

In South America, this debate juxtaposes the “pink legend,” which regards European rule as benign, to the “black legend” which condemns it as destructive. The “pink legend” lists as positive elements the creation of educational institutions such as schools, libraries, and universities and argues that colonial policies were often less violent than those of prior indigenous rulers. By contrast, the “black legend” insists on the genocidal character of Spanish colonialism and points to the coercive and racist nature of missionary and educational work which destroyed domestic values, languages, beliefs, and cultures. Both narratives simplify complex processes in which neither indigenous populations nor colonizers were homogeneous or static groups, and which included manifold forms of violence, perpetrated by pre-Columbian (mainly Inca and Aztec) empires as well as by European colonizers. A new discourse has emerged under a label of endorsing “neither the black nor the pink legend” (“ni leyenda negra, ni leyenda rosa”).²³ Generally, critics of the negative narrative of development as a violent, exploitative process do not deny either the violence or exploitation, but they contextualize them as an inherent characteristic of human history rather than a specificity of recent events. For instance, Nobel Prize laureate Angus Deaton has explicitly acknowledged the destruction brought by imperialism and the harm it has caused

²² Brijesh K. Mishra and Siddhartha Rastogi, “Colonial Deindustrialisation of India: A Review of Drain Theory,” *South Asian Survey* 24, no.1 (2018): 37–53.

²³ Santiago Liaudat, “Ni leyenda negra, ni leyenda rosa: la posición nacional latinoamericana,” *Dar a Leer. Revista de Educación Literaria; Dossier Filosofía de la Liberación* (2024): 163–72, https://sedici.unlp.edu.ar/bitstream/handle/10915/172900/Documento_completo.%20Dossier%20UNCoEdit.pdf-PDFA.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y; see also Jorge Senior, “La Conquista: ni leyenda rosa ni leyenda negra,” *El Unicornio*, July 21, 2021, <https://www.elunicornio.co/la-conquista-ni-leyenda-rosa-ni-leyenda-negra/>.

societies in Asia, Latin America, and Africa. But he also argues that even in the absence of imperialism, the gradual nature of socio-economic improvements would inevitably cause inequality, involving an “endless dance between progress and inequality.”²⁴ Whether this inequality is a constructive step towards universal progress or a means by which the fortunate cement their privileges over others depends on subsequent policies:

The world is hugely unequal. Inequality is often a *consequence* of progress. Not everyone gets rich at the same time, and not everyone gets immediate access to the latest life-saving measures, whether access to clean water, to vaccines, or to new drugs for preventing heart disease. Inequalities in turn affect progress. This can be good; Indian children see what education can do and go to school too. It can be bad if the winners try to stop others from following them, pulling up the ladders behind them. The newly rich may use their wealth to influence politicians to restrict public education or health care that they themselves do not need.²⁵

Drastically different and opposing narratives of development have likewise been produced about environmental challenges around the globe (see Paul Warde’s contribution to this volume), as the case of hospitals also illustrated. The inherent contradictions are crystallized, for instance, in the history of coal. As the basis of the steam engine, coal jump-started industrialization, which initially had negative effects on the wellbeing of workers but positive long-term effects for all industrialized societies, who got higher incomes and wealth, better health, more leisure time, and more social and actual mobility. The use of coal also limited (in some places, possibly ended) deforestation in Europe and Asia, and it contributed to the end of slavery by providing a potent substitute for human labor. However, at the same time, it caused large-scale air pollution, which contributed to diseases such as rickets, respiratory diseases, and cancers; it created a serious occupational hazard for miners, and for a while it increased slavery by increasing the demand for cotton, most of which was produced with slave labor. It also massively contributed to climate change.²⁶ Similar contradictory stories could be told for the pharmaceutical industry (the producer of life-saving drugs as well as narcotic drugs and simultaneously the source of iatrogenic risks), agriculture (the source of food as well as carrier of toxic burden through pesticides, synthetic fertilizers,

²⁴ Angus Deaton, *The Great Escape* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 8–9.

²⁵ Deaton, *Escape*, 12.

²⁶ Iris Borowy, “Economic Growth and Health: Evidence, Uncertainties and Connections Over Time and Place,” in *History of the Future of Economic Growth. Historical Roots of Current Debates on Sustainable Degrowth*, ed. Iris Borowy and Matthias Schmelzer (Milton Park: Routledge, 2017), 129–153.

and salinization), or urbanization (the process involving heightened productivity, cultural creativity, and social exchange but also environmental destruction, crime, and social anonymity). Clearly, it is part of the ambivalence of development that the positive effects could not be attained without its negative consequences.

Conflicting narratives of global development have played significant political roles in forming and consolidating identities, bolstering and legitimizing political aims, supporting processes of nation-building, and negotiating global power relations. However, narratives of development necessarily and unavoidably have limitations and bear a tendency to be one-sided and avoid or reduce ambiguity. Such limitations become a political burden and threaten social cohesion, when powerful narratives combined with increasing distinction, closure, and self-isolation drive and deepen polarization and increase political sensitivity and conflict. In a time marked by the decline of the global world order created and long maintained by mostly Western countries of the global North, narratives purporting to explain today's differences in wealth and status legitimize different evaluations of an ongoing profound shift in global power. Debates about histories of development, therefore, are of acute current significance: they form a key tool to negotiate today's changing international relations.

In this volume we argue that conflicting narratives of development are important, but we need to reflect their limitations and bring them into contact and negotiation, as the contributions to this volume aim to do. The book, therefore, is a plea for differentiation and integration of narratives of development, for opening to and discovering unfamiliar perspectives and for daring more rather than less ambiguity to acknowledge complexity, enhance multi-perspectivity, and enhance and enrich productive conversation and mutual understanding. Often, different interpretations result from different points of reference or different scales of perspectives, which can be further explored. We understand this volume to be an appeal to view conflicting narratives of development not as a dead-end of irreconcilable contradiction but as an open question that demands attention and an invitation to engage in conversation and negotiation and to accept ambiguity while testing possible integration. Of course, the aim is by no means new or original; rather, it is a common task and competence of scholarly work. We believe, however, that this aim deserves much more attention in times of rapidly deepening frustration, polarization, uncertainty, and confusion, particularly with regard to past, contemporary, and future understandings of development, which appear fraught with conflicting and antagonistic narratives.

This volume gathers eleven studies that address and discuss ambiguities of development and conflicting narratives about it around the globe, combining different approaches and experiences and covering various periods and places. Some chapters cover broader perspectives, including reflections about assess-

ments of global development (Borowy), clashing optimistic and declensionist narratives in postwar environmental literature (Warde), contradictory consequences of postwar food abundance (Mart), and paradoxical conflicts of environmental and oil interests (Melsted). Most chapters cover specific cases of ambivalent narratives and conflicting colonial and postcolonial developments in Nauru (Ferns), Côte d'Ivoire (Sprute), India (das Gupta), Malaysia (Heymann, Yacob), Mali (Amoh-Siaw), and Brazil (Da Silva). Abandoning one-sided perspectives and revealing conflicting aims, interests, assessments, and narratives in the presented stories involves diving deeper, adding complexity, allowing ambivalence, and considering broader sets of actors and interests, perspectives, and narratives. All these contributions show developments and/or narratives that are inherently ambiguous and even contradictory.

The first two chapters take an overview approach to the theme of the volume, though from different perspectives. While Iris Borowy raises the very big question of whether global development has tangibly improved people's lives or not, Paul Warde is interested in the academic construction of such developments, chronicling two distinct strands of narratives. Borowy's chapter draws on a large range of studies and literature and evaluating metrics like GDP, happiness indices, and sustainable development goals to show that measures of material wellbeing, social connections, health, good governance, and self-fulfillment on average improved significantly. Most people today live longer, healthier, and more comfortable lives than generations ever before. These benefits of global development, however, came with significant ambiguities, unintended consequences, and counterproductive side effects. First, the account of development has been strikingly negative for the environment, including dramatically deteriorated conditions of seas, soils, forests, biodiversity, and ongoing climate change. Second, Borowy underscores the paradox of progress, where benefits for some have been achieved at costs borne by others, often across time or geography. The wealth of many industrialized countries has often been built on tremendous burdens of past generations including, for example, slaves on colonial plantations, workers in industrializing countries in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, and exploited cheap labor and resources in the Global South. Also, good governance according to policy research built to a significant degree on war with violence often preparing for and facilitating subsequent political stabilization and peaceful life. These paradoxical relationships have domestic as well as international dimensions, whose interactions add another layer of complexity. Borowy concludes that positive and negative developments have been intertwined and intimately connected with the world's future standing at a crossroads due to environmental destruction and surging tensions and conflicts.

Warde traces this juxtaposition of positive and negative outcomes of development in his chapter on two strikingly contradictory narratives in postwar environmental thought: “One of improvement, the escape from a benighted and more suffering past. The other one of declension, of ever-expanding degradation”—an opposition that lives on today in common narratives of economic and environmental history. He critiques the “fallacy of misplaced concreteness,” where abstract theories are misapplied to complex realities, and highlights how histories are often tailored to support specific ideological or political goals. Environmental thinkers like Aldo Leopold and Rachel Carson used history to illustrate ecological values, while figures like Julian Simon and Herman Kahn celebrated progress through technology and human ingenuity, often ignoring nuanced historical complexities. Warde shows how these and many other authors, historians and non-historians alike, take stock of and draw on history to strengthen emphatic and unambiguous arguments rather than provide ambiguous and balanced accounts. History tends to serve as a battleground for competing visions of either improvement or degradation. The lack of ambiguity in these opposing narratives, Warde suggests, derives from the strongly manifest political values and purposes of the authors (that simply are unambiguous) and appears to become particularly evident in bird’s eye views describing long arcs of change.

The other chapters present various case studies, including seven that draw on contradictions of (post-)colonial development. Nick Ferns contributes a story of paradoxical colonial contradictions: the development of Nauru, a small island of about 21 square kilometers, from enjoying one of the highest per capita incomes in the world to becoming a failed state. During World War I, Australia gained control over Nauru, an enormously phosphate rich island, which the British Phosphate Commissioners (BPC), a semi-private company, exploited by selling it to Australia, New Zealand, and Britain. The BPC paid royalties to the Nauruan population and subsidized the Australian administration, providing easy access to health, free education, and other amenities. Nauruan wealth, however, was unsustainable and extremely fragile, as Australian administrators knew well and deliberately concealed. After independence in 1968, Nauru experienced first a phosphate boom, followed by a dramatic decline. Depleting reserves, mismanagement, and overspending led to financial ruin by the 1990s. Colonial policies had left Nauru largely dependent on a single resource, and attempts to stabilize the economy, including hosting Australian refugee centers, only perpetuated dependency. Fern’s study dissects the paradox of intertwined short-term wealth and long-term poverty, exploitation and privilege, affluence and structural vulnerabilities shaped by colonial legacies.

In another case of postcolonial development ambivalence, Paul Sprute explores the building of San Pedro’s port in Côte d’Ivoire. San Pedro, a municipality

located in the remote southwestern region of Côte d'Ivoire, was a backwater largely neglected by the French colonizers until independence in 1960. The project, starting in 1968, reflected the modernization ambitions of Côte d'Ivoire's President Félix Houphouët-Boigny to create a "gateway of development," aimed at establishing a new town and fueling regional development projects of different scales and scopes. Funded by West German and French development aid and led by West German and French companies, the project also reflected ambitions and interests of European postcolonial policies. Sprute shows that port construction and its many unexpected challenges caused a striking mismatch between planning, execution, and outcome. The port boosted plantation industries, particularly timber and later cacao (for export), but failed to establish the anticipated industrial base for long-term regional economic development. Instead of the planned new town of San Pedro, the project resulted in the shanty town of Bardo as a place of informal settlements for construction workers and displaced residents that eventually housed between seventy and ninety percent of the new urban population. Further unintended consequences included deforestation, exploitative economic structures, and deepening social inequities. The case of San Pedro's port illustrates how ambitious infrastructural projects led to contradictory long-term outcomes by catalyzing growth while perpetuating inequalities and ecological harm.

Amit das Gupta moves the focus to contradictory assessments of India's first prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru's development policies after independence in 1947. Following contemporary economic advice and ideas of democratic socialism, Nehru launched an ambitious development program with massive investments into state-owned infrastructure and heavy industries, aimed at breaking colonial-era economic dependencies, achieving self-reliance, and quickly transforming an agrarian society into a modern state. Within a decade this strategy failed. It led the country close to bankruptcy and heavily increased dependency on Western donors. Economists criticized excessive state control with overregulation, mismanagement, and corruption that led to inadequate railway, telecommunication, and highway systems while stifling private enterprise and innovation. Only since the early 1990s have economic liberalization and the opening of the Indian market to foreign investors fostered flourishing private industries, unleashed growth in sectors like IT, steel, and pharmaceuticals and propelled India's economic resurgence. While these developments have conventionally been viewed as a succession of bad and good strategies, Das Gupta argues that they have rather been inter-linked. Though not immediately productive, Nehru's development policies laid important foundations to realize the potential of a sleeping giant. For instance, the creation of a protected steel industry served as preparation for its subsequent success on the global market after liberalization. Similarly, Nehru's focus on higher

education paved the way for the quick rise of the Indian IT industry and other high-tech fields including space technology, nuclear energy, medicine, and pharmaceuticals. These findings echo Borowy's argument that the evaluation of development policies depends on the chosen time frame, which may obscure or reveal consequences over time.

This idea that historical development gives rise to a diversity of often contrasting or even contradictory narratives is highlighted by Matthias Heymann in his case study of tropical plant oil industries through the lens of two Danish companies in Malaysia. Examining their historical development as well as their economic and environmental implications, he explores five different types of narratives: industrial success, heroic pioneers, colonial exploitation, national development, and sustainability. Aarhus Oliefabrik in Denmark was a leading processor of tropical oils and United Plantations, a Danish plantation company in Malaysia producing coconut and palm oil. Earlier historical accounts of these companies celebrated innovation and economic growth, portraying Danish colonial actors as pioneers overcoming challenges and accomplishing welfare and innovation but downplaying colonial power dynamics and exploitation. Later critical narratives, by contrast, emphasized the social and environmental exploitation of the colonial plantation system, the labor abuses and societal disruptions (such as labor migration), as well as the deforestation and environmental destruction it caused. More recent positive accounts emphasize Malaysia's post-independence rise of the plantation economy for national growth and nation-building by balancing foreign investment with strong local ownership and smallholder support as well as by efforts of developing sustainable palm oil through the efforts of the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO). Thus, these stories of two specific local companies mirror typical diverging narratives of global North-South development. The chapter advocates for integrating diverse perspectives and including marginalized actors and voices to create balanced and comprehensive histories of global resource chains.

Shakila Yakob in her contribution takes up this thread and dives deeper into the development of Malaysian smallholder welfare. She provides a comprehensive analysis of the ambiguous legacy of FELDA (Federal Land Development Authority) in transforming Malaysia's rural economy. After independence from Britain, the Malaysian government embarked on ambitious land reforms and development initiatives to combat rural poverty and address the marginalization of indigenous smallholders. Established in 1956, FELDA aimed to transform landless marginalized rural Malays into landowners and integrate them into the broader economy through state-led and subsidized land resettlement and palm oil cultivation. Yacob describes FELDA as an agency driven by empathy for rural communities and offering an alternative to both corporate capitalism and socialist collectivism.

While it contributed significantly to Malaysia's global palm oil dominance, rural development, and poverty reduction, the initiative also entrenched dependency on state support and became a tool for political consolidation. In recent decades, challenges such as aging settler populations, urban migration, labor shortages, and financial risks, coupled with political interference, corporatization, and corruption, have increasingly complicated FELDA's developmental trajectory and undermined smallholder development in favor of profit-driven strategies. Yacob illustrates the complexities of and tensions in state-led post-colonial development efforts and underscores FELDA's dual legacy of success and challenges, empowerment and dependency, effectiveness and mismanagement.

The challenges and contradictions surrounding the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) are explored by Felix Amoh-Siaw. MINUSMA, established in 2013 to stabilize the country, protect civilians, and support democratic transitions amidst political instability, Tuareg rebellions, and jihadist insurgencies, is mostly remembered as a failure. Amoh-Siaw, however, develops a more fine-grained and ambiguous picture. After the fall of Muammar al-Gaddafi's government in Libya during the Arab Spring, jihadist fighters entered Mali in March 2012 and sparked a violent uprising. MINUSMA pacified the country, facilitated elections, negotiated peace agreements (e.g., the 2015 Algiers Accord), and engaged in local reconciliation efforts of the multi-ethnic population. While MINUSMA stabilized the country, played a crucial role in safeguarding civilians, and contributed to economic and social development, initial local support for the mission increasingly vanished. Continued attacks by armed groups led to suspicions and eroded trust in MINUSMA, which increasingly came to be perceived as a Western neo-colonial tool favoring the interests of the former colonial power France. Amoh-Siaw reveals the complexities of the intricate conflict landscape in Mali and argues that limited resources, ineffective communication, and widespread misinformation as well as rising nationalist feelings among large parts of the southern Malian population undermined the mission and led to its sudden termination in 2023. He concludes that both positive and negative perceptions of MINUSMA are oversimplifications, emphasizing the need for a nuanced understanding of its role and impact.

Claiton Marcio Da Silva and Rômulo de Paula Andrade provide an analysis of development ideals and practices in Brazil, focusing on two case studies from the mid-twentieth century that illuminate the conflict between technocratic modernization and rural traditional knowledge and culture. From the late nineteenth century, intellectuals and political elites sought to align Brazil with European modernity, emphasizing sanitation, health, and infrastructure as tools for progress. Scholars like Sérgio Buarque de Holanda and Florestan Fernandes advocated for incorporating marginalized rural populations into nation-building and mod-

ernization projects. They deemed the technification of agriculture, livestock, and more efficient extractive practices as pivotal for education, social change, and rural development. Likewise, the Superintendência de Valorização Econômica da Amazônia (SPVEA), modeled after the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) in the USA, aimed to modernize the Amazon region through training programs and regional planning. The initiative sought to develop the region and transform local populations into skilled workers by imposing global North technocratic approaches and practices, sidelining local traditions and knowledge. Da Silva and Andrade show that, despite some degree of integration of Brazil into the global economy, prioritizing technology-based modernization over local traditions largely failed to achieve the goals of developing rural areas and to increase inclusiveness of backward rural populations into the modern nation. In contrast, it resulted in significant environmental and social challenges that continue to resonate today.

The last two chapters turn to other dimensions of ambiguous development within a world in which material affluence rubs against policies safeguarding human health, social justice, and environmental integrity. Michelle Mart explores the paradox of food abundance in the modern United States. Looking at its impact on culture, health, environment, and equality, she highlights the dual nature of food abundance as both a blessing and a curse. While an efficient industrial food system lowered food costs, improved health, democratized access, and enriched food culture, it also caused significant harm through health crises, environmental degradation, and persistent inequality. Food abundance encouraged culinary creativity and broadened access to international flavors, but it also led to homogenization, over-reliance on industrially processed foods, and a loss of connection to traditional food cultures. Mart argues that the national school lunch program launched in 1946 led to better nutrition for children but also represented a subsidy for an increasingly industrialized agriculture. The abundance of calories contributed to better health but also led to overconsumption, increasing rates of obesity, and chronic diseases like diabetes. The industrial food system's reliance on pesticides, factory farming, and monocultures has caused significant environmental harm, including soil degradation and greenhouse gas emissions. This food system externalizes costs, often at the expense of small farmers, farm workers, and the environment. Mart concludes with a call for a holistic approach to the food system, integrating goals like environmental stewardship, cultural preservation, and equitable access alongside productivity and cost-efficiency.

Finally, Odinn Melsted explores the history of the International Energy Development Corporation (IEDC), created by Maurice Strong in 1979 to address the challenges of oil-importing developing nations after the oil price shocks of the 1970s. He highlights the contradictory professional commitments and legacy of Strong, a

Canadian oil and minerals businessman who started a second career in UN environmental and development politics. Strong's professional ambitions combined strong environmental advocacy and leadership in environmental initiatives with persisting strong business interests in oil and a pragmatic focus on development through oil. The IEDC aimed to facilitate oil exploration by raising private investment and expertise. It operated as a corporate development agency, targeting regions like Africa and Asia for exploration projects. Despite initial successes in attracting investors and setting up projects, financial difficulties and a market downturn led to its sale to the Kuwait Petroleum Corporation in 1983. The IEDC highlighted tensions between economic development and environmental sustainability. It promised to solve payment deficits for developing countries but also perpetuated reliance on oil, conflicting with emerging environmental concerns like climate change. While its projects sought to empower the developing world, they often reinforced neo-colonial trade dynamics, prioritizing the export of resources over long-term self-sufficiency. The case of the IEDC reveals the complexity of North-South energy cooperation and the ambiguity in the actions and rhetoric of Maurice Strong. It shows the challenge of balancing developmental aspirations and business interests with environmental priorities.

Collectively, all these chapters address cases in which developmental efforts result in diverse, ambiguous, or contradictory outcomes and/or in which narratives about such outcomes struggle to do justice to contradictory effects and contexts and to the incongruence of short- and long-term consequences. On one level, this is a normal part of academic scholarship. Historical events lead to different interpretations, and it is common for new generations of historians to revise views once broadly accepted as conventional wisdom. But there is another level to these questions, in that narratives and interpretations of past developments have tangible implications on policy choices about the future: international negotiations on climate change emissions and decisions on infrastructure investments and international alliances are just a few examples of the many ways in which views of the past affect the present and the future in important ways. This is especially true for narratives about whether developments have had positive, negative, or mixed outcomes and about which groups may have benefited or been harmed.

A stronger awareness of the contradictory outcomes of development processes may add nuance to public discourse and sensitize decision-makers to the fact that positive and negative effects cannot be viewed in isolation: rising living standards need to be viewed together with its effects on environmental and climate change. It may thereby lead to more conscious attention to trade-offs and to evolving results over time. This may be trade-offs between short-term economic gains and long-term environmental destruction (as in Nauru), between abundant food and food that keeps people and nature healthy (as in the US), or between palm-

oil cultivation that nourishes independent communities or forms of agriculture that keep ecosystems intact (as in Malaysia). It may also facilitate interdisciplinarity, making clear that more than one expertise may be needed to assess the likely future outcome of any given policy decision.

Likewise, an awareness of opposing narratives of development outcomes may help policymakers' understanding of the diversity and persistence of historical memory and the long-term political polarization with clashing convictions and interests it often engenders. Western and Southern perspectives often differ considerably and are not necessarily right or wrong, though the emotions they often trigger facilitate propagandistic instrumentalization, but, at any rate, they create interpretations of reality that are effective and relevant in negotiations and decision-making. Better understanding the diversity of perspectives is the basis of bridge-building and sensitive decision-making, be it in development planning (as in Côte d'Ivoire and India) or political stabilization missions (as in Mali). Informed decisions about the challenges ahead will benefit from an awareness of the ambiguous outcomes of many developments and the narratives they produce, including an understanding that positive or negative records at one point in time do not preclude different outcomes sooner or later. We believe, therefore, that debates on conflicting narratives of development are important, and we hope that this volume makes a contribution that others will follow.

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Iris Borowy and Matthias Heymann

Iris Borowy

How good or bad is global development and when will we know it? Some thoughts on complex assessments

In 1997, former executive editor for physical science and history at Princeton University Press, Edward Tenner, published a book entitled *Why Things Bite Back: Technology and the Revenge of Unintended Consequences* in which he described how efforts to improve life typically had unintended consequences that sometimes exacerbated existing problems or created new ones: antibiotics that bred resistant strains of bacteria; forest fire management that increased the intensity of fires; football helmets that ended up creating a more dangerous game; and the introduction of computers in office work, which replaced a lot of secretarial work through mechanization but required hiring computer programmers and system managers instead.¹ While the many examples were fascinating and often entertaining, the overall result seemed hardly surprising, rather like a confirmation of everyday experience that (almost) all things have good and bad sides. In fact, one could write a disturbing counternarrative to Tenner's book, one that describes how bad things may have unexpected positive effects: the crises in life, brought about by disease or losing loved ones, that lead to personal growth and more mature appreciation of the value of life; brutal and dehumanizing slavery that forcibly brought Africans to the Americas, which formed the preconditions for new musical styles such as jazz, blues, and gospel as well as profound literature that would enrich the world; economic crises that cause high unemployment and despair but also lower mortality rates.² World Wars have killed literally millions of people but also intensified social policies and created welfare states that subsequently served millions of people, spurred research and investments in medical advances, and triggered large-scale building projects of social housing for low-in-

1 Edward Tenner, *Why Things Bite Back: Technology and the Revenge of Unintended Consequences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997).

2 José A. Tapia Granados and Ana V. Diez Roux, "Life and Death during the Great Depression," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the USA* 106, no. 41 (2009): 17290–5, <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.0904491106>.

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come families, all making people's lives longer and healthier for those not killed in combat or in bomb attacks on cities.³

These experiences exist in personal life, in politics in general, and in developmental contexts in particular. Contradictory outcomes, unintended consequences, and counterproductive effects have long been a well-known feature of development aid, and reports about misguided development projects are legion. As a result, some scholars have rejected development assistance, or development policies *per se*, as unhelpful or downright harmful, though others have disagreed.⁴ On a larger scale, one may wonder how these ambivalent findings compare to global development as a whole. How has global society fared during recent decades and centuries? And how have outcomes and their interpretations shifted over time? Overall, have people's lives been getting better or worse? And is there a way to measure or evaluate this? And if most or all of human development has ambivalent elements, how can we as historians better grasp the contradictory nature of various strands? This chapter is meant to be a contribution to this debate.

Is the world getting better or worse? And what does that even mean?

“Good” and “bad” are not concepts usually employed in historical or development research since they are obviously simplistic. They are also considered subjective: sometimes, what I consider a phantastic development may be my neighbor's worst nightmare and vice versa. However, this is true only to an extent. A lot of analysis about historical (or present-day) developments makes implicit value judgments about what is “good” or “bad” or when, by extension, life is getting “better” or “worse.” For instance, wars and the large-scale killings of people they involve are usually considered something “bad,” and it is not usually questioned that a decline in infant mortality makes the world a better place. Similarly, I suspect many

³ Herbert Obinger and Klaus Petersen, “Mass Warfare and the Welfare State: Causal Mechanisms and Effects,” *ZeS-Arbeitspapier*, no. 02/2014, Universität Bremen. Zentrum für Sozialpolitik (ZeS), Bremen (2014), <http://hdl.handle.net/10419/100091>; Johan Mackenbach, *A History of Population Health. Rise and Fall of Disease in Europe* (Leiden/Boston: Brill Rodopi, 2020), 125–27.

⁴ Angus Deaton, *The Great Escape* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 267–324; Dambisa Moyo, *Dead Aid* (London: Allen Lane Publishers, 2009); Lou Keune, “The Myth of Developing Aid,” in *Tax Justice. Putting Global Inequality on the Agenda*, ed. Matti Kohonen and Francine Mestrum (London: Pluto Press 2009), 189–203; Steven Radelet, “Foreign Aid,” in *The Globalization and Development Reader*, ed. Roberts, J. Timmons, Amy Bellone Hite, and Nitsan Chorev (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2nd ed. 2015), 398–416.

or all readers of these lines will agree that it is a positive development if fewer people experience genocide, famine, or painful, debilitating diseases, if fewer people get tortured, if less nature is polluted, and if fewer women (and men) get raped or enslaved. There simply is no lobby rooting for premature death, torture, rape, enslavement, famine, disease, or pollution.

Admittedly, this view overlooks the degree to which people's professed values and actual behavior often diverge. Like people who want to lose weight but don't want to give up French fries and cake, policymakers, businesspeople, and regular people around the world routinely profess their commitment to environmental protection, peace, equality, and human rights while engaging in activities that harm the environment, spur warfare, exacerbate inequality, or violate human rights. This divergence can have many causes, some more justifiable than others, such as poverty, greed, megalomania, misguided fear, hatred, or, on an individual level, an objective difficulty of living a "normal," socially integrated life in a globalized world without using fossil fuels, generating harmful waste, or buying products whose manufacture involved some form of exploitation.⁵ This discrepancy opens a legitimate debate on two points: to what extent should people's professed views or their tangible actions count as their wishes, and to what extent should all views be treated as equally acceptable? Thus, a deeper discussion would need to take into account the different ranges within which people have room to make decisions, considering how the decisions of poor people, rich people, corporations, governments, interest groups, and other stakeholders could be adequately evaluated. However, this philosophical-psychological debate is beyond the scope of this chapter, which will remain on the, admittedly simplistic, level of stated views of what constitutes "good" development, a "good" life, and, consequently, a positive or negative development.

No one definition has been universally endorsed by people and institutions around the world, but various groups and institutions have put forth their respective concepts. Aiming at a working definition that is both reasonably inclusive and manageable, this chapter draws on development indexes and goals that were specifically designed to define the quality of societal development, as well as on surveys collecting people's views. Regarding the former, the chapter has excluded single number indexes such as the Genuine Progress Index or the Happy Planet Index, which are valuable but only provide very limited information on which el-

⁵ See Leo Hickman, *A Life Stripped Bare. My Year Trying to Live Ethically* (London: Eden Project, 2005).

ements of life are considered important.⁶ Instead, this chapter makes use of two composite indexes and a list of global goals: the Gross Happiness Index, the Better Life Index, and the Sustainable Development Goals.

Composite indexes emerged in response to and, to varying degrees, in rejection of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). The Gross Happiness Index took the name to redirect it to different contents. It was famously developed in Bhutan in the mid 2000s, though its roots go back further. It uses thirty-three indicators of wellbeing from nine domains.⁷ In 2015, the OECD established a Better Life Index, consisting of eleven dimensions, each with one or several sub-points.⁸ Bhutan takes an Asian approach that includes categories highlighting community such as family vitality, reciprocal trust, kinship density, lived culture, the use of dialects and traditional sports, and also aspects of personal life such as the time spent sleeping and spirituality, factors not usually found in a Western approach. But the firmly Western OECD Better Life Index has also included non-material aspects such as life satisfaction, community with friends and family, and civic engagement. Meanwhile, the Sustainable Development Goals, endorsed at the United Nations also in 2015, have a global ambition. They emerged from the initiative of two Southern countries, Guatemala and Colombia, and their creation followed a lengthy proposal and negotiation process involving numerous state and non-state actors from around the world.⁹ Nevertheless, these indexes or goals are, in essence, top-down projects. To add a bottom-up perspective, the paper uses two surveys. Since 2011, Gallup, the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network, and the World Happiness Report Editorial Board (since 2024 complemented by the Oxford Research Center on Wellbeing) have teamed up to regularly assess people's happiness around the world, based on over 100,000 standardized interviews in which people are asked to evaluate their happiness on a scale of one to ten. These results are then connected to six variables found to be predictors

⁶ For a discussion on development these indexes see Herman Daly, “A Note on the Historical Origins of ISEW-GPI,” in *The Yearbook on the History of Global Development*, vol. 1, ed. Corinna Unger, Nicholas Ferns, Jack Loveridge, and Iris Borowy (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2022), 227–34; Saamah Abdallah, “The Happy Planet Index,” *ibid.*, 251–58. See also the chapters on the National Welfare Index and the Gross National Happiness Index in the same volume.

⁷ The domains are: psychological wellbeing, time use, community vitality, cultural diversity, ecological resilience, living standard, health, education, and good governance. Karma Ura, Sabina Alkire and Tshoki Zangmo, *GNH and GNH Index* Thimphu (Center for Bhutan Studies, 2011).

⁸ The dimensions are housing, income, jobs, community, education, environment, civic engagement, health, life satisfaction, safety, and work-life balance. OECD, *Better Life Index*, accessed June 18, 2024, <https://www.oecdbetterlifeindex.org/#/111111111111>.

⁹ Sustainable Development Goals, accessed June 18, 2024, <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>.

of happiness.¹⁰ While these surveys allowed people to express their views on a given set of variables, the Pew Research Center conducted 16,254 open interviews in 2021 without such restrictions. Therefore, it offers a more immediate access to people's thoughts, albeit only in the sixteen advanced economies in Europe, North America, and Australasia in which these interviews were conducted.¹¹ Instead of happiness, the survey asked which factors the interview partners considered important for meaningful, fulfilling, or satisfying lives.¹²

Listing the goals/domains/variables of these five sources in a table identifies a large overlap of factors. Combining items that were mentioned in at least three of the five lists shows six dimensions considered essential for a “good,” i. e. happy or meaningful, life: material wellbeing, social connection, physical and mental health, good governance, a healthy environment, and some form of self-fulfilment.

The significance of these choices is limited by two factors. One is that, regrettably, the views of people in Western, industrialized countries are overrepresented, which reflects the unequal distribution of research on this topic. The findings are, therefore, considered provisional. However, given the large degree of overlap between the sources, it is cautiously assumed that key goals and values are shared more widely around the world. Secondly, the reference point for these goals and values is primarily individual wellbeing and life. Focusing on societies instead of individuals would shift attention to more collective aspects, such as social stability, environmental sustainability, the protection of societal minorities etc. However, in the absence of reliable data in this regard, this text will use the goals and values mentioned above, fully aware that this is a slanted version of how people around the world define a good life and, consequently, how they may evaluate it if development has been primarily positive or negative.

10 Though views differ between countries and generations, the large lines show substantial overlap. Overall core variables are, in that order: social support, GDP per capita, healthy life expectancy, freedom to make life choices, generosity (measures by how much people donate to others), and a low level (or absence) of perceived corruption. John F. Helliwell et al., *World Happiness Report 2024*, Chapter two, accessed June 18, 2024, <https://worldhappiness.report/ed/2024/happiness-of-the-younger-the-older-and-those-in-between/>.

11 Canada, Belgium, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, the United Kingdom, Australia, Japan, New Zealand, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan.

12 Eight answers were mentioned by double-digit percentages of respondents, in the following order: family and children, occupation and career, material well-being, friends and community, physical and mental health, society and institutions, freedom and independence, hobbies and recreation., Laura Silver et al., Pew Research Center, *What Makes Life Meaningful? Views From 17 Advanced Economies*, November, 2021, https://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/20/2021/11/PG_1118.21_meaning-in-life_fullreport.pdf.

Table 2.1: Globally Shared Development Goals (created by the author).

	OECD Better Life Index	SDGs	Gross Happiness Index	World Happiness Report	Pew Center Report
Material wellbeing	Income; jobs	No poverty; no hunger; decent work and economic growth; industry, innovation and infrastructure;	Living standards	GDP per capita	Material well-being; occupation and career
Social connections	Community	Sustainable cities and communities;	Community vitality	Social support; generosity	Family and children; Friends and community
Health	Health	Good health and well-being	Health; psychological wellbeing	Healthy life expectation	Physical and mental health
Good governance	Civic en-gagement	Peace, justice and strong institutions	Good govern- ance	Perception of corruption	Society and institutions
Environment	Environment	Clean water and sanitation; affordable and clean energy; responsible consumption and production; climate action; life below water, life on land	ecological resilience	-	-
Self- fulfilment	Work-life balance; ed- ucation; live satisfaction	Quality education	Time use; education	Freedom to make life decisions	Hobbies and recreation; freedom and independence
Miscel- laneous	Housing, safety	Gender equality; Reduced inequalities; partnerships for the goals	Cultural diver- sity		

Material wellbeing

Adequate material living standards are widely acknowledged as being foundational for overall wellbeing. Material wellbeing can be translated into the ability to have access to a sufficient quantity of necessary or useful products. Obviously, there is no precise definition of what exactly constitutes “necessary or useful”

and how much might be “sufficient.” One possibility is to make use of a globally accepted, though somewhat arbitrary, poverty level. By that definition, global development since industrialization has been spectacularly successful, as the proportion of people living on less than two dollars per day dropped from seventy-six percent in 1800 to eight percent in 2022.¹³

Another common measurement is Gross Domestic Project (GDP), admittedly a very crude number, fraught with problematic assumptions, but one whose broad acceptance today allows comparisons between different places and over time. The most comprehensive attempt to calculate GDP back into history was done by Angus Maddison, who in two volumes, published in 2001 and 2003, presented a retroactive assessment of global, regional, and national economic wealth back to the year 1000. He argued that this millennium saw a 300-fold increase in world GDP and a thirteen-fold increase in per capita income and that it was the first millennium ever to experience any per capita increase.¹⁴ Most of it occurred during the last 200 years when global GDP per capita rose from \$1,174 in 1820 to \$14,700 in 2016, a more than twelve-fold increase over two centuries despite a simultaneous seven-fold increase in the global population—a spectacular rise without precedent in human history.¹⁵ Admittedly, these developments have been uneven and have created substantial within- and between-country inequalities, but it was certainly more than a lucky few that benefitted.

These statistics can be illustrated with access to material amenities. Indeed, one does not need to be a cornucopianist to appreciate the degree to which an increase in wealth has improved many people’s lives. Most people today can eat better, dress better and more individually, enjoy better housing than at any time during the last millennia, and have easier access to cultural services and pleasures. Average people can enjoy amenities unthinkable even to the elite few only some generations ago including electric light, the ability to talk to distant loved ones, to listen to a broad choice of music, or to watch movies. Partly, this is the result of a growing infrastructure that makes such benefits possible. Though unevenly spread, access to these amenities has been increasing rapidly and contin-

¹³ gapminder, “Population by Income (%),” accessed July 24, 2023, [https://www.gapminder.org/tools/#\\$model\\$markers\\$billy\\$encoding\\$selected\\$data\\$;;;;&chart-type=mountain&url=v1](https://www.gapminder.org/tools/#$model$markers$billy$encoding$selected$data$;;;;&chart-type=mountain&url=v1).

¹⁴ Angus Maddison, *The World Economy: Volume 1: A Millennial Perspective and Volume 2: Historical Statistics* (Paris: Development Centre Studies, OECD Publishing, 2006), <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264022621-en>.

¹⁵ All expressed in 2011 US dollars. Jutta Bolt and Jan Luiten van Zanden, “The Long View on Economic Growth: New Estimates of GDP,” in *How was Life. Vol. II, New Perspectives and Well-being and Global Inequality 1820*, ed. OECD (Paris: OECD, 2021), 29–52, 44, <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/5fa1c6e1-en/index.html?itemId=/content/component/5fa1c6e1-en>.

ues to do so: at present, more than ninety percent of the world population has access to electricity and, as of October 2024, 67.4 percent of the world population had access to the internet.¹⁶ Partly, this development ties into a longer history of increasing material wealth. Max Roser chose as an illustration of growth and better access to consumption products the immense increase in books being produced over the last centuries, which reflects widely expanded education and better access to knowledge—once the privilege of very few. Innumerable other products must be added including refrigerators, heating, toilet paper, garbage removal, food, public transportation, vaccines, computers, bicycles, and countless others.¹⁷ Though income does not automatically guarantee the use of funds spent for public benefit, clearly, GDP reflects an important dimension of material wellbeing: per capita GDP is correlated negatively with infant mortality rates and maternal deaths, and positively with life expectancy, years of schooling, learning outcomes, hours of leisure, and overall life satisfaction.¹⁸ Overall, while per capita GDP is still very unequally distributed, on average an overall increase in GDP has made the world a better place for humans.¹⁹

However, there are several caveats to this assessment. One is that GDP says nothing about the type of products provided (life-saving hospital equipment and cigarettes are counted in the same way as monetary quantities) and nothing about the degree to which the products or services provided each year fill a real need or merely add to oversupply. Nor does it say anything about how the gains are distributed within society. These flaws have been widely discussed.²⁰ In real life, a lot of products gained from economic growth have been useful and objectively beneficial for the lives of many people, while others have been useless, frivolous, or harmful, making life less socially connected and/or environmentally destructive. Already in 1973, Herman Daly argued that the economy was not a goal in itself but merely an intermediate factor for reaching human aims that could ulti-

¹⁶ “Data Page: Share of the Population with Access to Electricity,” part of the following publication: Hannah Ritchie, Pablo Rosado, and Max Roser: “Access to Energy.” Data adapted from World Bank (2019), <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/share-of-the-population-with-access-to-electricity> [online resource]; Statista, Worldwide internet user penetration from 2014 to October 2024, undated, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/325706/global-internet-user-penetration/>.

¹⁷ Max Roser “What is Economic Growth? And why is it so Important?” OurWorldInData.org, 2019, <https://ourworldindata.org/what-is-economic-growth>.

¹⁸ See respective graphs in Our-world-in-data: <https://ourworldindata.org/>.

¹⁹ John Helliwell et al., eds., *World Happiness Report* (New York: Sustainable Development Solutions Network, 2020), 23.

²⁰ Lorenzo Fioramonti, *The Gross Domestic Problem* (London: Zed Books, 2013); Diane Coyle, *GDP. A Brief but Affectionate History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

mately only be understood in theological terms.²¹ Similarly, authors such as Ernst F. Schumacher, in his 1973 book *Small is beautiful*, and, more recently, Robert and Edward Skidelsky in their book *How much is enough*, have insisted that more things does not equal better lives, and a good life also demands a sense of “enoughness.”²² While differing in details, these authors (and many others) have all agreed that the pursuit of economic growth beyond reasonable limits substituted appropriate goals of a good life, which is not attainable with a mindless focus on material means.

Another caveat is that the undoubted benefits of economic growth often came with a price for others. The industrialization which improved living standards for so many was tied to disastrous effects for some groups: these included the native population in North America, who died in huge numbers, mainly due to Old World diseases, thereby making room for emigration from Britain that helped keep worker wages high enough to encourage investment in labor-reducing machinery. It also included the slaves who worked on plantations that provided the cotton that nourished early industrialization and workers in factories and in coal mines who suffered long hours of grueling work as well as elevated injury and mortality rates.²³ Colonialism further provided labor, resources, and markets for European industrialization, and while the extent of its impact is debated, it clearly played some, non-negligible role while interfering with the development of other parts of the world.²⁴

Any evaluation of the benefits of increasing material wealth, therefore, needs to take into account the substantial harm it caused to some groups, while the suffering and destruction caused by economic growth also needs to take into account the degree to which it improved many people's lives. This is particularly true for the impact economic policies have had on the environment.

²¹ Herman Daly, “Introduction,” in *Toward a Steady-State Economy*, ed. Herman Daly (San Francisco: W.H. Freeman & Co., 1973), 1–28.

²² Ernst F. Schumacher, *Small Is Beautiful: Economics As If People Mattered* (London: Blond & Briggs, 1973); Robert and Edward Skidelsky, *How Much is Enough?* (London: Other Press, 2012).

²³ Iris Borowy, “Economic Growth and Health: Evidence, Uncertainties and Connections over Time and Place,” in *History of the Future of Economic Growth. Historical Roots of Current Debates on Sustainable Degrowth*, ed. Iris Borowy and Matthias Schmelzer (Milton Park: Routledge 2017), 129–153.

²⁴ Colin Lewis, “Capitalism, Imperialism and the Emergence of an Industrialized Global Economy,” in *Evolutions of Capitalism: Historical Perspectives, 1200–2000*, ed. Catherine Casson and Philipp Robinson Rössner, (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2022), 127–155; Gurinder K. Bhambra, “Colonial Global Economy: Towards a Theoretical Reorientation of Political Economy,” *Review of International Political Economy* 28, no.2 (2020): 307–22.

Environment

The improved living standards through increased production and consumption have involved breathtaking quantities of resources, which changed both the quantity and composition of items people use in everyday life, as they went from using few things, most of which were made from recyclable or decomposable materials such as wood, hemp, iron or bricks, to using many things, made from more complex materials.²⁵ In addition, urbanization and mechanization, especially but not only in high income countries, have resulted in an immense increase in the use of materials like stone, sand, gravel, minerals, and biomass, mostly for the production of energy and as construction material for streets, residential areas, and commercial quarters. Only a fraction has been recycled. The large majority has ended up in the air (when incinerated) or in water (when dumped) or on land (when discarded on landfills or left scattered in the environment) or will do so in the future.²⁶ One study found that the anthropogenic mass, i.e. the accumulated mass of inanimate man-made objects, equated to a mere three percent of global biomass (measured as dry weight) at the beginning of the twentieth century but surpassed this around 2020. Including accumulated waste in the calculation advances the date to approximately 2013.²⁷

The impressive improvements in global living standards also would not have been possible without an increase in agricultural productivity. Though results obviously differ between regions, global agricultural output probably grew by 0.2—0.3 percent per year between 1870 and 1938, and by an astounding 2.3 percent yearly between 1950 and 2000. This development surpassed population growth, so that the period between 1961 and 2000 saw a per capita increase in agricultural production of 0.56 percent per year.²⁸ Statistically, there is more food for every person in the world today with a six times greater population than in 1800.²⁹ The rise of agricultural production involved growing land use, new crops, fertilizers, pesticides, and mechanical power, and it has gone hand in hand with a distinct increase in Human Appropriated Net Primary Production (HANPP), i.e. the

²⁵ Kris De Decker, “How Circular is the Circular Economy,” *Uneven Earth*, November 27, 2018, accessed March 16, 2021, <http://unevenearth.org/2018/11/how-circular-is-the-circular-economy/>.

²⁶ Iris Borowy and Bernard Harris, “Introduction,” in *Health and Development*, Vol 2 of *Yearbook for the History of Global Development*, ed. Iris Borowy and Bernard Harris (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2023), 1–30.

²⁷ Emily Elhacham et al., “Global Human-made Mass Exceeds All Living Biomass,” *Nature* 588 (2020): 442–44, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-020-3010-5>.

²⁸ Giovanni Federico, *Feeding the World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 19–20.

²⁹ Ibid., 221.

percentage of all biological production that is used by humans. Depending on what is or is not included, HANPP has been calculated as amounting to between twenty and thirty-nine percent in recent decades, up from thirteen percent in 1900. However, it reaches up to eighty-three percent of the global terrestrial biosphere. Not all humans appropriate the same share of biomass production, of course. This number entails an inequality between species, as humans are increasingly monopolizing the resources of the Earth, but also inequality between different populations, as some consume more than others. For instance, the European Union has been shown to import substantial quantities of embedded biomass from other regions, particularly South America, through trade.³⁰

These changes of the surface of the Earth are only the most visible parts of a profound ongoing transformation. In a model developed by Johan Rockström et al. in 2009, human life on Earth faced nine planetary boundaries: climate change, ocean acidification, stratospheric ozone, the biogeochemical nitrogen and phosphorus cycles, global freshwater use, land system change, the rate of biodiversity loss, chemical pollution, and atmospheric aerosol loading. Going beyond one or several of these boundaries, they argued, could be “deleterious or even catastrophic due to the risk of crossing thresholds that will trigger non-linear, abrupt environmental change within continental- to planetary-scale systems.” Alarming- ly, they theorized that three of these boundaries, climate change, extinction rates and interference with the nitrogen cycle, had already been crossed.³¹ Subsequently, circumstances deteriorated further. In 2023, a group of nineteen scientists concluded that, by then, six boundaries had been transgressed, taking the Earth well beyond what they considered the “safe operating space for humanity.” They also argued that observing the boundaries as separate issues, as was commonly done, was misleading since it ignored “these perturbations’ nonlinear interactions and resulting aggregate effects on the overall state of Earth system.”³²

³⁰ Helmut Haberl, Karl-Heinz Erb, and Fridolin Krausmann, “Human Appropriation of Net Primary Production (HANPP),” in *Elgar Encyclopedia of Ecological Economics*, ed. Emilio Padilla Rosa and Jesús Ramos-Martín (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2023), 289–97; Thomas Kastner et al., “Land Use Intensification Increasingly Drives the Spatiotemporal Patterns of the Global Human Appropriation of Net Primary Production in the Last Century,” *Global Change Biology* 28 (2022): 307–22.

³¹ Johan Rockström and Will Steffen et al., “Planetary Boundaries: Exploring the Safe Operating Space for Humanity,” *Ecology and Society* 14, no. 2 (2009): 32, <http://www.ecologyandsociety.org/vol14/iss2/art32/>.

³² J. Richardson, W. Steffen W. Lucht, J. Bendtsen, S.E. Cornell et.al., “Earth Beyond Six of Nine Planetary Boundaries,” *Sciences Advances* 9, no. 37 (2023). See also <https://www.stockholmresilience.org/research/planetary-boundaries.html>.

Arguably, the most threatening one of these is climate change. Even if more mitigating policies will be put into place than appears probable at present, climate change will jeopardize the lives and livelihoods of millions of people through increases in drought, floods, extreme weather events, destruction of coastal and freshwater ecosystems, challenges to agricultural production resulting in an increase of food insecurity, changes in disease patterns, and overall stress on physical and mental health, all of which will increase global inequality and the economic, social, and political pressures it brings.³³ While some of these effects have certainly already begun, most still lie in the future, and the degree to which they will threaten lives depends on local circumstances and policy decisions made today and in the future. The outlook is seriously concerning, if not downright petrifying.

In local terms, the record is more complicated. At first sight, the picture is also alarming: according to WHO, in 2019, ninety-nine percent of the global population lived in places in which the WHO guidelines for air quality were not met, leading to 6.7 million premature deaths per year.³⁴ But urban air pollution varies hugely, with the areas most affected principally being those experiencing strong industrialization in its comparatively early stage when manufacturing industry, motor vehicles, and energy production are plentiful but technologically unsophisticated. As a case in point, in 2023, forty-two out of the fifty most polluted cities at the time were in India.³⁵ However, the development in more advanced areas gives rise to the hope that this situation may be transitory. Christof Mauch has urged readers to take a long-term view for *Slow Hope* and has provided various examples of ecological revivals of what seemed, at some point, hopeless cases of environmental destruction.³⁶

Health is particularly sensitive to the contradictory strands of industrialized development: the same processes that improve health through producing higher

³³ IPCC, *Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation, and Vulnerability*, Report of Working Group II (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009325844>.

³⁴ WHO, “Factsheet: Ambient (outdoor) air pollution,” October 24, 2024, [https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/ambient-\(outdoor\)-air-quality-and-health](https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/ambient-(outdoor)-air-quality-and-health).

³⁵ IQAir, “World’s most polluted cities,” 2023, accessed November 26, 2024, <https://www.iqair.com/us/world-most-polluted-cities?continent=&country=&state=&sort=rank&page=1&perPage=50&cities=>.

³⁶ Christof Mauch, “Slow Hope. Rethinking Ecologies of Crisis and Fear,” *RCC Perspectives* 1 (2019): 22–36.

incomes and better living standards also degrade the environment in ways that are harmful to human health.³⁷

Health

In many ways, findings regarding health mirror those regarding the ambiguities of overall development, explained above. In recent decades, tangible improvements in population health across the whole globe have been substantial and indisputable. Life expectancy at birth has increased on average by thirty years since 1820, though unevenly around the world.³⁸ These improvements have to a large extent been the result of a profound decline in infant mortality rates, and they have been reflected in the dramatic increase in global population (more on this below). Health improvements are also indicated by increased physical height of people, which depends on nutritional status and disease burden experienced during childhood and adolescence. People around the world are universally growing taller than they did a century ago, albeit to different degrees. According to one study, South Korean women and Iranian men experienced stunning gains in height of 20.2 cm and 16.5 cm, respectively, while the height of people in some countries in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia changed little.³⁹ The reasons are a combination of improved nutrition, better living standards, governmental public health measures, and improved medical care, all in some way related to increased private or public income.

However, the growth of wealth and its associated transformations caused both increases in average life expectancy and better health as well as health compromising factors. The connection with environmental factors is direct, as the case of air pollution mentioned above indicates. Others are more indirect and long-term. The loss of biodiversity, of pollinators, and of mangroves can reduce the availability of medicinal resources, food, and protection against extreme weather

³⁷ Iris Borowy, “Is Wealth Good for your Health? Some Thoughts on the Fateful Triangle of Health,” *PEAH – Policies for Equitable Access to Health*, March 19, 2019, <http://www.peah.it/2019/03/6507/>.

³⁸ Lamar Crombach, Jeroen Smits, and Christiaan Monden, “Life Expectancy and Length of Life Inequality in the Long Run,” in *How Was Life? Volume II: New Perspectives on Well-being and Global Inequality since 1820* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1787/aa9ad684-en>.

³⁹ NCD Risk Factor Collaboration (NCD-RisC), “A Century of Trends in Adult Human Height,” *eLife* 5 (2016):e13410, <https://doi.org/10.7554/eLife.13410>.

events.⁴⁰ The World Health Organization estimated that approximately one quarter of deaths are attributable to the environment.⁴¹ However, the nature of environmental health hazards has changed with development over time. Various theories have emerged in attempts to conceptualize these shifts.

The Environmental Kuznets Curve drew on a theory published by Simon Kuznets in 1955 that inequality would first increase and then decrease with rising incomes.⁴² In the early 1990s, researchers theorized that environmental health burdens would similarly increase during the early phase of industrialization, as relatively primitive machines polluted air and water during production, and decrease when they were replaced with modern, clean, and efficient technologies. However, his theory was only partially confirmed by empirical data. A World Bank study in the early 1990s suggested that risks at the household level declined as GDP increased, those at the community level increased during the early stages of industrialization but declined with further increases of national income, and those at the global level increased continuously with economic growth.⁴³ Berkeley professor Kirk Smith shaped these findings into an Environmental Risk Transition theory, in which he conceptualized these shifts as a gradual replacement of traditional with modern environmental risk: traditional hazards mainly consisted of infectious and parasitic diseases, often resulting from organic contaminations of water and air and exacerbated by poor nutrition. They declined with economic development through sanitation and public health measures such as vaccination. However, this development process brought new hazards through industrialization and urbanization, which brought water and air pollution, which initially increased but then decreased, as industry matured. Further development brought new risks such as climate change, which, so far, appeared to be continually rising along with growing wealth. In the process, environmental health burdens shifted from local to global, from immediate to delayed, and from threatening health to threatening ecosystems. Countries would experience these stages at different points in time, and they even overlap, burdening societies with traditional as

⁴⁰ WHO, *Nature, Biodiversity and Health: An Overview of Interconnections* (Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe; 2021).

⁴¹ Public Health and Environment, <https://www.who.int/data/gho/data/themes/public-health-and-environment>.

⁴² Simon Kuznets, “Economic Growth and Income Inequality,” *American Economic Review* 45, no. 1 (1955): 1–28.

⁴³ K. S. Smith and Majid Ezzati, “How Environmental Health Risks Change,” *Ann.*

Rev Env Res. 30 (2005): 291–333, 295; see also Iris Borowy, “Global Health and Development: Conceptualizing Health between Economic Growth and Environmental Sustainability,” *History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 68, no. 3 (2013): 451–85.

well as modern environmental health hazards.⁴⁴ Further research has refocused on the Environmental Kuznets Curve, dedicating numerous studies to the question of how it affected various countries or whether it even existed. Results have been inconclusive. Meta studies of hundreds of publications have produced no consensus “on the existence, shape, and turning points of the EKC among researchers. The same geographic region can produce opposing arguments on the existence and shape of the EKC.”⁴⁵

A reverse effect on health of developments of the last century may not only be related to the environment. The other aspects discussed as parts of a good life, e.g. social connections, governance, and self-fulfillment, all interact with health in important ways. If any of them is negatively affected by ongoing developments, it will inevitably have an impact on health, and vice versa. Overall, development appears to have had ambivalent effects on health with different impacts on different times, groups, and places. While data about currently living people indicate unequivocal improvements, long-term effects are far from clear.

Social connections

As all surveys confirm, people around the world universally attach great importance to their social connections: to being with family and friends and experiencing community with those around them. These views obviously reflect a profound need for mental and physical wellbeing, whose full significance is increasingly recognized. A 2022 global survey by Meta/Gallup exploring the state of connections and loneliness in 142 countries showed that seventy-two percent of people globally felt “very connected” or “fairly connected” to others while twenty-four percent of the global population felt “very lonely” or “fairly lonely.” Overall, connection and loneliness tended to be inversely related, though not always. Some people felt lonely despite being connected. Though there were differences between men and women in some countries, globally, data were similar and, overall, young people tended to report higher degrees of loneliness than adults aged sixty-five or

⁴⁴ Kirk R. Smith, “Environmental Hazards during Economic Development: The Risk Transition and Overlap, Assessing and Managing Health Risks from Drinking Water Contamination,” *Approaches and Applications, Proceedings of the Rome Symposium, September 1994, IAHS Pub.*, 223 (1995): 3–13.

⁴⁵ Muhammad Azfar Anwar et al., “Global Perspectives on Environmental Kuznets Curve: A Bibliometric Review,” *Gondwana Research* 103 (2022): 135; Patrícia Hipólito Leal and António Cardoso Marques, “The Evolution of the Environmental Kuznets Curve Hypothesis Assessment: A Literature Review Under a Critical Analysis Perspective,” *Heliyon* 8, no. 11 (2022): e11521.

older. Beyond that, results varied widely between countries: the percentages of people feeling very or fairly connected were highest in Mongolia (ninety-five percent), Kosovo (ninety-three percent), and Taiwan (ninety-two percent) while they were lowest in the Dominican Republic (forty-seven percent), Northern Cyprus (forty-eight percent), and Morocco (forty-nine percent). Similarly, percentages of reported loneliness ranged from low levels in Vietnam (five percent), Ukraine (six percent), and Germany (six percent) to high levels in Afghanistan (fifty percent), the Philippines (fifty-seven percent) and Lesotho, where a shocking fifty-eight percent of people declared feeling very or fairly lonely. Twenty-two of the twenty-nine countries in which at least one-third of the population felt lonely were in Africa, a finding that goes against commonly held views of Africans living in tight-knit communities based on kinship and ethnicity (and was met with disbelief among my African students). Of the other countries, four were in the Middle East and three were in South Asia.⁴⁶ Recent studies among adolescents in countries of Africa, South America, and Asia suggest substantially lower numbers, with self-reported loneliness ranging between 2.2% in Laos and 25.9% in Afghanistan. However, they confirmed the findings of the Meta/Gallup study, in that the relatively highest percentages of lonely people were found in Africa (13.1%) and the Eastern Mediterranean region (14.7%).⁴⁷

Depending on perspective, one may find these data reassuring or alarming. To what extent loneliness has increased or decreased over time is unclear. Research on the history of loneliness or social (dis-)connection is at an early stage and often focused on Western societies, addressing the topic on the basis of somewhat Eurocentric sources such as works of art, literature, medical texts, or diaries.⁴⁸ This approach, while important and necessary, relies on written accounts and likely misses a lot of experienced social isolation and connection which never produced conventional sources. However, recent research has produced valuable insights into factors that influence to what extent people around the world feel connected or isolated and lonely and it is possible to explore changes of those factors over time.

A 2009 review of 109 studies indicates that factors such as migration, unemployment, a worsened financial situation, bad health, and a high level of urban-

⁴⁶ Meta/Gallup, “The Global State of Social Connections,” 2022, <https://www.gallup.com.analytics/509675/state-of-social-connections.aspx#ite-513308>.

⁴⁷ Kenta Igami et al., “Adolescent Loneliness in 70 Countries Across Africa, America, and Asia: A Comparison of Prevalence and Correlates,” *Journal of Adolescent Health* 72, no. 6 (June 2023): 906–913.

⁴⁸ Katie Barchley, Elaine Chalus, and Deborah Simonton, eds., *The Routledge History of Loneliness* (Milton Park: Routledge, 2023).

ization tended to increase the risk of loneliness (though evidence was sometimes inconclusive). But the most important protective factor by far was the rate of daily interactions with family and friends, and such meetings were substantially facilitated by living with or near them.⁴⁹ Another meta study reviewing qualitative studies on experienced loneliness in middle- and low-income countries highlights the roles played by poverty, stigma due to illnesses, and not conforming to social, including sexual, norms, age, and disconnection due migration. Loneliness was also spurred by a lack of respect because of unfulfilled gender norms (mainly infertility for women and inability to reach an expected economic status for men), unhelpful living areas, whereby anonymous, crowded cities were a risk factor, as were rural areas with long distances between houses, and a lack of entertainment options.⁵⁰ On that basis, and very generally speaking, the development of the last century has involved factors that can be either detrimental or conducive to social connections: longer lives, higher mobility, urbanization, societal economic fragmentation, and the decline of traditional organized associations such as religious affiliations may have decreased social connections, while reduced poverty, improved health, decreased (child) mortality rates, more means of long-distance connection, and a decline in rigid social norms may have resulted in an improvement of social connections. Admittedly, in the absence of more targeted research, this is little more than informed guesswork.

Future research might usefully investigate rates of marriage and living arrangements, both within families and within communities, degrees of social organization of communities through religion, volunteer organizations, political groups, choirs, clubs, or any other type of social group, and degrees of inclusion or exclusion of people choosing or having to live on the margins or outside of social norms. A beginning was made in a classic study by Robert Putnam, which describes a decline in membership of numerous civic organizations and an increasing fragmentation of society.⁵¹ Further, living arrangements have been becoming more conducive to loneliness. A study by Keith Snell has documented a “dramatic rise across many countries in single-person households during the twentieth century, notably since the 1960s” which he characterizes as “unprecedented histori-

⁴⁹ Martina Barjakova, Andrea Garnero, and Béatrice d’Hombre, “Risk Factors for Loneliness: A Literature Review.” *Social Science and Medicine* 334 (October 2023): 116163, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2023.116163>.

⁵⁰ Samia C. Akhter-Khan et al., “Experiences of Loneliness in Lower- and Middle-income Countries: A Systematic Review of Qualitative Studies,” *Social Science and Medicine* 340 (2024): 116438.

⁵¹ Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000).

cally.⁵² Until the early twentieth century, single households rarely surpassed five percent of the population, while a century later it could reach more than half of the population in cities in Northern Europe. To some extent, face-to-face contact has been replaced by online communication, as social media has fundamentally changed the forms of social interaction in large parts of the world. Its impact on social wellbeing is ambivalent. Depending on how it is used, it can increase social connection, self-esteem, and mental health, or, on the contrary, increase stress, sadness, and isolation.⁵³ Such studies only show the first few pieces of a very large puzzle.

Good governance

The main components of good governance, as expressed in the sources cited above, are peace, justice, civic engagement, and a low level of corruption.

It does not require a lot of explanation why living in peace is crucial to having a good life, so much so that one wonders why so much of human history has been taken up by warfare. The question of whether the world has become more violent or more peaceful has been the object of much debate, however, it seems clear that the world has become a more violent place in recent years. As the 2024 Global Peace Index has demonstrated, the number of active conflicts has been growing, and conditions preceding major conflicts have been rising since the year 2000 and are more tense now than at any time since World War II. The most peaceful countries were Iceland, Ireland, Austria, and New Zealand, while the most violent were Yemen, Sudan, South Sudan, and Afghanistan, and the gap between the most and last peaceful countries has widened. Deaths from internal conflict had increased by over 475 percent during the preceding seventeen years, turning over 95 million people into external or internal refugees, and in sixteen countries more than five percent of the population had been forcibly displaced. The economic costs of war amounted to a gigantic \$19.1 trillion in 2023, tantamount to 13.5 percent of global GDP or \$2,380 per person. The reasons were partly technological, as non-state groups could easily acquire drones, whose usage in attacks had surged explosively since 2018, and partly geopolitical, as a unipolar world dominated by the United States had given way to a multipolar world in which rising regional powers

52 Keith Snell. "The Rise of Living Alone and Loneliness in History," *Social History* 42, no. 1 (2017): 2, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03071022.2017.1256093>

53 Agnes Zsila and Marc Eric S. Reyes, "The Pros & Cons: Impacts of Social Media on Mental Health," *BMS Psychology* 11, no. 201 (2023), <https://bmcpychology.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s40359-023-01243-x>.

were seeking to assert themselves.⁵⁴ This situation appears to fit a historical pattern theorized by Ian Morris, arguing that warfare increases in periods when a major power or “globocop” loses dominance and lacks the power to impose peace to the benefit of itself and others. However, this does not contradict the finding by Morris and others of a drastic long-term decrease in domestic or international violence, visible from modern documents and ancient skeletons in archaeological sites.⁵⁵

Perhaps the best-known example of the narrative of an increasingly peaceful world has been suggested by Steven Pinker, whose book *Better Angels of our Nature* became a best-seller. Pinker is only one of several authors pointing out that the overall record regarding a drastic decline in the percentage of people dying from interstatal or interpersonal violence seems compelling. But while the data are widely accepted, their interpretation differs. In contrast to Morris, who sees the reason for the decline in the control of dominant powers, Steven Pinker believes in increasing civilization and Azar Gat argues that industrialization made peace too profitable for war to remain an attractive option.⁵⁶ However, historians responding to Pinker’s widely read book have pointed out that violence can take many forms including environmental violence, human trafficking, or cyber violence, which may be less direct but no less consequential than direct warfare. Besides, focusing on the decline in percentages of casualties, while important, disregards that a lower percentage of substantially larger populations translates into more people dying a violent death.⁵⁷ While true, a comprehensive evaluation should take into account that a lower percentage also translates into a larger number of people who lead a life unmarred by violence until they die a peaceful death.

The record looks similar with regard to the state of democracy in countries around the world, based on data by V-Dem and Polity Project and defined as ac-

⁵⁴ Institute for Economics & Peace, *Global Peace Index 2024: Measuring Peace in a Complex World*, June 2024, accessed July 15, 2024, <http://visionofhumanity.org/resources>.

⁵⁵ Ian Morris, *War! What Is It Good For? Conflict and the Progress of Civilization from Primates to Robots* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014).

⁵⁶ Azar Gat, *War in Human Civilization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Steven Pinker, *Better Angels of our Nature* (New York: Viking Press, 2011); Lawrence H. Keeley, *War Before Civilization: The Myth of the Peaceful Savage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); Robert Muchembled, *History of Violence: From the End of the Middle Ages to the Present* (Cambridge: Polity, 2012); Azar Gat, “Is War Declining – and why?” *Journal of Peace Research* 50, no.2 (2012), 149–57; Max Roser, “Data review: ethnographic and archaeological evidence on violent deaths,” 2013, OurWrldInData.org, <https://ourworldindata.org/ethnographic-and-archaeological-evidence-on-violent-deaths>.

⁵⁷ Philip Dwyer and Mark Micale, *The Darker Angels of our Nature* (London: Bloomsbury Academy, 2021).

cess to free and fair elections and other forms of participation in political life, a protection of civil liberties, and a functioning government whose policies benefit the population. As with warfare, a record of recent stagnation or regression contrasts with profound long-term improvements.⁵⁸ The development of corruption, a crucial element of governance, is murky. Analyses by Transparency International suggest a slight deterioration since 2012.⁵⁹ But the idea of “corruption” is culturally constructed and could refer to different actions over time. However, it has a long history depicting some form of an abuse of power, usually with regard to some people gaining an unjustified private benefit at public expense or some other form of transgression of social norms. At any rate, complaints about corruption and efforts to curb it go back at least to Roman times and have remained over time, with no clear linear development being visible.⁶⁰

Self-fulfillment

Central components of this category, generically called “self-fulfillment,” consist of education, disposable time for leisure or hobbies, and the freedom to make life decisions. Overall, the record shifts over time, as successive waves of industrialization in various countries typically began by forcing workers into long hours of grueling work but for later generations increasingly made work easier and working time shorter.⁶¹ Women in many countries (though by far not all) have benefitted from the invention of machines, run by “energy slaves,” such as washing machines, refrigerators, or stoves, which has reduced the time necessary to run a household, enabling them to dedicate their time to activities outside the home.⁶² More time after shortening working hours and in expanding human

58 “Data Page: Democracy index,” in “Democracy,” by Bastian Herre, Lucas Rodés-Guirao and Esteban Ortiz-Ospina, data adapted from Economist Intelligence Unit, Gapminder, 2013, <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/democracy-index-eiu>.

59 Transparency International, *Corruption Perceptions Index 2023* (Berlin: Transparency International, 2024), 8.

60 Ronald Kroese, Andre Vitoria, and G. Geltner, eds., *Anticorruption in History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

61 Peter Stearns, *The Industrial Revolution in World History* (London: Routledge, 5th ed. 2021).

62 Publications in the 1970s and 1980s questioned this reduction in household work, arguing that higher standards for hygiene and food quality caused women to spend as much time doing household chores as before. See for instance: Ruth Schwartz Cowan, *More Work for Mother: The Ironies of Household Technology from the Open Hearth to the Microwave* (New York: Basic Books, 1983). However, more recent scholarship, using time diaries, has refuted these theories. See Jonathan Gershuny and Teresa Attracta Harms, “Housework Now Takes Much Less Time: 85 Years

lives has given people around the world more opportunities to spend time with loved ones and doing activities they enjoy, though undoubtedly to vastly different degrees. The extent to which people in countless societies around the world have experienced changes in leisure time is impossible to address in a short article and, indeed, appears understudied within leisure studies.⁶³

Education, though still far from perfect, has also expanded dramatically in recent decades. As a case in point, the 2018 World Development Report noted: “In 1970 the gross enrollment rate in primary education was 68 percent in Sub-Saharan Africa and 47 percent in South Asia. By 2010, that rate was above 100 percent in both regions.”⁶⁴ This means that not only were all children attending classes of their age group but also people of older age were enrolled, so that the educational systems were fulfilling contemporary needs while repairing past deficiencies. One needs to consider that this form of learning and knowledge is a recent development: for most of human history, the vast majority of people learned without formal schooling and lived without reading or writing, a competence they did not need for their work and, one may suspect, often did not miss. Nevertheless, education that opens doors to qualified work, forms the precondition to higher learning, and provides the ability to access knowledge objectively broadens opportunities in life. Literacy, in particular, opens a whole new dimension of opportunities and, thereby, can be interpreted as a way of expanding freedom, also understood to be a core value of a good life.

Statements regarding freedom are obviously problematic. The expression has been used and abused extensively to camouflage other political agendas, and interpretations of what constitutes “freedom” are mostly socially constructed and differ over time and between different cultures. Nevertheless, objective and subjective differences between degrees of freedom and unfreedom have existed for millennia, along with near constant efforts by the unfree to gain more freedom, as demonstrated in the history of slavery, the most extreme form of non-freedom.⁶⁵ Struggles for freedom, in whatever form it is understood, have a long history that overlaps with but is not identical to efforts towards democracy.⁶⁶ A West-

of US Rural Women’s Time Use,” *Social Forces* 95, no. 2 (2016): 503–24, <https://doi.org/10.1093/sf/sow073>.

⁶³ Anthony Veal, “Is There Enough Leisure Time? Leisure Studies, Work-life Balance, The Realm of Necessity and the Realm of Freedom,” *World Leisure Journal* 62, no. 2 (2019): 89–113, <https://doi.org/10.1080/16078055.2019.1667423>.

⁶⁴ World Bank, *World Development Report 2018: Learning* (Washington: World Bank, 2018), 58.

⁶⁵ Damian A. Pargas and Julianne Schiel, eds., *The Palgrave Handbook of Global Slavery Throughout History* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2023).

⁶⁶ Annelien de Dijn, *Freedom. An Unruly History* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2020).

ern approach has been taken by Freedom House, a US based non-profit association, which began assessing the freedom of the countries in the world in the 1950s and has been publishing reports since the 1970s. As its methodology has become increasingly sophisticated, it now awards points for ten political rights and fifteen civil liberties indicators including, among others, political pluralism and participation, freedom of expression and belief, rule of law and personal autonomy and individual rights. It identifies an overall deterioration of freedom since 2001.⁶⁷ Meanwhile, Polity Project, which categorizes countries into “democracies,” “anocracies,” and “autocracies,” depicts an overall positive trend between 1800 and 2017: a world largely governed by autocracies and anocracies until around 1950, a rise of autocracies until 1970, followed by a sharp fall while democracies gained ground slowly since 1950 and rapidly after 1989, followed by stagnation after 2005.⁶⁸ With all caution that such a brief snapshot requires, available data suggests a picture of long-term improvement and recent deterioration.

Assessing developments over time

Overall, and painting with an admittedly extremely broad brush, one may cautiously suggest a mixed picture of recent development: while material wellbeing and health appear to have distinctly improved, the environment appears deteriorated and alarmingly threatened, and governance suggests a trajectory of long-term improvement paired with short-term setbacks while the record of social connection and self-fulfillment appears unclear. The problem with this evaluation is not only its inevitably superficial character within the context of a chapter length text but also the degree to which these elements may be intertwined: improvements at some points may have been tied to deteriorations at other times or places. Hence, positive or negative assessments of development may to some degree be coincidental, depending on what times and places historians investigate and from which vantage points. The challenge for historians of development, therefore, is how to assess developments whose qualities are inherently mixed, with beneficial sides connected to unleashing harmful consequences, and both possibly separated in time and space.

⁶⁷ Yana Gorokhovskia and Cathryn Grothe, *The Mounting Damage of Flawed Elections and Armed Conflict*, undated, accessed December 2, 2024, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2024/mounting-damage-flawed-elections-and-armed-conflict>.

⁶⁸ The Center for Systemic Peace, “About Polity,” undated, <https://www.systemicpeace.org/polityproject.html>.

A few recent publications have addressed such paradoxes. As already mentioned, Ian Morris has argued on the basis of the study of long-term developments that warfare has been brutal and destructive, killing millions of people, but has also, paradoxically, been the force that has kept bringing to power administrations that could (and did) enforce norms and regulations that, in turn, both forced and enabled people and communities to live together without resorting to violence. War, in other words, “has produced bigger societies, ruled by stronger governments, which have imposed peace and have created the preconditions for prosperity.”⁶⁹ War, in other words, has been necessary to create peace. It is difficult to think of a more extreme example of human actions having contradictory outcomes. If this analysis is accurate, it would mean that people living during periods of active warfare would suffer the negative results of war while those living during subsequent periods of prosperous peace would enjoy its benefits, so that the less fortunate earlier generations pay the price for the wellbeing of those born in happier eras. A similar connection has been suggested by Johan Mackenbach when writing about European health. Analyzing long-term trends of numerous health burdens, ranging from smallpox to warfare and AIDS, Mackenbach has conceptualized the health-development nexus as a dynamic system of constant co-evolution and adaptation, tying people in Europe to an everlasting up and down of illness:

As a result of the drive for socioeconomic improvement, and the changes in behaviour associated with this drive, mankind is continuously confronted with new disease risks. However, because higher levels of development also bring higher living standards and a greater desire and capacity to control disease, after some time these disease risks decline again (but often to be replaced by new disease risks).⁷⁰

Again, this would mean that people in periods of rising illness development would be paying the price for later generations’ ability to cope with a given health challenge by learning how to deal with and adapt to it. A comprehensive assessment of these health developments, therefore, would be determined by the degree to which the long-term positive results of these development-health waves outweigh the short-term negative ones.

Elsewhere, I have made a similar argument with regard to industrialization, economic growth and health: the long lives and good health enjoyed by large parts of the global population have in large parts been the result of more wealth. While more material wealth alone does not guarantee better health, it does provide the

⁶⁹ Morris, *War*, 9.

⁷⁰ Mackenbach, *History of Population Health*, 51.

preconditions for higher living standards, active public health policies, and improved medical treatment, all of which are positive for health in the long run. However, for poor societies to become affluent, they need to go through a period of economic expansion, whose social disruptions typically depress health outcomes. This creates the paradoxical finding that, while rich societies tend to have healthier populations than poor societies, the process of economic growth (i.e. the transition period between states of poverty and of relative wealth) is detrimental to population health. The price for the good health of people living today has been paid by earlier generations suffering the living conditions and stresses of early industrialization.⁷¹

Such connections apply not only to the past but also to the future. If existing scenarios about climate change and its effects on health become true, future generations may similarly pay a price for today's health. Public health experts have warned that even if global mean temperature rises by just under two degrees Celsius, which is below the projected outcome in the absence of dramatic policy changes, annual heat-related deaths will increase by 370%, heat-related labour losses will increase by 50 percent, more than 525 million additional people will experience food insecurity, and life-threatening infectious diseases will increase substantially by mid-century.⁷² Another scenario looks at the number of people who will find themselves outside of the "human climate niche," the climatic regions in which humans have historically lived. In a pessimistic outlook, it indicates that 600 million people, equaling nine percent of people living today, are already living outside of that niche, and if global temperatures rise 2.7 degrees Celsius, this could increase to between twenty-two and thirty-nine percent of the global population. Possible effects include "increased mortality, decreased labour productivity, decreased cognitive performance, impaired learning, adverse pregnancy outcomes, decreased crop yield potential, increased conflict, hate speech, migration

⁷¹ For a detailed discussion of these factors, see Iris Borowy and Bernard Harris. "Introduction," in *Health and Development. Vol 2 of Yearbook for the History of Global Development*, ed. Iris Borowy and Bernard Harris (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2023), 1–30, <https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1515/978311015583-001/html>; Iris Borowy, "Economic Growth and Health: Evidence, Uncertainties and Connections over Time and Place," in Iris Borowy and Matthias Schmelzer, eds., *History of the Future of Economic Growth. Historical Roots of Current Debates on Sustainable Degrowth* (Milton Park: Routledge 2017), 129–153.

⁷² Marina Romanello et al., "The 2023 Report of the *Lancet* Countdown on Health and Climate Change: the Imperative for a Health-Centred Response in a World Facing Irreversible Harms," *The Lancet* 402, no. 10419 (2023): 2346–94, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(23\)01859-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(23)01859-7).

and infectious diseases.”⁷³ This does not include unpredictable factors such as sea level rises and tipping points.

Other forecasts are more optimistic. The Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation, which regularly estimates the Global Burden of Disease, foresees a continued increase of life expectancy by 4.6 years between 2022 and 2050 even when factoring in rising temperatures, based on projections of declining deaths from cardiovascular diseases, respiratory infections and tuberculosis, and maternal and neonatal deaths. They also forecast that improvements will be largest in low-income countries, continuing a trend of recent years that reflected changes in income, fertility, and education, so that health inequalities between countries will shrink.⁷⁴ Public health experts have also pointed to a fifteen percent decrease in deaths due to fossil-fuel-derived air pollution in recent years and a dramatic increase in investment in renewable energy. Such changes raise hope for other developments such as the replacement of fossil and biomass fuels with clean fuels, the adoption of diets low in red meat and dairy products, and urban changes that promote non-motorized mobility. Collectively, such changes could prevent millions of deaths while creating local jobs and generating income.⁷⁵

Evaluations of the global development of the last decades and even centuries will depend overwhelmingly on the extent to which the future will resemble one or the other of those scenarios. A disastrous outcome will make recent improvements in health and overall living standards appear like a brief period of positive changes for a relatively small group of people who splashed out extravagantly on resources to the detriment of the large majority of people living before and after them. If, on the contrary, the future will turn out to be more benign than anticipated, the last century may appear as a spectacularly successful period, which laid the groundwork for long-term improvements of people’s wellbeing with only temporary setbacks, a regrettable price paid by some people for the benefit of the subsequent majority. Present-day evaluations largely depend on assumed future developments.

However, even a positive outcome for humankind may look differently within its planetary context of other living beings. The reduction of (child) mortality rates and increases in life expectancy—certainly positive outcomes for parents who do not have to watch their children die before their eyes—have resulted in a dramat-

⁷³ Timothy M. Lenton et al., “Quantifying the Human Cost of Global Warming,” *Nature Sustainability* 6 (2023): 1237–47, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41893-023-01132-6>.

⁷⁴ Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME), *Global Burden of Disease 2021: Findings from the GBD 2021 Study* (Seattle, WA: IHME, 2024), https://www.healthdata.org/sites/default/files/2024-05/GBD_2021_Booklet_FINAL_2024.05.16.pdf.

⁷⁵ Romanello et al., “Lancet Countdown,” 2346–94.

ic increase in global population. Even for historians it is easy to overlook to what extent the ongoing demographic transition forms an exception in the long-term history of human population. For the large majority of human history, until about 10,000 to 5,000 BC, humans probably numbered no more than five million people, reaching about 200 million by the year 1 AD and one billion around 1800. Global population only began a period of explosive expansion in the twentieth century, reaching two billion in 1930, three billion in 1960, four billion in 1974, and five billion in 1987. People numbered just over eight billion at the time of writing in 2024, a more than four-fold increase in one century.⁷⁶ A continued expansion of that dimension would let the world population explode to almost 38 billion people in 2124, which obviously cannot and will not happen. Present projections expect a maximum world population of about 10 billion people around 2050. In other words, the last century has been a demographic anomaly, unlike anything either before or afterwards.

One tangible result of this population growth, coupled with economic growth, has been that humans have largely crowded out other beings not considered directly useful, with large numbers of plants and animals having died out. Concern about accelerating extinction rates has given rise to the idea that the world is going through the sixth mass extinction episode, similar in extent to five previous mass extinction events but entirely caused by humans. The thesis is controversial, hampered by the lack of firm knowledge on either the totality of existing species, the long-term background extinction rate, or the number of species extinctions in more recent times. There is no doubt that humans have had a major impact on accelerated extinctions ever since migrating out of Africa and being instrumental in megafauna extinctions in several continents. The present may well be another episode of human-induced mass extinction as more and wealthier people pollute and destroy habitats.⁷⁷ An evaluation of these developments depends not only on how they will play out in the future but also on the extent to which one considers development a human activity, to be judged according to the effects it has on human lives, or whether one sees humans as merely one species among others, whose wellbeing should not be more important than that of others.

The assessment of developments in other dimensions is similarly difficult to foresee, potentially subject to contradictory influences. Warfare may increase as

⁷⁶ Worldometer, <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/>.

⁷⁷ Robert H. Cowie, Philippe Bouchet, and Benoit Fontaine, “The Sixth Mass Extinction: Fact, Fiction or Speculation?”, *Biological Reviews* 97, no. 2 (April 2022): 640–63; for difficulties of precise knowledge see also Fred Pearce, “Global Extinction Rates: Why Do Estimates Vary So Wildly?”, *Yale Environment* 360, August 17, 2015, https://e360.yale.edu/features/global_extinction_rates_why_do_estimates_vary_so_wildly.

societies fight about access to dwindling resources, or it may decrease as aging societies become more peaceful with less appetite for violent conflict and fewer soldiers to fight each other. People may become lonelier, more isolated in ever-growing megacities, or more connected as increasing economic means and improving health lead to more contact. Besides, system breaking events such as pandemics (facilitated by increased encroachment on regions with zoonosis carrying animals, population density, and high professional and private mobility) or climate change tipping points may completely upset all forecasts, creating apocalyptic conditions.

Conclusions

In 2021, historian Peter Stearns wondered:

Given all its changes and problems, and all the shifts that have occurred in the ways people evaluate their lives, has the industrial revolution, on balance, been a good thing, or should we focus less on celebrating its undeniable new technological mastery and more on trying to undo or remedy some of its key effects?⁷⁸

It is an open question and one that only future generations will be able to answer. During the last two centuries, the positive and negative developments have been intertwined, intimately connected through industrialization, based on an explosive increase in cheap energy. It allowed an increase of private incomes and public funding which, in the long run, helped improve public health as well as social conditions. It also put unprecedented pressure on the environmental systems on which human lives depend. Which of these strands of development, the positive or the negative, will become the defining element of this phase of human history will depend on the future decades. In this way, world development seems at a crossroads: many people have experienced a spectacular improvement of well-being in terms of material comfort, health, and governance, which may be jeopardized by environmental destruction and conflict.

Pointing this out is merely one reflection of the fact that evaluations depend very much on the time they are made. An assessment made in 1945 would inevitably have resulted in a negative view on global governance and warfare, highlighting wartime destruction and the risk of devastating nuclear war. An assessment of 1975 might have highlighted the uneven distribution of global wealth that divided the countries of the world into two distinct groups of material well-

⁷⁸ Peter N. Stearns, *The Industrial Revolution in World History* (New York: Routledge, 5th ed. 2021), 17.

being, while one done in 2010 might already have considered the fragility of benefits in the face of evolving climate change and global financial crisis. At any of these points, past suffering might have been conceptualized as challenges on the way to ongoing improvements. However, the verdict would obviously have been different if the Cold War had really erupted into nuclear war, and it may still change drastically for the worse if unmitigated climate change does disrupt life as we know it around the world, particularly in countries situated in warm latitudes, with as yet unknown political consequences.

There is certainly reason to be concerned. Mackenbach warns that “it is uncertain whether our current levels of population health can be sustained. To a large extent, they have been mortgaged on the health of future generations, by ruthlessly exploiting and – if we do not stop this very soon – destroying our habitat.”⁷⁹ However, even if upcoming decades will see a turn for the worse, a verdict on global development would not necessarily be clear. Approximately six percent of all people who have ever lived on planet Earth are living today. Without wanting to belittle existing miseries of poverty, warfare, and repression, the vast majority live longer, healthier, and more comfortable lives than generations ever before. If living conditions deteriorate for half the global population in the future, this might still leave enough people with sufficiently good lives to think of a positive development in a long-term perspective. Besides, it is not certain that people living in the future will have similar understandings on what constitutes a good life as people living today. After all, people in the past are known to have held views on questions like justice, equality, slavery, or violence that differed radically from those widely accepted today.⁸⁰

But as long as people living today hold the views they do, it makes good sense to try to leave a world that allows lives conforming to those views for the generations to come: lives with comfortable living conditions, good health, a healthy environment, peace, and the possibility to learn, determine, and enjoy one’s own life.

⁷⁹ Mackenbach, *History of Population Health*, 339.

⁸⁰ See e.g. Ian Morris, *Foragers, Farmers, and Fossil Fuels: How Human Values Evolve* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

Paul Warde

“Fallacies of misplaced concreteness”? History in post-war environmental arguments

This chapter sits in a volume inviting integrated histories of development, stories that do not simply repeat master narratives of improvement or destruction. Perhaps these integrated histories would be capable of provoking conflicting or uncertain feelings, or summoning a simultaneous sense of gratitude and sorrow for what has passed. Of course, historical writing is generally done with hindsight, and much of it with irony. It would be surprising if all histories were not to some degree ambiguous, but this does not necessarily mean that such moments affect the overall tenor of the narrative: optimistic or pessimistic. A lack of ambiguity in the narrative is perhaps often all the more evident when the narrative is extended over time, and hindsight shifts from a foreshortened preoccupation with the very recent to describing a long arc of change, sometimes with a quantitative underpinning: loss of species, rises in longevity, and the like. In histories preoccupied with short-term phenomena, it is perhaps easier to maintain a vivid sense of personal gains and losses, of relief and regret. Seen over the very long-term, it is harder not to view any personal experience, or even localized collective experience, as somehow aberrant relative to the overall trend. Integration, or the lack of it, is partly an issue of scale. Thus it is probably the case—although this is only advanced as a hypothesis—that the longer the sweep of history dealt with, the less integrated particular divergent narratives appear, and alternative narratives may be barely visible at all, or exist to be refuted. Such “histories” are probably also more likely to be written by people who are not professional historians.

Challenges to integration also exist in the temporal categories employed. In environmental history, two very frequently evoked (at the time of writing) temporal poles are the idea of the “modern” and the “indigenous.” The first is imagined to be universal or at least universalizing, and while obviously a category that has transmogrified over time since becoming widespread in the eighteenth century, it is often linked with a kind of inevitability and unidirectional change (or alternatively, hubristic arrogance). Whilst temporal, its qualities are peculiarly timeless, and even critiques of the idea of the “modern” tend to concede its ubiquity. In contrast, the indigenous is imagined as ultimately local, as repetitively vulnerable, as vanishingly authentic. Of course, both concepts have great political salience, but arguably in a truly integrated history, both concepts would also struggle to be descriptive of anything.

How would the great majority of the world's population classify themselves in regard to "modernity and "indigeneity"? Of course, this author cannot know. Yet the discomfort I would certainly feel in pigeon-holing most people according to such ideas indicates both that they are the manifestations of political projects more than solid descriptions and also that most people's sense of themselves is actually more integrated than the grand narratives academics tell about them. Yet an integrated sensibility, and even having a sense of inner contradiction or irony about one's complex self, is not the same as being able to narrate that story. Many personal stories still end up being on a distinct, final trajectory: self-improvement, escape from poverty or ignorance, redemption, fall from grace, victim of injustice.

This project started with two opposed but also intertwined narratives: one of improvement, the escape from a benighted and more suffering past; the other one of declension, of ever-expanding degradation. It is not unreasonable to associate the first with the standard approach and research questions of economic history, and the second with environmental history. Sometimes the values being expressed are more implicit than explicit in practice, but they would come as no surprise to their practitioners. The dominant question in recent economic history, for example, is What produces economic growth? especially when economic history is considered in the long term. This question does not necessarily imply that economic growth is a good thing, but most practitioners and readers would assume that this is both intended and justifies the question being asked. In its more reductionist forms that, idea of "growth" or "development" itself is assessed through a single metric, such as per capita GDP. Environmental history, in contrast, has self-consciously purveyed tales of destruction since its inception as a discipline in the 1970s, and even some moves away from that blueprint have framed themselves as a means of fostering hope, of reversals to the general trends, rather than being ambiguous *per se*.

These trends in economic and environmental history, and occasional attempts to reconcile them, fit neatly with arguably one of the main policy instruments of the second half of the twentieth century: "cost-benefit analysis." This presents us with an explicit acknowledgement of *trade-offs* but in essence aims to draw all factors into a common standard of judgement or even measurement, focused on determining if there is a net benefit or disbenefit to a particular policy. Indeed, the "opposite" view can even be integrated into the narrative. It is precisely challenges, environmental or otherwise, that lead in some accounts to the innovation that culminates in growth; or alternatively, it is precisely the apparent success of growth that reaps its hubristic harvest in the form of environmental destruction, most evident in climate change. To argue that the method would not actually give or cannot give a clear-cut result is essentially to give up on the method.

At one level there appears to be integration in cost-benefit approaches. At another, there is a basic incapacity to accept that we are just dealing with different values and valuing different things. One cannot really expect everyone to agree that it is possible to trade-off things on a universally agreed scale of values any more than one can imagine that a remote tribe could be simultaneously indigenous and more modern than New York City. Thus debates between opposing views, where integration is implicitly aspired to and conducted as if a measure of cost-benefit could be achieved, can often become little more than accusations of denialism, most obviously in regard to the "denial" of the seriousness of causes of climate change, but one might see a kind of mirror in "denying" evidence that people really are better off, or really want the things that they buy, or are happier now than in the past.

None of this is, perhaps, very surprising. A large amount of the writing of history is geared to particular purposes. At its most simplistic, we might claim that the meta-question of much economic history is "When did we get it right?", while the meta-question of much environmental history is "When did it start to go wrong?" Fortunately, a very large amount of everyday discourse—even in academia—is accommodating and non-confrontational. People are not frequently confronted with the question of whether things in general are getting better or worse, and are not required to give a clear-cut answer, or be consistent in their judgements (although some people *do* almost constantly struggle with such issues). This is one way of attempting integration.

Why do people write about history? An empirical approach

History is above all an empirical discipline. The above section is speculative rather than empirical. It lays the ground, however, for asking the question of to what purposes history and historical thinking were being put by people in the past. The argument is simple. Histories were not ambiguous, and not very "integrated," because people did not have ambiguous purposes when they wrote them. And perhaps they rarely do—at least when they are writing books that seek large audiences. Discovering the purposes they did have may help us understand why certain kinds of narratives prevail, and how likely they are to persist.

My focus will be on what we might call "modern environmental thought," that is, a selection of environmental writers from the late 1940s, when "the environment" emerged as a category of thinking and began to become a subject of argument and public policy. Of course, people had long worried about what we might

now consider specific elements of the environment, such as wood supplies, soils, drought, and indeed climate change, yet it was only at this moment that they became drawn in and integrated under the umbrella of a unifying concept.¹ The aim of this chapter is not to provide an exhaustive survey of this literature, which is probably not in any case possible, but to examine works with a degree of typicality. The claim of typicality can only really rest on the fact that these authors very frequently cited each other, were generally recognized as being prominent and influential representatives of particular ways of thinking, and used particular forms of communication that at some point led to them publishing books and articles. The manifestation of their purposes, then, is partly related to the genre in which they are writing just as History is a particular genre of writing, and authors might behave differently in different contexts. It is important to also look at people who considered themselves participants in environmental debates, but as “opponents” of environmentalism—without implying that environmentalists or their critics necessarily presented common and agreed fronts against each other.

If readers think other authors should be incorporated or might better represent their sense of what was then current, I would only be too happy to add them. None of these people were professional historians. Yet nearly all of them drew on History, and arguably set the terms for debates in environmental history more than did any historians themselves. I have avoided, however, authors that were very clearly political in their purposes—someone like Green Party politician Petra Kelly for example—because the point that history is employed to particular ends and purposes is redundant in such obviously political cases.² This point is more tellingly made in regard to those who tend to present their work as “objective” or even pertaining to a mode of scientific discourse. Nor are the purposes I am referring to generally as simple as “encouraging environmentalism” or the aim of “refuting environmentalists,” once the idea of a broader social movement became established in the post-war decades. Rather, what I attempt to set out is how allegiances to environmentalism were generally connected to and articulated other sets of values that would make their “integration” with opposing values very difficult. Indeed, to concede too much ambiguity might well undermine their very reason for writing. Put another way, the supply of integrated histories was small (in this literature at least) because the demand for such integration among the authors and their imagined readers was low, and might even be seen as undesirable.

¹ See Paul Warde, Libby Robin, and Sverker Sörlin, *The Environment, A History of the Idea* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 2018).

² Petra Kelly, *Fighting for Hope* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1984).

Of course, one could argue that selecting a set of authors because they have strong purposes and firm principles and then finding that such purposes are important to their writing does not prove that writing in general has these characteristics. That would, of course, be a circular argument. The empirical but unquantified hypothesis is that these authors nevertheless really did set the parameters of the argument, and perhaps precisely because their purposes were strongly manifest. However, the aim of writing an intellectual history of writers who did not articulate strongly held views would be an important, if challenging, one.

This did not necessarily mean the works addressed here are always obviously polemical (although some works were). They might even appear quite paradoxical. Hermann Daly, an economist who rose to prominence in the late 1960s and early 1970s and who now is considered a founding father of ecological economics, based his arguments on first principles regarding the laws of thermodynamics, and especially entropy—that energy transformations degrade that energy irreversibly towards lower quality, meaning no economy could be sustained in the long run that was dependent on non-renewable stocks of higher-quality energy (like fossil fuels) or scarce materials. Yet despite advocating for some planning in the allocation of resources, Daly did not derive a technocratic ethos from this viewpoint. Indeed, he inveighed against the “idolatory of science” and was critical of reductionism (including the much-debated *The Limits to Growth* report produced by a team of computing experts at MIT in 1972).³ For Daly, the world of scarcity with which entropy confronted people might even foster the necessary virtues of community (shades here of Malthus’ argument that the power of population presented people with a choice between vice and virtue).⁴ It was in the end the ethos of holism, and more spiritual ideas—he cited the Christian author C.S. Lewis, famous for his Narnia books—that provided guidance for the life made necessary by entropy. To think that society could be governed according to matters of fact, or managerial principles, was “the fallacy of misplaced concreteness,” defined as the vice of “applying to one level of abstraction conclusions arrived at from thinking on a different level of abstraction.”⁵

For Daly, physical laws pointed to the necessity of choosing the correct values, even though values are themselves voluntary. Values involve embracing the best of human capabilities, and not focusing on one narrow set of problems. Yet values

³ Donella H. Meadows et al., *The Limits to Growth* (Washington DC: Potomac Associates, 1972).

⁴ Thomas R. Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (London: J. Johnson, 1798), and subsequent editions.

⁵ Hermann Daly, “The Steady-State Economy: What, Why and How,” in *The Sustainable Society*, ed. Denis Clark Pirages (New York: Prager, 1977), 107–30, esp. 113–14.

differ between people, and hence stories about both the history and the future became battlegrounds used to demonstrate the values one should choose.

The uses of History: finding the general in the particular

The use of History as a stage in which general propositions play out can be demonstrated through two very different authors. One is the rangeland scientist, farmer, and author Aldo Leopold, who worked in various aspects of land and wildlife management in the American West in the interwar period, and whose most famous work, *A Sand County Almanac*, was published posthumously after his death fighting a wildfire in 1948. The other is Herman Kahn, post-war futurologist and advocate of game theory, best known for shaping ideas of nuclear deterrence and who became a strong opponent of environmentalist thought in the years before his death in 1983.

For Aldo Leopold, history was above all a place where ecological rules played out: where people made choices amid “the struggle for existence.” Violence and war were a function of population density, in essence a form of competition over resources, and thus increasingly likely as populations grew, because “All gains from density are subject to the law of diminishing returns.” Cultural diversity, which improves the prospects for survival in evolutionary terms, was itself a product of ecological diversity. This was Leopold’s modern update of Thoreau’s view that wilderness provided the raw material for civilization, and meant that the homogenizing forces of modernity were understood as loss, and the hobbies (a term Leopold viewed positively) of hunting and fishing substitutes for genuine survival skills. Still, these were better than nothing, otherwise “It is better to stay home.” Conservation should be based on what Leopold famously called the “Land ethic... a kind of community instinct in the making” that rested on ecological understanding. History for Leopold, then, was therefore illustrative rather than a source of disruptive knowledge. It was where the laws of evolution played out, and rather like Daly but on a different basis demonstrated an imperative to a particular ethos for survival.⁶

Like some other American writers, Leopold also used western Europe and Japan as counterpoints to what he saw as a particular disregard for the land in

⁶ Aldo Leopold, “The Land Ethic,” in *A Sand County Almanac* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966 [1949]), 237–64, especially 239, 257–58; and “Wilderness,” *Sand County Almanac*, 264–79, especially 264, 267, and 279.

the United States. With their much longer and seemingly more continuous histories of ecological change (seen from the 1940s), they were presented as examples of "radical conversion without disorganization" into new more stable and agreeable forms of landscape.⁷

In 1977, on the occasion of the two hundredth anniversary of the American Revolution, Herman Kahn (and co-authors) in contrast presented a celebration of what he saw as the virtues of this New World that had brought progress to humankind, largely through technology. Yet this story of machine-led wonder was above all a history of moods. "...most people have been willing to accept such risks as one of the many costs of progress," opined Kahn in arguing against any strict regulation of new technologies and products. Any attempt to limit technological progress was "catastrophe-prone" resulting in social disorder. Writing in opposition to economists like Daly but above all *The Limits to Growth*, he reduced their argument to their alleged "true feelings" that they didn't care about others becoming richer. Doomsday prophets betrayed "a failure of nerve," although Kahn conceded that one might share some anxieties about the impact of new technology.⁸

Kahn's account of the causes of technological growth being driven and facilitated by positive emotions was no more based on historical evidence than Leopold's musings on the ecological foundations of History—it was more notably lacking perhaps, given Leopold was writing short essays on ethics and Kahn was providing an account explicitly celebrating two centuries of American achievement. History was a stage on which the virtues of optimism are displayed, and the evidence that optimism led to new and valuable technology was the existence of new technology. "In other words", as the authors wrote, "we are optimistic".⁹

This circular reasoning did not just apply to human history. In an extraordinary passage at the end of a chapter on long-term environmental risks, Kahn argued that the very existence of nature proved that one did not have to worry about it: "both the environment and most ecological systems must be tough and largely self-correcting or self-healing; otherwise neither would have survived to date."¹⁰ Of course, the characteristics of the environment or the ecological systems are not specified, so the nature of "self-correction" cannot be determined from this statement, but the crucial point from history is that time itself is irrelevant. Everything balances in the end – just as, paradoxically, it is apparently the case

⁷ Leopold, "Land Ethic," 256.

⁸ Herman Kahn, William Brown, and Leon Martel, *The Next 200 Years. A Scenario for America and the World* (New York: William Morrow, 1976), 164–66.

⁹ Kahn et al., *The Next 200 Years*, 166.

¹⁰ Kahn et al., *The Next 200 Years*, 180.

that human society must be kept in constant motion through optimism to avoid catastrophe.

Despite the fact that Kahn's *The Next 200 Years* put considerable energy into debunking the use of statistical evidence by those he saw as environmentalist doomsayers, it would be a mistake to see historical evidence and quantifiable data as of essence to his arguments. This was equally true of another great skeptic of Malthusian arguments, and Kahn's eventual collaborator, the economist Julian Simon.¹¹ They edited the collection *The Resourceful Earth* as a riposte to the Carter administration's *Global 2000* report which had set out an assessment of future environmental risks.¹² *The Resourceful Earth* was also an extended companion to Simon's *The Ultimate Resource* of 1981 that took aim at all sorts of environmental thinking. In the introduction, Kahn and Simon cited the director of *Global 2000*, Gerald Barnet, who worried about "a hidden layer of decision makers – computer programmers and modelers," whose assumptions now, "have a profound influence on the range of policy options considered by senior government officials" but "are not well documented... not understood... and are not available for peer review and comment." Yet the antidote to dangerous assumptions and poor evidence was not to ground policy on better evidence but simply to have different assumptions: "We know of no body of scientific evidence assessing the effects of ill-founded pessimistic forecasts about resources and the environment upon public morale, innovation, and economic progress. We are agreed, however, that we adjudge the effects, past and future, to be severe and costly."¹³

This is not to say that History was of no importance. Rather, the best readers of History were those who already knew how things really worked.

The rest of the chapter will examine further instances of putting History to particular purposes in environmental debates. This discussion is roughly chronological, running from the 1940s into the 1970s, but the particular ideas expressed should not be thought of as belonging only to particular periods; rather, they received particular emphasis at certain points. The discussion also runs through a literature that at first was more preoccupied with applying evolutionary theory and Malthusian ideas, and later tended to draw on history less for grand generalizations about historical change than as a source of edifying case studies and expressions of particular values. Again, this does not aim to create a typology but to

¹¹ Simon's biography and approach is covered in Paul Sabin's *The Bet. Paul Ehrlich, Julian Simon and Our Gamble over Earth's Future* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).

¹² Gerald Barnet, ed., *The Global 2000 Report. Entering the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Penguin, 1982).

¹³ Julian L. Simon and Herman Kahn, eds., *The Resourceful Earth. A Response to Global 2000* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984), 30.

be indicative of certain approaches and styles. The chapter ends by asking: if history written by non-historians appears like this, how is history written by avowed historians actually different?

People as populations: stage theories and evolutionary thinking

Making assessments of “Man’s role in changing the face of the Earth,” as the title of an influential conference held in Princeton in June 1955 put it, was nevertheless an essential guide to likely futures, and the piling up of historical cases an important strategy in making the case about environmental dangers from the late 1940s.¹⁴ One of the earliest works preoccupied with general environmental decline, Fairfield Osborn’s *Our Plundered Planet* of 1948, can stand as a case in point—not least because Osborn made extensive use of information provided by influential contemporaries such as William Vogt (who published the contemporaneous *Road to Survival* advancing a distinctly Malthusian take on the world), leading ornithologist and curator Robert Cushman Murphy, and soil scientist and USDA official Walter C. Lowdermilk.¹⁵

As with the new environmental literature more generally, *Our Plundered Planet* was about the future, and dedicated, “To all who care about tomorrow.” Yet the evidence for humanity’s potential fate could be read from history, detailed in the second part of the book entitled simply, “The Plunderer”:

Man’s misuse of the land is very old, going back thousands of years even to the earliest periods of human history. It can be read in the despairing chronicle of ruins buried in sand, of rivers running in channels high above their surrounding landscapes, of ever-spreading deltas, of fallen terraces which once held productive fields or rich gardens.¹⁶

As Osborn was well aware, this kind of argument had already been made influentially in 1864 by George Perkins Marsh, once Senator for Vermont and later US ambassador to the Ottoman Empire and then Italy, and drew on a tradition of explaining the fall of Rome extending at least as far back as Gibbon in the

¹⁴ William L. Thomas, ed., *Man’s Role in Changing the Face of the Earth* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956).

¹⁵ Fairfield Osborn, *Our Plundered Planet* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1948), 204.

¹⁶ Osborn, *Plundered Planet*, v, 87, 89–90.

eighteenth century.¹⁷ As with many earlier authors, the modern state of Greece and other lands around the Mediterranean were a warning of the possibility of collapse of the highest of civilizations, an event attributed again in an enduring tradition to the depredations of nomadic invaders, at one point called “The Arab problem.”¹⁸

Africa, in contrast, was imagined by Osborn as a place virtuously without history, where traditional land uses, “illustrate the ability of human beings to live on the land in what may be thought of as practically natural conditions,” but the enforcement of marketization through taxation by European colonizers in the cause of “higher civilization” [placed by Osborn in inverted commas] meant that, “natives are tempted... to mine the land for the cash that it will produce.”¹⁹ Osborn’s argument was that humans were inescapably part of the natural world, and historical destinies could not evade this fact. Yet humans acting as historical agents of change had consequently become “plunderers” for millennia; this was not a recent condition. Yet in certain circumstances, a balance was possible. Here again Europe and Japan come to the fore for an American author where, “peoples early became intelligent tillers of the soil, and were not nomadic but lived for generations in one place. They loved their land and learned to return to it much of the substance they drew from it.” Danger reared its head once people became too mobile, whether as nomads or colonisers—an argument often repeated already by American writers across the nineteenth century, and that would continue to be advanced throughout the twentieth, a variant for an example found a little later in the assertion of Paul Ehrlich and Dennis Pirages that, “American attitudes toward resources and the environment have their roots in the enormous abundance of the frontier.”²⁰

Other writings of this time were equally in thrall to the Enlightenment idea of a stadal history through which human societies moved, repeatedly bumping up against environmental limits, but now framed through ecological terminology. The physicist Harrison Brown’s *The Challenge of Man’s Future* of 1954 saw human history in the long run as a story of population pressures related to

17 See David Rosenthal, *George Perkins Marsh, Versatile Vermonter* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958).

18 Osborn, *Plundered planet*, 112–13, 101–16. See also G. Marsh, *Man and Nature: or, Physical Geography Modified by Human Action* (London: Low, Son and Marston, 1864). This literature is also discussed in, among others, Paul Warde, *The Invention of Sustainability. Nature and Destiny c.1500–1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

19 Osborn, *Plundered Planet*, 116–17.

20 Osborn, *Plundered Planet*, 133, 144; Dennis C. Pirages and Paul R. Ehrlich, *Ark II. Social Responses to Environmental Imperatives* (San Francisco: W.H. Freeman, 1974), 40.

food-prey-predator relationships, offered up in the opening section of the book as a classical conjectural history beginning with hunter-gatherers arriving in a valley then moving towards agricultural and pastoral stages, and finally urbanization, all linked to increased population density.²¹ Nevertheless, the human capacity for conceptual thought rescues history from being ecologically deterministic. Combined with new scientific knowledge, it offers the possibility of new ethical choices. This style of thought was probably influenced by the work of the Australian archaeologist V. Gordon Childe, who coined the phrase the “Neolithic Revolution” and offered a revised and revived stage theory of history linking technological and social revolutions in *Man Makes Himself* of 1936.²² Brown was also typical of much anglophone history-telling in that this story of revolutionary technological pioneers from which the highest civilization diffused meant that history could be recounted in a way that ignored the vast majority of the world’s population, and followed a putative line of development from Mesopotamia and Egypt, through Greece and Rome, to arrive safely in England and then the United States.

Yet if the human capacity for reflection opened up the possibility of choosing a different tack, most people were imagined as following biological imperatives, both individually and collectively. Brown cited Forbes to explain why India had become so poor: “There has been no great disaster. There has been merely the predictable operation of a natural law, a relentless rain of small disasters, 46 per thousand persons every year....” Nations competed and humanity as a whole lacked the mechanisms to enhance “fitness” and steer itself towards, “population stabilization.” Drawing on the language of eugenics, Brown imagined a world authority that could distribute the population rationally, just as, “A rancher in Nevada usually puts no more cattle on a range than he believes can be adequately supported.”²³

For several leading environmentalist writers, understanding of the predicament of the world had been, and was likely to stay, an elitist endeavor linked to high levels of education. William Vogt first employed a medical metaphor as he opined that, “The World is sick. Man has moved into an untenable position by protracted and wholesale violation of certain natural laws...” a situation underpinned by, “the ignorance that runs through the entire social structure of the world... the countryman’s limited comprehension.... urban man’s unawareness.” Vogt, who had spent time during the War travelling in Latin America to assess the condition of that region’s resources, concluded that only the biologist “sees

21 Harrison Brown, *The Challenge of Man’s Future* (New York: Viking Press, 1954), 14–45.

22 V. Gordon Childe, *Man Makes Himself* (London: Watts & Co, 1936).

23 Brown, *The Challenge*, 260.

his role more clearly.”²⁴ The latter might belong to the coterie of “geophysicians” – who are diagnosing and healing the earth,” evoked by John Harte and Robert H. Socolow in their *Patient Earth* of 1971.²⁵ A little later, on turning from doomsaying Malthusian predictions to consideration of the politics of the environment, Paul Ehrlich in partnership with Denis Pirages claimed that, “Accepted rhetoric assures us that democracy is good and that the people should rule because most citizens are rational and intelligent. This is not supported by empirical evidence... But because the number of activists in favor of any cause is small, minor changes can be initiated by a dedicated cadre of a few thousand people. If as many as ten million persons should become dedicated to transforming society, the job might be done.” By and large, both voters and politicians were considered selfish and ill-informed.²⁶ It should be said that this was not out of line with currents in political science that saw American politics as essentially being a battle of special interests.²⁷

The works set out above roved over the entirety of the human past, and it is perhaps unsurprising that they tended to take a rather undifferentiated view of the vast majority of humans. This tendency was reinforced by the training in evolutionary science of some individuals, conceiving of humans as a species struggling for survival, and also the Malthusian emphasis of much of the writing, which understood humanity as a set of populations. Fundamentally demographic arguments traced recent population developments using census data and related it to available resources, producing “per capita” estimates of resource availability in the past, present, and those futures considered likely, which was also a style of thought to be found in official enquiries into resource dependency such as America’s Paley Commission of 1952.²⁸ Such accounts gave sparse consideration to what such figures meant for a varied humanity with very different practical levels of access to resources, facing different price structures and navigating varied economic lives. Certainly, the availability of data shaped such discourse, as far more consideration was offered to differences between nations considered as ag-

²⁴ William Vogt, *Road to Survival* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1948). On Vogt, see Charles C. Mann, *The Wizard and the Prophet. Two Groundbreaking Scientists and their Conflicting Visions of the Future of our Planet* (New York: Penguin, 2018).

²⁵ John Harte and Robert H. Socolow, eds., *Patient Earth* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Wilson, 1971), vii.

²⁶ Pirages and Ehrlich, *Ark II*, 133.

²⁷ See Mancur Olsson, *The Logic of Collective Action* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965).

²⁸ The President’s Materials Policy Commission, *Resources for Freedom* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1952).

gregates of population, land, and resources than within nations. Yet there was more to this reductionism than method—a point illustrated by the fact that writers who wrote more positively about human capacities and behaviors than those who lambasted “the plunderers” did much the same thing.²⁹

At its most extreme, we might describe this as the process of drawing ahistorical lessons from History. Everybody had always been the same and worried about the same things, so what was new? In his Ely lecture to the American Economics Association of 1973, essentially a reply to *The Limits to Growth* and the immediate context of the energy crisis, leading growth economist Robert Solow went back to Harold Hotelling’s 1931 essay on the economics of non-renewable resources to note Hotelling’s observation that people were saying resources were being used too quickly and sold too cheap.³⁰ Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose, one might say. Solow quipped, “The world has been exhausting its exhaustible resources since the first cave-man chipped a flint, and I imagine the process will go on for a long, long time.” Solow actually delivered a rather nuanced and non-committal address on the future of resources but still couldn’t resist using history as evidence that people could overcome their problems: “We’re still here.”³¹ Exactly who was “still here” and why was not examined any more closely. This combination of a satisfaction in generalities about people on the basis of confidence in technocratic knowledge was also evident in the speech that Solly Zuckerman, an advocate of environmental concern and at the heart of the British government’s science policy in the 1950s and 1960s, gave at the UN conference on the Human Environment in 1972. Raising various straw men to attack that no serious analyst ever advocated, and delivering yet another side-swipe at *The Limits to Growth*, he claimed that, “Whatever computers may say about the future, there is nothing in the past which gives any credence whatever to the view that human ingenuity cannot in time circumvent material human difficulties.”³² Without any evidence being provided, this view only seemed credible if one substitutes

²⁹ See Thomas Robertson, *The Malthusian Moment: Global Population and the Birth of American Environmentalism* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2012); Alison Bashford, *Global Population: History, Geopolitics and Life on Earth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014); Matthew Connelly, *Fatal Misconception: The Struggle to Control World Population* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2008); Warde et al., *The Environment*.

³⁰ Harold Hotelling, “The Economics of Exhaustible Resources,” *Journal of Political Economy*, 39, no. 2 (1931): 137–75.

³¹ Robert Solow, “The Economics of Resources or the Resources of Economics,” *The American Historical Review* 64, no. 2 (1974): 1–14, especially 1.

³² Solly Zuckerman, “Science, Technology, and Environmental Management,” in *Who speaks for Earth?* ed. Maurice F. Strong (New York: Norton), 129–50, especially 146.

the experience of some humans for humans in general and thus ignores the fate of some who did not successfully circumvent their material difficulties.

The art of invoking History while actually ignoring it was prominent, as we have seen, in the writing of arch anti-environmentalists Julian Simon and Herman Kahn. Overcoming such problems was likely, they blithely argued, “as has been usual throughout history... the solutions usually leave us better off than if the problem had never arisen; that is the great lesson to be learned from human history.”³³ As so often, Simon and Kahn evoked an “us” who might reasonably agree that their experiences chimed with those of Simon and Kahn. The point was not so much that these arguments were wrong, which doubtless people will continue to debate, but that the assertion of a universally shared destiny was never considered to require actual demonstration.

Lessons from the past: the case study

Nevertheless, environmentalist writers did not employ only grand narrative and sweeping human histories to make their points. More detailed case studies were brought forward as exemplars. *Patient Earth* of 1971, mentioned above, contained various essays on what we might now call “contemporary history” drawn from the previous decade of regulatory success and an invigorated environmental politics. More obviously historical was an opening section named, “Lessons from the Past,” even if rather more practical lessons were probably to be found in studies of very recent events elsewhere in the book. The “Lessons” section contained chapters on the classic cautionary tale of the Dust Bowl, written by ecologist Paul Sears who had already published *Deserts on the March* during the troubled heart of that historical moment in 1935, re-issuing it in 1949.³⁴ The idea of the Dust Bowl as the epitome of unwise environmental overreach was already carefully curated into official narratives at the time from the US Soil Conservation Service, National Resources Committee, and in Pare Lorentz’s short movie *The Plow That Broke the Plains*, although these ideas would be fiercely contested by others such as the historian James Malin.³⁵

³³ Simon and Kahn, *Resourceful Earth*, 3.

³⁴ Paul Sears, “An Empire of Dust,” in Harte and Socolow, *Patient Earth*, 2–15; Paul Sears, *Deserts on the March* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1949 [1935]).

³⁵ For a general discussion of this see William Cronon, “A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative,” *Journal of American History* 78 (1992): 1347–76; also James C. Malin, *The Grassland of North America: Prolegomena to Its History* (Gloucester, MA, 1967).

The somewhat mysterious disappearance of the urban Mayan civilization, discussed by Jeremy Sabaloff, would be an enduring staple for environmental explanations of historical change, and the genre of "warnings from history"—in part a reflection of the greater likelihood of such explanations being applied when societies left no written record of their own (alleged) demise. This tradition was still evident with Jared Diamond's 2008 book *Collapse*, for example, opening with an account of the disappearance of Norse settlement in Greenland.³⁶ In a different vein, ecologist Garret Hardin's apparent description of the "tragedy of the commons" through an over-stocked pasture land was later taken as if it was an actual description of the medieval English commons and open fields, although in Hardin's original text it was in fact a thought experiment that did not explicitly draw on any actual histories at all (and indeed grazing on English medieval commons was in reality carefully regulated and nothing like Hardin's morality tale).³⁷

Later in *Patient Earth*, the demographers Alice Taylor Day and Lincoln Day also drew on historical (albeit largely anthropological) literature to present edifying tales of populations that had succeeded in prudently regulating their numbers. "There is substantial evidence of efforts on the part of primitive peoples to reduce the pressures caused by rapid additions to their numbers," they noted, quoting the example of Tikopia island in Polynesia, where practice of *coitus interruptus* kept families small, explained by one islander as a means of stopping children stealing from the limited number of orchards (albeit this might be considered a property rights and allocational problem rather than necessarily a Malthusian one).³⁸ Such references, which also evoked the Old Testament, Japanese and Egyptians might be considered to function largely as steering the reader towards the possibility of wisdom, rather than any serious analytical engagement, as did references to Old Testament prophets in Leopold's "The Land Ethic" or Aristotle and Han Fei-Tzu in *The Limits to Growth*.³⁹

More specific histories, whether "cases" or the naming of individuals, were offered as cautionary tales or evidence of paths that could be taken, rather than setting out to answer any research questions about the past. Of course,

³⁶ Jeremy A. Sabaloff, "The Collapse of the Classic Maya Civilization," in Harte and Socolow, *Patient Earth* 16–27; Jared Diamond, *Collapse. How Societies Choose to Fail or Survive* (London: Penguin, 2006).

³⁷ Garret Hardin, "The Tragedy of the Commons," *Science* 162 (1968): 1243–48. For an introduction to the actual history of the commons, see Angus Winchester, *Common land in Britain* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2022).

³⁸ Alice Taylor Day and Lincoln H. Day, "Toward an Equilibrium Population," in Harte and Socolow, *Patient Earth*, 206–25.

³⁹ Leopold, "Land Ethic," 238–39; Meadows et al, *Limits to Growth*, 25, 156.

these writers were not themselves historians. This was true of both “pro” and “anti” environmentalists, or as they were figured in a set of comic poems by the economist Kenneth Boulding in 1955 written at the plenary of the *Man’s Role in Changing the Face of the Earth* conference, “Conservationsts” or “Technologists.”⁴⁰ The fact that such stories functioned to reinforce the values being advocated could mean that sometimes there was a surprising degree of agreement about the story being told.

Histories of knowledge

This was the case with the widespread story already outlined above that Americans had learned to be careless with resources because of the abundance of the frontier. As this abundance declined, and resources became relatively more expensive, development became ever more predicated upon knowledge, altering the composition of capital stock and the organization of the economy. In a common environmentalist account, certainly more prevalent in academic and policy circles than the idea of the necessity of a return to a more thrifty and homespun world, a new modern knowledge of limits would lead to investment in a more careful curation of resources. In the self-styled “optimistic” view, new knowledge meant much greater efficiency and eventual substitution of scarce resources to the extent that the possibility of economic growth was, on occasion, argued to be literally infinite.

This history of the closing frontier was figured by heterodox (as we might say) economist Boulding, in his famous mid-60s essay on “Spaceship Earth,” as a move between a “cowboy economy” and a “spaceman economy” (similar language was used by the design guru Buckminster Fuller), with, “the cowboy being symbolic of the illimitable plains and also associated with reckless, exploitative, romantic, and violent behavior, which is characteristic of open societies.” In contrast, in the limited world of the spaceman economy, the priority was on minimizing material throughput achieved by developing a high quality capital stock, and thus enhancing the durability of goods.⁴¹ As Hermann Daly put it, “The cardinal virtues of the past become the cardinal sins of the present.”⁴²

⁴⁰ Thomas, *Man’s Role*, 1087.

⁴¹ Kenneth Boulding, “The Economics of the Coming Spaceship Earth,” in *Environmental Quality in a Growing Economy*, ed. Henry Jarrett (Baltimore, MD: Resources for the Future/Johns Hopkins University Press, 1966), 3–14. Richard Buckminster Fuller, *Operating Manual for Spaceship Earth* (Osterbeek: Lars Müller, 2017 [1969]).

In a 1980 essay Julian Simon argued for the centrality of the evolving nexus between population and knowledge, but argued that rather than a larger population stimulating a *requirement* for new forms of knowledge (and associated values), larger populations *generated* both more knowledge and more capital, which in turn effectively generated more resources (theoretically he reached back to the English economic writer and colonial official William Petty). More babies were not a curse but a long-term capital gain.⁴³ Whilst Boulding's narrative offered something more akin to a change in system state, both Boulding and Simon would agree on the rising importance of human capital as population rose and frontier circumstances disappeared. In other regards their accounts were of course politically highly divergent, and indeed this might be taken as evidence that the idea of human capital itself had very little real substance. Yet there were other points of convergence. Boulding concurred with the importance of optimism: “There is a great deal of historical evidence to suggest that a society which loses its identity with posterity and which loses its positive image of the future loses also its capacity to deal with present problems, and soon falls apart.”⁴⁴ Yet again, no actual historical evidence was advanced.

Histories of freedom

Kahn and Simon's arguments were fundamentally about freedom. Any restraint on freedom, they argued, also restrained innovation and hence made desirable outcomes less likely (one can put aside for now the possibility that their attachment to a certain vision of freedom was not really rooted in its rationally-determined outcomes). However, even a restraint on reproduction, argued by Malthusians to lead to penury if permitted unfettered, was according to Simon a restraint on the means by which knowledge was created, as every additional person increased the likelihood of innovation.

Kahn had been instrumental in founding the conservative think-tank The Hudson Institute and the pair's conference on *The Resourceful Earth* was funded by the Heritage Foundation which led arguments for a slimmed down state in the 1980s. Nevertheless, these economic libertarians had no monopoly on claims about freedom. One such example, and indeed the most consistently “historical”

⁴² Herman Daly, “Toward a Steady State Economy,” in Harte and Socolow, *Patient Earth*, 226–44, especially 237.

⁴³ Julian Simon, “Resources, Population, Environment: An Oversupply of False Bad News,” *Science* 208 (1980): 1431–37.

⁴⁴ Boulding, “Economics,” 9.

work addressed in this essay, is Raymond Dasmann's *The Destruction of California*, published in 1965. Dasmann worked in conservation and land management in the state, and as an academic, and had published the landmark textbook *Environmental Conservation* in 1959.⁴⁵

There was a “populationist,” though not necessarily Malthusian, edge to Dasmann's work. It opens describing a sign on San Francisco's Bay Bridge that in 1963 showed the “population race” between California and New York. California was winning, but at what cost? For Dasmann, a life in nature was freedom, and thus a diminution of that possibility counted as an irreversible loss of freedom, whatever other benefits it might bring. This was not just true of the loss of space for wildlife and other aspects of nature but of the changing, more regimented character of urban life. Yes, there had been material gains, but they brought “a spiritual rot.” San Francisco had been “more fun” and “more pleasant” in the late 1930s (Dasmann was born in 1919), “brighter, more human, more colorful, more fun... before this population growth and change, before the industrial gains and their by-product losses.” Dasmann provided an extensive account of changes in California since the Spanish conquest, and much more historical information than was usual in explicitly “environmental” books of this time (as opposed to, for example, historical geographies that did not take an environmentalist stance). He was not unsympathetic to the circumstances of the state's incoming population and what drove them—whether economic need or opportunity among individuals and firms, developers, or sportsmen, all of whom he had extensive dealings with. These people “are not to be blamed for protecting their own interests.” Yet he was also frustrated with “public indifference, entrenched ignorance, and unwarranted legislative interference.”⁴⁶

Despite his much more detailed attention to historical change than the essays of Aldo Leopold, the importance of what Dasmann described can be distilled into an ethic. This was the freedom to be won by being in nature, and even that “The knowledge that wild nature still exists adds a dimension of freedom to an otherwise restricted life – leaves open the possibility for escape from the narrow confinements of civilization. If we create in California a world with no space left for wild animals, it will prove to be a world with little space for human freedom” (as Dasmann himself noted, these comments echoed lines from Harrison Brown cited above).⁴⁷ This was largely a question of space to live a good life, rather than a

⁴⁵ Raymond F. Dasmann, *The Destruction of California* (New York: Collier, 1965); Raymond F. Dasmann, *Environmental Conservation* (New York: Wiley, 1959).

⁴⁶ Dasmann, *Destruction*, 11–13, 56.

⁴⁷ Dasmann, *Destruction*, 58, 128.

Malthusian accounting, even if rising population was a central aspect of the story. Indeed Dasmann was dismissive of,

papers on world food problems... If I read too many of these, I find myself thinking that food is some sort of uniform substance like water that can be measured by the bowlful and distributed to the needy.... It would be in the interests of those who would simplify life to its bare essentials if this were true, and those who expect science to solve the population problem with algal soup can look forward to this day.

The destruction of California was a history that argued the necessity, explicitly, of “the limits of growth” but it was not one that was placed within a longer narrative of the necessity of ecological diversity or the rise and fall of civilizations. “I believe that wild animal life and wild country is a bulwark of, and essential to, human freedom,” Dasmann wrote.⁴⁸ Recounting the loss served as a reminder and an affirmation of what made life worth living.

Environmental history as sacred history

Dasmann’s argument has something of the quality of a sacred history, although this is not of course his term. This is a history—often indeed linked to religion—setting out that there are values that stand outside history, and history is an account of the greater or lesser possibility of their expression. Of course, the notion of “doomsday” environmentalism, generally thrown out as an accusation by its putative opponents, may also imply in a Christian eschatology an approaching last judgement. Yet in our world, there will be no allocation of souls to heaven or hell. Rather, humans themselves, over their long history—“plunderers” or not—have an implicit judgement bestowed upon them by how well they husbanded and lived with nature. Only values are eternal.

Steadfastness to values runs as a red thread through the work of Wendell Berry, the Kentucky poet, writer, academic, and farmer. For him, farming is a spiritual discipline, and it is no surprise to find him writing the preface to recent editions of the writer and horticultural expert Liberty Hyde Bailey’s *The Holy Earth* of 1915 that made the case for a “permanent agriculture.”⁴⁹ This perhaps helps explain why Berry, when standing up to give a talk to a small assembled crowd on Earth Day in 1970 (later published in Stewart Brand’s *Whole Earth Catalog*) ex-

⁴⁸ Dasmann, *Destruction*, 116, 192, 197.

⁴⁹ Liberty Hyde Bailey with a forward by Wendell Berry, *The Holy Earth* (Counterpoint, 2015), 100th anniversary edition; among Berry’s many writings see Wendell Berry, *The Unsettling of America. Agriculture and Culture* (Counterpoint, 2004 [1977]).

pressed deep skepticism about contemporary environmentalism in a world of, “total consumerism – which is to say a state of helpless dependence on things and services and ideas and motives that we have forgotten how to provide ourselves.” “All meaningful contact,” he continued, “between ourselves and the earth is broken.” He feared that the kids’ attachment to nature was just another fad. Berry’s practical solution for most was to make a start with gardening. “Think Little.”⁵⁰

Yet it is difficult to articulate the verity of eternal values without evidence of their historical presence—how can they otherwise be distinguished from the fadishness and brevity of social movements (Civil Rights, anti-Vietnam war, now the environment) that Berry instinctively drew back from? As we have seen, for some writers wisdom could be figured by evoking a figure so far back in the past that their historical moment comes to stand for eternity rather than context: Confucius, Aristotle, or someone from the Old Testament. Berry praised and quoted, “the profound ecological intelligence of Black Elk, a holy man of the Oglala Sioux”.⁵¹ Hermann Daly evoked what might pass for a description of timelessness in economic writing: John Stuart Mill’s essay on the stationary state from 1857 (three years before Black Elk was born). “I know not,” wrote Mill,

why it should be a matter of congratulation that persons who are already richer than anyone needs to be, should have doubled their means of consuming things which give little pleasure except as representative of wealth... It is only in the backward countries of the world that increased production is still an important object; in those most advanced, what is economically needed is a better distribution, of which one indispensable means is a stricter restraint on population.⁵²

Such sacred histories do not evoke changing, historical values, but rather histories where at moments of rupture, enduring truths are revealed and transform the present and future. This could place the awkwardly indifferent mass of humanity in a new light, as potentially subject to a “vast inner change in man’s interior or imaginative environment.” These were the words of British economist and writer Barbara Ward, a major player in environmental diplomacy in the 1960s and 1970s and author of the pre-Stockholm report *Only One Earth*. Her speech at the Stockholm conference offered such possibility from history: “Such times of re-thinking do occur in history. At the end of the civil wars in China 2,000 years ago... there

50 Wendell Berry, “Think Little,” in *The Whole Earth Catalog* (January 1, 1971), 24–25.

51 Berry, “Think Little,” 25.

52 Daly, “Toward a Steady State,” 229–30.

was an immense intellectual ferment in this most ancient of civilizations... More recently our forefathers went through the 'Copernican Revolution'".⁵³

Even these histories of revelation indicate, in fact, the great diversity of environmentalist thinking that cannot be reduced to a single narrative. Wisdom could come through modesty and gardening. It could come from a great societal revolution that, "shook people to the roots of their being."⁵⁴ It would be reflected in opinions as varied as forms of quietism or declaring "small is beautiful" is more adequate to our times, to whether one should admit, as Stewart Brand said in 1968, "We are as gods and might as well get good at it."⁵⁵ Of course, such varied views also reflected varied diagnoses of the problem. As Barry Commoner put it in his *The Closing Circle* of 1971, "In the woods around Walden Pond or on the reaches of the Mississippi, most of the information needed to understand the natural world can be gained by personal experience. In the world of nuclear bombs, smog, and foul water, environmental understanding needs help from the scientist."⁵⁶ According to Commoner, the fundamental environmental problem was not population, or the nature of "the plunderer," but the use of technology recently unleashed by modern scientists such as himself. One did not need recourse to eternal verities; one just needed to regulate the use of technology better, although that also required an ecological understanding that appreciated the likelihood of unintended consequences of change.

Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* has more in common with Commoner than the mode of "sacred history"—despite beginning with its famous, mythical "Fable for Tomorrow" which Carson only added to the manuscript late on and somewhat reluctantly.⁵⁷ For Carson, however, the problem she identified was largely caused by "the era of specialists" and their associated institutions. Certainly, the profit motive and aesthetic considerations played their part, in that chemical control of pests had become a "crusade" exhibiting "fanatical zeal." Nevertheless, Carson did place the problems generated by new technology in a historical framework but one defined by much longer geological and ecological histories. She did not evoke an eternal "balance of nature" (as some critics claimed) but rather that the action of chemicals was disruptive of the time of nature, "To adjust to these

⁵³ Barbara Ward, "Speech for Stockholm," in Strong, *Who Speaks*, 19–31, especially 20.

⁵⁴ Ward, "Speech," 20.

⁵⁵ Ernst F. Schumacher, *Small is Beautiful. Economics as if People Mattered* (London: Blond & Briggs, 1973); Stewart Brand's quip came on the second page editorial defining the purpose of the first *Whole Earth Catalog* of Fall 1968.

⁵⁶ Barry Commoner, *The Closing Circle. Confronting the Environmental Crisis* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1971), 48.

⁵⁷ Linda Lear, *Rachel Carson: Witness for Nature* (New York: H. Holt, 1997).

chemicals would require time on the scale that is nature's; it would require not merely the years of a man's life but the life of generations." One could not ignore evolutionary time, and she imagined how "Future historians may well be amazed by our distorted sense of proportion." One aspect of this was spatial, because such time was also being overwhelmed by species' introductions both intended and inadvertent, drawing upon the arguments of Charles Elton's *The Ecology of Invasions* which itself also called to mind the destructive forces unleashed by the recent World War—one of which was the pesticide industry.⁵⁸

Integrated histories

This takes us back to what I have argued above to be a typical—perhaps even foundational—question of environmental history. Where did it start to go wrong? Given the varieties of viewpoints noted above, it is no surprise that answers to this question have been varied. Indeed, one could even argue that such histories are indeed integrated – they were integrated with the diagnosis of what was wrong in the present. Sometimes, indeed perhaps more often than not, the origin of the problem emerges from the nature of the precise issue one wants to solve. Professor of International Law at Princeton, Richard A. Falk, for example, was understandably preoccupied with the possibility of co-ordinated international regulation, and so his historical account begins with the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 agreeing to the autonomy of sovereign states, an iconic date in legal history, even if only binding to the signatories of that agreement (this right would be vigorously reasserted in regard to sovereignty over natural resources in Principle 21 of the Stockholm Declaration).⁵⁹ Sovereignty continually stymies effective global action, a legacy of that moment.

Stanford scientist and evolutionary theorist Paul Ehrlich, famous for his Malthusian interventions, would comment "We were a great hunting and gathering animal... the biggest mistake mankind ever made was the agricultural revolution" (a view that subsequently found quite widespread currency).⁶⁰ In the later work *Ark II* of 1974, written with Dennis Pirages, he argued again that there had been three fundamental revolutions in human history: a cultural one (the adoption of language and tools); the Agricultural; and the Industrial. It was the

⁵⁸ Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (London: Penguin, 1999 [1962]), 23–24, 27–29, 30.

⁵⁹ Richard A. Falk, "Adapting World Order to the Global Ecosystem," in Harte and Socolow, *Patient Earth* 245–57, especially 245; United Nations, *Report of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment* (New York: United Nations, 1972), 5.

⁶⁰ "Paul Ehrlich Interview: The Population Bomb," in *Mother Earth News*, July 1, 1974.

second that had put humanity on track to problems, because it gave the possibility of dramatically scaling up human populations and impact, “thus commencing a trend toward widespread environmental deterioration.” This scaling up was also accompanied by the simplification of complex ecosystems, and hence their increased vulnerability—examples cited are the salination of Mesopotamia and the Irish potato famine.⁶¹

Ehrlich’s argument about the simplification of ecosystems through agriculture, and the implicit maladaptation of human behaviours towards the world those humans created, had a reasoned relationship to the ecological science he advocated and the pre-eminence he gave to population. Other thinkers provided a similar, vaguely pre-historical chronology, but on different terms. The Norwegian adventurer Thor Heyerdahl, invited to speak at Stockholm as a kind of eyewitness to the state of the Ocean, speculated that “At least five thousand years ago man started to rebel against the nature that had bred him... One might say that on the seventh day, when God rested, man took over as Creator.”⁶² This Biblical reference had been taken further, but on a different tack, by the historian of technology Lynn White who argued in a famous article of 1967 that the gift of dominion over plants and animals granted by God to humans in Genesis 1:28 provided the ideological underpinnings to environmental destruction (and by inference made it the West’s fault).⁶³ Chilean demographer, Carmen Miró, also speaking at Stockholm, rejected the Malthusian story but nevertheless utilized the idea of the “predatory nature of the ‘homo oeconomicus’” formed in deep time to “account for his suicidal efforts in subduing the environment beyond reason.”⁶⁴ Back to “the plunderer.”

Barry Commoner, who was also noted as a sharp critic of Ehrlich and other Malthusians, rather blamed, as we have seen, the development of new technologies, where the complexity of nature ensured the persistent generation of unintended consequences from human attempts to shape it. The problem was not the “population explosion” but the “civilization explosion” and associated “information explosion” (measured by a doubling of scientific papers in 15 years). “World War II is a decisive turning point,” the moment when basic science transformed ideas from the interwar period into widely used technologies in the form

⁶¹ Pirages and Ehrlich, *Ark II*, 2–6. See also Ehrlich’s arguments about the simplification of ecosystems in Paul R. Ehrlich, Ann H. Ehrlich, and John P. Holdren, *Human Ecology. Problems and Solutions* (San Francisco: W.H. Freeman).

⁶² Thor Heyerdahl, “How Vulnerable is the Ocean?”, in Strong, *Who Speaks*, 45–63, especially 45.

⁶³ Lynn White, “The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis,” *Science* 155, no. 3767 (1967): 1203–07.

⁶⁴ Carmen Miró, “Population”, in Strong, *Who Speaks*, 109–125, especially 118–9, 124.

of atomic weapons, pesticides, and plastics.⁶⁵ This account resembles the timing of the “Anthropocene” or “Great Acceleration” advocated later by historian John McNeill,⁶⁶ and indeed although Commoner positioned himself on the left of American politics he did not differ much from the consensus of the political establishment as to the causes of environmental woes in the early 1970s. It was Richard Nixon who argued for using “the same reservoir of inventive genius that created these problems in the first place,” although Commoner commented this might also benefit from more prudent reflection on “the past record of technological efforts and to discover why they have failed so often in the environment.”⁶⁷ He identified an excessive division of labor leading to bad science as a primary cause of problems in an interconnected ecology, although, like any academic, he was not immune to breaking down the issues he discussed into isolated questions to make them more manageable. Nor was Commoner, who also recognized a fundamental gap between market rates of financial return and natural cycles, simply an advocate for a kind of technocracy where a better kind of science would prevail. He eventually, to very little effect, would put himself forward as a presidential candidate in 1980. “Who is to be the Solomon of modern technology... in a democracy [judgements] belong not in the hands of “experts,” but in the hands of the people and their elected representatives.”⁶⁸

Conclusions

It should be reiterated again that we have examined here the use of history written by people who are not historians. It is thus not surprising that the style of academic history, demonstrating fidelity to a certain use of evidence and developing narratives in a style typically found in academic history, is largely absent. Nor is it surprising that non-historians have particular purposes to which the use of history is geared, the history perhaps being sometimes perhaps rather decorative or ornamental to the main argument—although it is rare to find a work where history is not evoked.

Nevertheless, these were figures that played leading roles in shaping post-war environmental thought—although others could and even should have been added. It seems unlikely, however, that in doing so the point being argued would change.

⁶⁵ Commoner, *The Closing Circle*, 114, 128–29.

⁶⁶ John McNeill and Peter Engelke, *The Great Acceleration. An Environmental history of the Anthropocene Since 1945* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).

⁶⁷ Commoner, *The Closing Circle*, 181.

⁶⁸ Commoner, *The Closing Circle*, 197.

Histories were presented with specific purposes in mind, and the goals of those purposes were not ambiguous, even if they are not always immediately apparent from a superficial reading of the texts. They were integrated with the political purposes and values of the authors.

Yet are the purposes of professional historians, in the main, very much different? Certainly, expectations about the standards of handling of evidence and density of information are. Yet we know well that historians are able to maintain professional standards, examine much the same evidence, and yet still tell radically different stories, a point made famously by William Cronon in his essay on the historiography of the Dust Bowl, “A Place for Stories,” in 1991.⁶⁹ In their fundamental purposes—in having fundamental purposes and values that shape the topics and narratives they choose to foreground—historians are perhaps not so different from anybody else. This does not mean that history is simply a free-for-all where anything goes in the competition of values. Rather, the adherence to professional standards can arguably promote a discussion about values in which standards of truthfulness can be expected to be adhered to. It is this integration that can enable the diversity of human experience to find its voice.

⁶⁹ Cronon, “A Place for Stories.”

Nicholas Ferns

A mixed blessing? Phosphate mining, development, and the discourse of Nauruan wealth

In September 1983, Paul Gigot of the *Wall Street Journal* wrote an article on the wealth held by the local population of Nauru, a small island nation in the Pacific Ocean. Independent since 1968, Nauru's wealth was due to the high-quality phosphate deposits that were found on the island. Gigot reported on the ways in which the local population were making use of the royalties that they received from the sale of phosphate on the global market. For instance, Gigot told the story of Police Inspector Deidienak A. Daniel, who used a portion of his royalty income on the purchase of a \$25,000 Lamborghini. For vital context, it is worth noting that Nauru has one major road, which rings the tiny island, and which does not really offer opportunities to make full use of such a vehicle. As Gigot claims in his piece, the wealth provided by the phosphate income was a "mixed blessing", since it caused the population to shy away from work and to become dependent on imported luxury items.¹ This was a particular concern, as by the 1980s, when Gigot was writing, the phosphate deposits were about to run out. Time would prove Gigot right, as the spendthrift behavior of the Nauruans would partly prove their undoing over the next two decades. From the heights of having one of the highest per capita incomes in the world, by the early 2000s Nauru was described by some observers as a "failed state".²

The Nauruan case study raises questions of how a colonized people can be both immensely wealthy while also victims of colonial exploitation. Until the 1990s, Nauru's wealth was based almost solely on the wealth derived from the mining of phosphate on the "topside" of the island. Before gaining its independence in 1968, Nauru was administered by Australia on behalf of the triumvirate of Australia, New Zealand, and Great Britain. The true power on the island, however, belonged to the British Phosphate Commissioners (BPC), a semi-private entity that was responsible for mining Nauru's phosphate and selling it at a minimal price to farmers in the three countries that controlled Nauru. The BPC subsidized the Australian administration, with all health, education, and other amenities

¹ Paul A Gigot, "The Smallest Nation Has a Rare Problem: Too Much Wealth; Nauru Phosphate Income Fell from the Sky, Bringing Much Laziness and Waste," *The Wall Street Journal. Eastern Edition* 202 (1983): 1.

² John Connell, "Nauru: The First Failed Pacific State?," *Round Table (London)* 95, no. 383 (2006).

paid for out of the phosphate earnings. A paltry royalty was also paid to Nauruan landowners, which was a small fraction of the market value of the phosphate (which was not sold at market value but rather at a heavily subsidized rate to Australian and New Zealand producers).³ The low royalty rates were a frequent source of tension between the BPC and the Nauruan landowners. Steady negotiations over the course of the 1960s resulted in increased royalty payments to the Nauruans, which meant that by the time of independence in 1968, Nauru, with its Indigenous population of around 3000, had the second highest per capita income in the world, after Saudi Arabia.⁴ For the two decades post-independence, Nauruans enjoyed a high standard of living based on the income from the ever-dwindling phosphate reserves.

The fragility of this wealth, which had been observed by UN Trusteeship Council observers in the 1950s and 1960s and by Paul Gigot in 1983, was evident by the 1990s. Mismanagement of trust accounts, poor investment decisions, and financial fraud all brought about the end of Nauru's phosphate boom. This can be seen in the decline of the Nauru Phosphate Royalties Trust, which was designed to support the population of Nauru when the phosphate exports came to an end. In 1990, the NPRT stood at A\$1.3 billion, but by 2004 had dropped to around A\$300 million.⁵ In an attempt to revive Nauru's flailing economy, politicians devised a range of extreme solutions, including the sale of Nauruan passports to enable tax evasion in other countries for the benefit of Nauru. These desperate attempts only brought international condemnation on Nauru, demonstrating the extent of the fall from the heights of the phosphate boom. This narrative fits with the "resource curse" phenomenon (and the associated "Dutch disease"), whereby the benefits of resource wealth do not produce broader developmental outcomes due to the inappropriate use of commodity windfalls.⁶ While the "resource curse" idea explains some of the boom-and-bust nature of Nauru's history, this explanation is complicated by the colonial-era role of the BPC.

Nauru's story is one where wealth and development sit awkwardly alongside exploitation and vulnerability. During the colonial period, Nauruans received a

³ C. G. Weeramantry, *Nauru: Environmental Damage Under International Trusteeship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

⁴ Julia Morris, *Asylum and Extraction in the Republic of Nauru* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2023), 49.

⁵ Stephen Howes and Sherman Surandiran, "Nauru: Riches to rags to riches," ANU Devpolicy blog, accessed August 24, 2023, <https://devpolicy.org/nauru-riches-to-rags-to-riches-20210412/>.

⁶ Richard M Auty, *Sustaining Development in Mineral Economies: The Resource Curse* (London: Routledge, 1993); Nancy Pollock, "Nauru Phosphate History and the Resource Curse Narrative," *Journal de La Société Des Océanistes*, no. 138–139 (2014).

small fraction of the value of phosphate exports, with the island's mineral wealth supporting the agricultural development of Australia, New Zealand, and Great Britain.⁷ According to detailed studies by Christopher Weeramantry in preparation for a 1992 rehabilitation suit in the International Court of Justice, it is estimated that the partner governments extracted over \$1 billion worth of profit (in 1992 dollars) from Nauru.⁸ This wealth was literally comprised of the island of Nauru, which was then transported to Australia and New Zealand and converted into fertilizer to maintain the productivity of those settler colonies. Despite this obvious example of colonial exploitation, Australian representatives were quick to highlight the relative wealth of the Nauruan population, particularly in contrast to the poor island colonies of the Pacific. These Australian claims were obviously self-serving, yet they corresponded with the developmental thinking of the time. In the 1950s and 1960s, Indigenous Nauruans enjoyed a standard of living that was high for those living under colonial rule—free education (in English), easy access to healthcare, and cultural and social amenities provided by the BPC were highlighted by colonial officials in their annual reports to the Trusteeship Council. This satisfied the requirements of the trusteeship system, which expected administering countries to promote the “political, economic, social and educational advancement” of people living in Trust Territories.⁹ It also distracted from the primary purpose of Australian colonial rule in Nauru: the economic exploitation perpetrated by the BPC, as the vast majority of Nauru's wealth was still being transferred to Australian farmers.

Alongside the optimism regarding Nauruan living standards in the 1950s and 1960s came a recognition of the fragility of this wealth. The constant speeding up of phosphate mining by the BPC—partially caused by concerns over the possibility of Nauruan independence—shortened the lifespan of Nauru's phosphate reserves. UN officials consistently expressed concern over the viability of Nauru as a self-contained entity once the phosphate ran out. Australian, Nauruan, and international officials considered a range of options to overcome this problem: resettlement, trust funds, and/or agricultural development. Over time, the Nauruan leaders came to place their faith in the ongoing phosphate wealth, with trust funds created to ensure the ongoing survival of Nauru. For a time, this plan worked, as the Nauruan population maintained a high level of wealth in the two decades

⁷ Maslyn Williams and Barrie Macdonald, *The Phosphateers: A History of the British Phosphate Commissioners and the Christmas Island Phosphate Commission* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1985).

⁸ Weeramantry, *Nauru*, 13.

⁹ United Nations, *Charter of the United Nations*, Chapter XII, Article 76, <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/un-charter/full-text>.

following independence. The logic of developmentalism thus enabled both the exploitation of Nauruan resources (in the name of Australian and New Zealand “development”), while also facilitating Nauruan independence, which could be supported by the wealth generated from the remaining phosphate resources.

Nevertheless, the complex interplay between development and vulnerability continued into the post-independence period. The spendthrift behavior of Nauruan leaders and the population more broadly during the 1970s and 1980s occurred despite an awareness that phosphate deposits were running out, and the failure of Nauruan leaders to plan adequately for the end of phosphate income paved the way for the crash that happened in the 1990s. This collapse was exacerbated by decades of insufficient attention to basic infrastructure throughout Nauru. Schools, hospitals, and infrastructure went into decline, coinciding with a crisis of Nauruan obesity, which was a hangover from the boom period. The excesses of the 1970s and 1980s compounded the crisis of the 1990s and 2000s, as behaviors learned during a time of easy income prevented a smooth adjustment to newfound hardship. Boom and bust were thus inherently linked, and have their legacies in the colonial exploitation of Nauru’s phosphate deposits. This story reveals that high levels of income, often presented as a marker of a nation’s development, is sometimes a superficial measure.

By examining the legacies of colonial development, this chapter adds to a growing literature exploring the legacies of colonial rule in Nauru. Cait Storr and Julia Morris have recently respectively examined the legal dimensions and extractive legacies of Australian rule in Nauru. For both, the impact of Australian exploitation of Nauruan phosphate continues to exert profound influence on the Nauruan people.¹⁰ This scholarship advances earlier work by Christopher Weeramantry and Antony Anghie, which explained the degree to which Australian farmers benefitted from cheap Nauruan phosphate.¹¹ This is not just a Nauruan story; Katerina Teaiwa has demonstrated the extent of colonial exploitation of Banaba, another phosphate island in the Pacific.¹² More broadly, Gregory Cushman has examined the global history of guano, of which Nauru and its phos-

¹⁰ Cait Storr, *International Status in the Shadow of Empire: Nauru and the Histories of International Law*, *International Status in the Shadow of Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020); Morris, *Asylum and Extraction in the Republic of Nauru*.

¹¹ C. G. Weeramantry, *Nauru*; Antony Anghie, “The Heart of My Home – Colonialism, Environmental Damage, and the Nauru Case,” *Harvard International Law Journal* 34, no. 2 (1993).

¹² Katerina Martina Teaiwa, *Consuming Ocean Island: Stories of People and Phosphate from Banaba* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014).

phates form one part.¹³ This chapter, by bringing Nauru's story into conversation with the literature on the history of colonial development, adds yet another dimension to our understanding of the complex legacies of Australian colonialism in Nauru.¹⁴

A Brief History of Nauru

Geographically, Nauru is approximately 3,000 kilometres north-east of Australia. It is a small island, measuring only 21 km² and a person can walk around the entire island in about four hours. The island itself resembles a top hat, with a low-lying perimeter, which is where most of the people live, and a plateau in the center of the island. It is here, on what is known as "topside," that phosphate has been mined since the beginning of the twentieth century.¹⁵ Nowadays this area is notorious for the limestone pinnacles that have been left behind as a result of the mining.¹⁶ Nauru, along with Banaba (now a part of Kiribati) and Christmas Island in the Indian Ocean, were the primary sources of Australian and New Zealand phosphate throughout the twentieth century.¹⁷

Prior to the First World War, Nauru was a German colony, and the earliest phosphate mining enterprises were conducted by the British-owned Pacific Phosphate Company and the Hamburg-owned, Marshall Islands-based Jaluit Gesellschaft.¹⁸ These companies capitalized on the "discovery" of phosphate and guano islands at the turn of the twentieth century, which facilitated the growth

13 Gregory T. Cushman, *Guano and the Opening of the Pacific World: A Global Ecological History* (Cambridge: Cambridge, 2013).

14 The literature on the study of the history of colonial development is a large one and is constantly growing. Some key recent works in this field include Elizabeth McMahon, *The Idea of Development in Africa: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021); Corinna R. Unger, *International Development: A Postwar History* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2018); Ruth Rempel, "Colonialism and Development in Africa," in *The Palgrave Handbook of African Colonial and Postcolonial History*, ed. Martin Shanguhyia and Toyin Falola (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

15 Williams and Macdonald, *The Phosphateers*.

16 H. I. Manner, R. R. Thaman, and D. C. Hassall, "Plant Succession after Phosphate Mining on Nauru," *Australian Geographer* 16, no. 3 (May 1985): 187.

17 Katerina Teaiwa, "Ruining Pacific Islands: Australia's Phosphate Imperialism," *Australian Historical Studies* 46, no. 3 (September 2, 2015): 374–91. There is also a history of Australia converting its phosphate territories into refugee processing centres, which perpetuates the political and economic dependence of places like Nauru and Christmas Island on Australia: *Morris, Asylum and Extraction in the Republic of Nauru*.

18 Williams and Macdonald, *The Phosphateers*.

of fertilizer use throughout Europe and the settler colonies of North America and the Pacific.¹⁹ Upon the outbreak of war in 1914, Australia quickly sent troops to occupy Nauru (as well as German New Guinea) and held the island throughout the war. Australia, under Prime Minister Billy Hughes, sought to annex Nauru but was forced to accept a League of Nations mandate alongside New Zealand and Great Britain. Australia was responsible for the administration of the island. This proved a tricky situation for the Administrators, who were really at the mercy of the BPC, which was also created in the aftermath of the First World War, taking over from the Pacific Phosphate Company. The phosphate money—controlled by the BPC—paid for the administration of the island, which was a violation of the principle of the mandate but which went largely permitted by the Permanent Mandates Commission.²⁰

For half a decade, the BPC dominated the economic, social, and political situation in Nauru. Before the League of Nations had even assigned the Nauru mandate to the British Empire, an agreement was reached between the British, Australians and New Zealanders. The Nauru Island Agreement, as it was known, was signed in 1919, and guaranteed that Australia, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom would have access to well below market price phosphate.²¹ The agreement established the BPC, whose primary duty was to “dispose of the phosphates for the purpose of the agricultural requirements of the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand.”²² Both the United Kingdom and Australia granted themselves access to 42 percent of phosphate provided by the BPC, with New Zealand having access to the remaining 16 percent. In practice, Australia and New Zealand received almost all the phosphate extracted from Nauru due to the high transport costs associated with shipping the mined rock to Britain.

The BPC was an unconventional organization, as the three commissioners, one from each member country, were appointed by their government, but governmental oversight was minimal. The members largely acted in their own interests, and so long as the phosphate kept flowing, the governments were content with this. The BPC monopoly over Nauruan phosphate (in addition to Banaba and Christmas Island) extended to acting as the agent for buyers in Australia and New Zealand. They decided the cost-price of the phosphate, which included the ad-

¹⁹ Cushman, *Guano and the Opening of the Pacific World*.

²⁰ Nancy Viviani, *Nauru: Phosphate and Political Progress* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1970).

²¹ Weeramantry, *Nauru*, 73.

²² Nauru Island Agreement, 1919, reprinted in Barrie Macdonald, *In Pursuit of the Sacred Trust: Trusteeship and Independence in Nauru* (Wellington, N.Z.: New Zealand Institute of International Affairs, Victoria University, 1988), 74–77.

ministration costs on Nauru, upgrading and purchasing mining equipment, as well as buying BPC properties, such as Phosphate House on Collins St in Melbourne. As the true power on Nauru, the BPC controlled the administration's funds, and negotiated with the Indigenous population over phosphate royalties.

The two decades following the First World War were marked by Australian efforts to build up their administration while the BPC resumed the phosphate mining operations. Under League of Nations oversight, there were some attempts to "develop" the local population, such as through education of local elites in schools in Australia. Nevertheless, the primary objective of the Australian administration at this time was to ensure the ongoing exploitation of the phosphate reserves. This process was undone during the Second World War, as the Japanese occupied Nauru and sent a significant portion of the Nauruan population to the island of Chuuk (at that time part of the Japanese controlled Pacific Islands mandate).²³ The upheaval of the Second World War and subsequent attempts to rebuild after 1945 dominated Australian administration policy into the early 1950s. These rehabilitation attempts took place under the supervision of the UN Trusteeship Council, which had replaced the League of Nations mandate system.

Colonial Exploitation and the "Development" of Nauru

As explained in the previous section, the primary objective of the Australian administration in Nauru was to avoid obstructing the BPC in its work to maximize the extraction of phosphate. A further indication of the colonial attitude that informed the Australian attitude towards Nauru can be seen in Prime Minister Billy Hughes' comments in Parliament in 1919: "Without phosphates Australia cannot progress. We are a progressive nation, and year by year require a greater supply of this necessity. This agreement, which vests in us, as one of the parties, 42 per cent of the total output of the island, gives us a most valuable asset, not one that endureth for a day, but an asset that will last for a century or more."²⁴ The naked economic interest that drove Australian colonialism in Nauru was plain to see. This starkly colonialist viewpoint came under increasing attack in the UN Trusteeship Council and forced Australian officials to employ the rhetoric of development to counter accusations of colonial exploitation.

²³ Viviani, *Nauru*, 80–81.

²⁴ *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates* (Hereafter cited as *CPD*), House of Representatives, no. 39, 1919, September 24, 1919, 12678.

In accordance with the requirements of the UN trusteeship system, Australia was required to promote “the political, economic, social, and educational advancement of the inhabitants of the trust territories [i. e. Nauru], and their progressive development towards self-government or independence.”²⁵ This was in keeping with the post-war international system of development, whereby international organizations (such as the UN) and wealthy countries devoted considerable resources to the promotion of “development” in what would become known as the Global South.²⁶ The first two decades after the Second World War marked the zenith of international attempts to establish a system of development, and they coincided with the intensification of Australia’s colonial administration in Nauru. As I have explained elsewhere, Australian policymakers accepted the key principles of post-war international developmentalism and implemented them in their colonial administrations.²⁷

These principles corresponded with the orthodoxy that was established by development experts and policymakers in the 1950s and 1960s. Central to this orthodoxy was the expectation that increasing the productive capacity of a population would enable increased incomes, economic growth, and economic development.²⁸ This productive capacity could be increased through “improvements” in education, infrastructure, health, and agricultural or industrial production. In order to promote this process, wealthy, “developed” countries could provide economic and technical assistance. The most common forms that this assistance took were the building of schools, hospitals, and roads, or the sending of “experts” to recipient countries or the education of local elites in universities in the United States, Europe, or Australia.²⁹ In the case of Australia’s administration in Nauru, the annual reports to the trusteeship council consistently emphasized the new construction of schools or hospitals in order to demonstrate Australia’s support for Nauruan development.³⁰ Nauruans also engaged with the dominant develop-

25 United Nations, *Charter of the United Nations*, Chapter XII, Article 76.

26 M. Frey, S. Kunkel, and C. R. Unger, *International Organizations and Development, 1945–1990* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2014); Corinna R. Unger, *International Development: A Postwar History* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018); Nicholas Ferns, *Australia in the Age of International Development, 1945–1975: Colonial and Foreign Aid Policy in Papua New Guinea and Southeast Asia* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

27 Ferns, *Australia in the Age of International Development*, 10–16.

28 W. Arthur Lewis, *The Theory of Economic Growth* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1955).

29 Sara Lorenzini, *Global Development: A Cold War History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019).

30 “Report of the Commonwealth of Australia on the Administration of the Territory of Nauru for the Period 1 July 1953 to 30 June 1954: Note by the Secretary-General” (United Nations, April 28, 1955), T/1171, UN Trusteeship Council Records.

ment thinking of the time, as shown when Australian-trained Kinza Clodumar (who would go on to be President of Nauru in the late 1990s) invoked Walt Rostow's stages of growth theory to suggest that phosphate had brought Nauru to the "take off" stage and could also generate "self-sustained growth."³¹ The logic of development was a powerful force for both colonized and colonizer.

An additional dimension of the development process, as it was understood in the 1950s and 1960s, involved cultural changes that would take place amongst a society undergoing the modernisation process.³² As Nils Gilman explains, modernization theory was marked by its attempt to "reshape" underdeveloped societies.³³ Australian policymakers acknowledged that this was taking place in Nauru as early as 1949. In the annual report on Nauru, submitted to the UN, Australian officials explained that "as the result of full employment [of the Indigenous population] certain purely native pursuits are slowly falling into disuse."³⁴ Less than four years after the resumption of Australian administration following the Second World War, colonial policy was having a profound effect on Nauruan society.

The UN Trusteeship Council was the main forum for discussions about Nauru's development. Australia, as the administering power of Nauru, submitted to annual oversight of its administration there. The issues relating to Nauru that repeatedly attracted the attention of the Council, and in particular its non-colonial members, were the exploitation of the phosphate reserves, the royalties paid to the Indigenous population, and the perceived need to relocate the Nauruan population once the phosphate ran out. Australia frequently found itself on the defensive during the Council's annual examination of its administration of Nauru. In 1953, Enrique de Marchena, the representative for the Dominican Republic, described Nauru as "purely and simply a mining centre for phosphates; it has no resources other than the enormous and productive phosphate mine, the wealth of which will one day be exhausted."³⁵ In 1958, the Guatemalan representative, Maximiliano Kestler Farnés, claimed that the BPC exercised "a decisive influence over the life and development of the Nauruan community, exploiting and shipping to

³¹ Kinza Clodumar, "Apartheid and Nauru's Obligations," *Pacific Islands Monthly* 41, no. 3 (March 1970): 44–45.

³² Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the words "modernisation" and "development" were often interchangeable.

³³ Nils Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future: Modernization Theory in Cold War America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 5; W. W. Rostow, *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1960).

³⁴ "Report of the Government of Australia on Nauru for the Year Ending 30 June 1949" (United Nations, March 17, 1950), T/472, UN Trusteeship Council Records, 27.

³⁵ "Trusteeship Council 12th Session Official Records 470th Meeting Monday, 29 June 1953, at 2 P.M. New York" (United Nations, June 29, 1953), T/PV.470, UN Trusteeship Council Records, 150.

the three countries which constituted the joint Administering Authority the Territory's only important source of income.”³⁶ These critiques were accompanied by repeated requests for more details into the BPC accounts, which the Australian representatives rebuffed by claiming that because the BPC was a private entity, it was not required to submit to the council's oversight. This was a dubious claim, as the three commissioners (one each from Australia, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom) were governmental appointments and obliged to uphold the terms of the 1919 Nauru Island Agreement, which was signed by the three governments before Nauru was made a League of Nations mandate.³⁷ Australia's refusal to provide more information on the BPC attracted further criticism from the council.³⁸

In response to the criticisms from the Trusteeship Council, Australian representatives frequently invoked the high standard of living that they claimed the Nauruan population enjoyed. In June 1955, J.H. Jones, the Australian “special representative” to the Council (he was a public servant in the Commonwealth Department of Territories, having served as a member of the Papua New Guinean administration until 1953), responded to Soviet claims that Australia was depleting the value of the mined-out land on topside. Jones “replied that such land was of no value, but that it had never been of any value and that the Nauruan people had never used it for agricultural purposes. However, thanks to the extraction of phosphates, the people of Nauru had drawn many benefits from land which had never been of any use to them.”³⁹ Here we see an explicit acknowledgement by Australian officials that Nauru's development was due to the phosphate mining enterprise. The cost price of phosphate negotiated by the BPC took administration costs into account, alongside the royalties to the Nauruan population. This had been the case since the signing of the 1919 Nauru Island Agreement and was not affected by the brief Japanese occupation during the Second World War.⁴⁰ Less than a week later, another Australian representative to the Council, Alan Loomes, made a similar point in summing up Australia's activities in Nauru. Loomes claimed that phosphate mining ensured that the Nauruan population would have access to “services which would not be possible with other communi-

³⁶ “Trusteeship Council 22nd Session Official Records 894th Meeting Monday, 16 June 1958, at 2.40 p.m. New York” (United Nations, June 16, 1958), T/SR.894, UN Trusteeship Council Records, 31.

³⁷ Cait Storr, *International Status in the Shadow of Empire*, 151.

³⁸ “Trusteeship Council 16th Session Official Records 614th Meeting Monday 13 June 1955, at 2.15 p.m. New York” (United Nations, June 13, 1955), T/SR.614, UN Trusteeship Council Records, 20.

³⁹ “Trusteeship Council, 16th Session Official Records, 613th Meeting, Friday, 10 June 1955, at 2 p.m. New York” (United Nations, June 10, 1955), T/SR.613, UN Trusteeship Council Records, 15.

⁴⁰ Cait Storr, *International Status in the Shadow of Empire*, 167.

ties in different circumstances." He also explained that "so long as the phosphate deposits lasted and were efficiently raised by the British Phosphate Commissioners, the prosperity of the people would continue."⁴¹ Thus, it is clear that by the mid-1950s, the connection between phosphate and Nauruan wealth was firmly established in the mind of Australian officials.

While Australia pointed to free education and health as evidence of the success of its development policies in Nauru, local leaders took a different view. The clearest expression of Nauruan attitudes towards some of the services provided by the Australian administration can be found in a September 1956 letter from Head Chief Hammer DeRoburt to the Administrator of Nauru, Reginald Leydin. In this wide-ranging letter, which covered subjects from phosphate royalty rates to Nauruan opposition to direct taxation, DeRoburt also commented on the free provision of school supplies to Nauruan children. The Head Chief explained that "the system of freely issuing everything to school children was introduced only after the recent war by the Administration, without consulting the Council. It was never requested by the people and within our own circles, the wisdom thereof had even been questioned on a number of occasions."⁴² Here we can see direct evidence of the Nauruan leader questioning the practice whereby the administration provided services free of charge out of the island's phosphate royalties. While the population largely accepted these services, DeRoburt wished to make it clear that this was a policy imposed by the Australian administration, rather than by the local Nauruan leadership. This has a direct bearing on post-independence accusations of the spendthrift nature of the Nauruan government. Indeed, DeRoburt anticipated this kind of argument in the letter by stating, "if any blame is to be attached to anyone for services given too freely to Nauruans, in respect of the above at least, the greater part if not the whole should go to the Administration."⁴³ Australian development policy, the funds for which came from the phosphate enterprise, was leading the Nauruan population to expect free services, paid for by the phosphate income.

Australian policy in Nauru was also a subject of debate within Australia. News editorials from the mid-1960s highlighted the "ruthless" exploitation of Nauru and argued that Australia (along with New Zealand and Great Britain) owed "a great obligation to the people of Nauru."⁴⁴ Similarly, parliamentary de-

⁴¹ "Trusteeship Council, 16th Session Official Records, 616th Meeting, Wednesday, 15 June 1955, at 2:15 p.m. New York" (United Nations, June 15, 1955), T/SR.616, UN Trusteeship Council Records, 32.

⁴² Hammer DeRoburt to R.G. Leydin, September 6, 1956, National Archives of Australia (Hereafter cited as NAA: A452, 1958/4013).

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ "Nauru and Racial Prejudice," *Canberra Times*, September 5, 1964.

bates over Nauru were marked by accusations of exploitation, which were then followed up by familiar comments regarding Nauruan affluence. In a 1965 debate over the possible resettlement of the Nauruan population, which is discussed in more detail below, Gough Whitlam, a member of the opposition Australian Labor Party (ALP) and future Australian Prime Minister, commented on Australia's status as an "exploiter" of Nauruan resources. For Whitlam, this obliged Australia to ensure the ongoing welfare of the Nauruan people once the phosphate reserves were exhausted.⁴⁵ In response, Liberal party backbencher Wylie Gibbs defended his government's policy by pointing to the "unprecedentedly good conditions" enjoyed by Nauruans, going even further to attribute Nauruan wealth to the policies enacted by the Australian government. For Gibbs, whose broader politics can be gleaned from his advocacy for the "Rhodesian cause" in Australia, Nauru was not a victim of Australian exploitation but rather a fortunate beneficiary of the developmental effects of phosphate mining.⁴⁶

Australia's use of developmental discourse to defend, or even obscure, its exploitation of Nauru's phosphate wealth is revealing of the utility of development in upholding colonial power structures. For Australian officials and their Trusteeship Council colleagues, so long as it could be claimed that the Nauruan standard of living was rising (and indeed was much higher than other places in the Pacific), then the broader process of economic exploitation could be overlooked. This practice would have very dramatic consequences for the Nauruan population, however, as it served to provide the foundations for an economy that appeared developed when examined superficially but that was ultimately deeply fragile.

The push for resettlement and Nauruan faith in their own development

Observers of Nauru, both in Australia and within the broader UN system, recognized that Nauru's supposedly high standard of living masked a deeper fragility. The 1962 UN Visiting Mission highlighted this predicament in stark terms: "The problem of Nauru presents a paradox. The striking contrast is between a superficially happy present state of affairs and an uncertain and indeed alarming future – and it is the future that matters."⁴⁷ As the BPC ramped up its phosphate mining

⁴⁵ *CPD*, House of Representatives, no. 49, 1965, December 9, 1965, 3835–37.

⁴⁶ *CPD*, House of Representatives, no. 49, 1965, December 9, 1965, 3839–43.

⁴⁷ "United Nations Visiting Mission to the Trust Territories of Nauru and New Guinea, 1962: Report on Nauru" (United Nations, June 9, 1962), T/1595, UN Trusteeship Council Records, 10–11.

enterprise throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the future loomed even larger. Whereas at the beginning of the 1950s, the BPC and administration officials predicted that the phosphate deposits would last into the twenty-first century, by the early 1960s that timeline had shifted to the 1990s or even earlier. This paradox of short-term wealth with long-term precarity for the Nauruans spurred Australian attempts to relocate the Nauruan population.

As with the Australian defences of its own administration in Nauru, the discussion of Nauruan resettlement was rooted in developmental discourse. The underlying premise of Australian resettlement plans was explained by J. H. Jones in the Trusteeship Council in 1957. In his closing statements on Nauru, Jones stated that “the standard of living of the Nauruans, thanks largely to the benefits obtained from the extraction of phosphates, has increased far beyond the point where it could be sustained, let alone further improved, by the agricultural resources of the island.”⁴⁸ The absence of alternative forms of development, such as in the agricultural field (ironically due to a lack of fertilizer for the relatively unproductive Nauruan soil), meant that once the phosphate ran out, life on Nauru would be unviable. This was exacerbated by the high standard of living that had accompanied the mining of phosphate.

Plans to resettle the Nauruan population date back to the 1920s, as there were concerns even then about the viability of Nauru once the phosphate ran out.⁴⁹ While these early plans went nowhere, discussion of resettlement gained in volume by the mid-1950s. Prompted by Trusteeship Council observations and Australian recognition of the challenges that would be faced by the Nauruans once the phosphate ran out, Australian officials looked for places where the Nauruan population could live. The first options were islands off the coast of Papua New Guinea, which was also under Australian administration at the time. The most promising of these, according to Territories Department officials, was Woodlark Island, in the Solomon Sea, part of Milne Bay province.⁵⁰ The principal issue with this option was that the Nauruan population were unwilling to move to a location with a lower standard of living than they experienced in Nauru.⁵¹ This could not be guaranteed in any Pacific island location, so the Australian government looked to islands off the Australian coast. After an extensive search and consultations with the Nauruan population throughout the first half of the 1960s, the

⁴⁸ “Trusteeship Council – Twentieth Session, Statement in Reply on the Trust Territory of Nauru by the Special Representative (Mr. J.H. Jones), 13 June 1957”, NAA: A452, 1957/257.

⁴⁹ W. J. Hudson, “Australia’s Experience as a Mandatory Power,” *Australian Outlook* 19, no. 1 (1965): 39.

⁵⁰ Minutes of the Nauru Local Government Council, October 6, 1954, NAA: A452, 1958/4013.

⁵¹ Minutes of the Nauru Local Government Council, April 6, 1955, NAA: A452, 1958/4013.

two most likely options were Fraser Island and Curtis Island, both just off the coast of Queensland. However, the resettlement plans came unstuck after the Commonwealth Government was unable to promise the Nauruans that their separate identity would be maintained if they moved to Australia.⁵² Some additional factors that shaped the Nauruans' final decision were opposition from the existing inhabitants of Curtis and Fraser Islands and Nauruan confidence in their own ability to maintain their living standards on Nauru.⁵³

Throughout the first half of the 1960s, the negotiations over the resettlement of the Nauruan population dominated Australian administration policy. It was also an annual subject in the Trusteeship Council, as the members repeatedly expressed their skepticism of Nauru's viability as a self-governing entity, particularly once the phosphate ran out. For these members, while the high standard of living of the Nauruans was something to celebrate, it was not going to last. Aside from the quote provided above from the 1962 Visiting Mission report, other Trusteeship Council members expressed similar sentiments. For instance, in the 1963 discussion of Nauru, the Chinese, French, and American representatives all accepted the need for resettlement.⁵⁴ Importantly for Nauruan development, the plans for resettlement overshadowed future planning for what an independent Nauru, with its population living on Nauru, would look like. For instance, uncertainty over the future habitation of Nauru slowed housing projects on Nauru, as Australian officials didn't see the need to continue building houses if the population was set to move in the near future.⁵⁵ As with many elements of this story, the negotiations over resettlement interacted with development policy in contradictory ways. On the one hand, there were limited options for resettlement owing to the high standard of living in Nauru. On the other hand, plans for the Nauruan population to leave their island resulted in a slowing of development programs.

Nevertheless, the breakdown of negotiations regarding Nauruan resettlement culminated in discussions about Nauruan independence. One byproduct of Nauruan advocacy for their own rights regarding the royalty rates paid by the BPC was the emergence of a kind of nationalist movement, led by Head Chief Hammer DeR-

⁵² One of the primary concerns in Australian discussions over Nauruan resettlement was the impacts that the arrival of Nauruans would have on the White Australia policy. See Macdonald, *In Pursuit of the Sacred Trust*, 46.

⁵³ Barrie Macdonald, *In Pursuit of the Sacred Trust*; Viviani, *Nauru*, 141.

⁵⁴ "Trusteeship Council 30th Session Official Records 1212th Meeting Friday, 7 June 1963, at 3 p.m. New York" (United Nations, June 7, 1963), T/SR.1212, UN Trusteeship Council Records.

⁵⁵ Commonwealth of Australia, *Report to the General Assembly of the United Nations on the Administration of the Territory of Nauru for Year 1962–63* (Canberra: Commonwealth Government Printer, 1964), 20.

oburt. DeRoburt spoke on behalf of the Nauruan people in the Trusteeship Council, and assured its concerned representatives that Nauru could be a viable nation-state. In Trusteeship Council debate over Nauru in 1966, DeRoburt expressed his faith in Nauru's "very bright" economic prospects, based on expectations surrounding future phosphate income.⁵⁶ For DeRoburt and other pro-independence Nauruans, the continuance of phosphate mining would guarantee the maintenance of Nauru's high living standards, thereby justifying Nauruan viability. This assuaged the concerns of some of the representatives of the Trusteeship Council. Angie Brooks, the Liberian representative, was confident that the Nauruans were capable of governing themselves, while also pointing to the prospect of several more decades of phosphate income to support the soon-to-be independent state.⁵⁷ Nauruan advocacy for independence—led by DeRoburt—intensified throughout the 1960s, building upon the movement that had challenged the BPC for increased royalty rates. Following several years of negotiations with the BPC over the transfer of the phosphate enterprise, Nauru became formally independent in 1968. Ironically, Nauru's phosphate wealth, which was a legacy of colonial rule, served as the foundation for its independence.

Observers of the Nauruan struggle for independence connected developmental observations with the struggle for self-government. As Nancy Viviani explained in 1970, two years after Nauru gained its independence, "this attainment of independence by the Nauruan people has a wider significance, for it shows that where economic and social circumstances are favourable, the attainment of legal sovereignty need present no insuperable problems."⁵⁸ In a vivid representation of Nauru's complex story of development, in addition to the above comment by Viviani on Nauru at the time of independence, she made the following comment: "Although the Nauruans are absorbed in a semi-suburbia of refrigerators and motorcars, the moonscape of the worked-out phosphate fields nevertheless perpetually reminds them of the all-important problem of the future."⁵⁹ This dual existence of wealth and desolation would mark the boom period.

⁵⁶ "Trusteeship Council 33rd session official records 1289th meeting Thursday, 14 July 1966, at 3:25 p.m. New York" (United Nations, July 14, 1966), T/SR.1289, UN Trusteeship Council Records.

⁵⁷ "Trusteeship Council 33rd session official records 1291st meeting Tuesday, 19 July 1966, at 11:25 a.m. New York" (United Nations, July 19, 1966), T/SR.1291, UN Trusteeship Council Records.

⁵⁸ Viviani, *Nauru*, 177.

⁵⁹ Viviani, *Nauru*, 158.

Independence and the phosphate boom (and subsequent bust)

Nauru gained its independence on 31 January 1968 (the anniversary of the return from Chuuk), and after several years of negotiations took control of the phosphate enterprise from the BPC. The Nauruans were required to pay A\$21 million (around A\$292 million in 2022 dollars) to buy the right to mine their own land.⁶⁰ According to Barrie Macdonald, the Nauruan decision to stay on Nauru—aside from the reasons discussed above—was motivated by the belief that “there was hope for a viable community existence based on investment income, especially if there was a complementary rehabilitation programme for the worked-out mining lands.”⁶¹ The central feature of Nauruan plans for their financial future was the establishment of the Nauru Phosphate Royalties Trust (NPRT). A percentage of phosphate income was invested into the trust, while Nauruan landowners continued to receive a sizeable royalty. This both satisfied the landowners, who sought to maintain a high standard of living, and responded to the concerns of Australian officials and UN observers who continued to express concern over the long-term feasibility of Nauru.

In the early post-independence years, Nauru was a beneficiary of a significant rise in phosphate prices. The ramifications of the 1973 oil crisis combined with other factors relating to both production and consumption caused a sharp price spike. From an already increased price of US\$13.75 per ton in 1973, phosphate prices jumped to US\$67 per ton in 1975.⁶² In the context of this significant rise in the value of phosphate, Nauruan landowners were suddenly amongst the wealthiest people in the world. Ships bearing phosphate would travel to ports in Japan and Australia and return laden with consumer goods that were otherwise unavailable in Nauru. Furthermore, given the small amount of productive agricultural land in Nauru and the shortage of fresh water, food and water were imported, paid for with the proceeds of the phosphate enterprise. As John Connell explains, by the 1970s Nauru had the features of a “comprehensive welfare state,” with essential goods all provided by the government, and significant amounts of

⁶⁰ Antony Anghie, “The Heart of My Home – Colonialism, Environmental Damage, and the Nauru Case,” *Harvard International Law Journal* 34, no. 2 (1993): 460.

⁶¹ Barrie Macdonald, *In Pursuit of the Sacred Trust*, 46.

⁶² Michael C. Howard, *Mining, Politics, and Development in the South Pacific* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 177.

money left over for “conspicuous consumption: automobiles, video sets, stereos, and, especially, food.”⁶³ On the surface at least, Nauru was a wealthy, happy place.

While Nauruan landowners benefited from the significant rise in phosphate prices, Nauru’s trust fund also grew rapidly in the 1970s. President Hammer DeRoburt exercised considerable control over the use of trust funds during this period. As has been already discussed, he was concerned for the future prosperity of his people, and he repeatedly expressed the need for “putting aside some of today’s wealth” for subsequent generations.⁶⁴ This corresponded with the strategy that has been described by Michael Howard as being focused on overseas investments, particularly in stocks and real estate, but that was under the control of a “small group of individuals.”⁶⁵ Trust funds were used to invest in real estate in Australia and a shipping company that gave Nauru control over the transport of phosphate, and partnerships were formed with mining companies throughout Asia. With proper handling, these funds could have served as a sound foundation for future Nauruan generations.

Over time, however, the investments made by the NPRT failed to be profitable. An early example was the Nauruan airline, which was established soon after independence, and which involved the purchase of aircraft and the establishment of routes throughout the Pacific and between Japan and Australia. Flights were rarely full, and the generous amenities provided in the air replicated some of the consumerist habits that were evident in Nauru. For example, a 1973 article described the basic level of service provided on board: “Eating and drinking is almost continuous. Oysters, champagne and tropical fruits precede a traditional European-cooked breakfast. Later there is caviar, palm hearts, prawns, smoked ham washed down with the very best of Australian, French and German wines.”⁶⁶ Unsurprisingly, given the lack of passengers and the expenses associated with the food and drink provided, the airline constantly operated at a loss, depleting NPRT resources. Another example was the 52-floor Nauru House in Melbourne. Completed in 1977 at a cost of A\$45 million (over A\$307 million in 2024 dollars), the building was eventually sold in 2005 for A\$140 million (A\$233 million in 2024 dollars).⁶⁷ The

⁶³ John Connell, quoted in Howard, *Mining, Politics, and Development in the South Pacific*, 178–79.

⁶⁴ “Should Nauruans Contribute to the Welfare State?,” *Pacific Islands Monthly* 42, no. 3 (March 1971): 24.

⁶⁵ Howard, *Mining, Politics, and Development in the South Pacific*, 192.

⁶⁶ Christopher Beck, “A Small Airline with Big Ideas and a Big Breakfast,” *Pacific Islands Monthly* 44, no. 3 (March 1973): 105–6.

⁶⁷ Macdonald, *In Pursuit of the Sacred Trust: Trusteeship and Independence in Nauru*, 61–62; “Nauru moves out of Melbourne with \$99 m sale,” *The Age*, April 8, 2005.

building was expected to provide ongoing rental and commercial income, but high costs limited Nauru House's profitability. Crucially, the mismanagement of Nauru's finances occurred alongside neglect for crucial infrastructure, such as health, education, and other services. For almost half a century, Nauruans had come to take basic services for granted. In this way, the concerns expressed by Hammer DeRoburt in his September 1956 letter to Administrator Reginald Leydin had come home to roost.

Conclusion—navigating the end of phosphate wealth

By the mid-1980s, Nauru was forced to deal with a growing number of looming crises. The phosphate resources were about to run out, NPRT funds were diminishing, and basic infrastructure was becoming obsolete. These issues were compounded by problems that were a byproduct of the consumerist habits of the Nauruan population. Obesity and diabetes became major health problems, affecting upwards of 25 percent of the population by the mid-1980s.⁶⁸ Thus, while 1980s observers such as Paul Gigot, discussed at the beginning of the paper, could point to the excesses of Lamborghinis being driven on Nauru's only road, there was always the prospect of the end of phosphate wealth. The collapse of phosphate prices in the 1980s and 1990s only exacerbated a decline that had already begun.

One source of hope for the Nauruan population was the possible rehabilitation of "topside," which had long been regarded as an expensive necessity to provide Nauru with alternative forms of food or income after the end of phosphate mining in the 1990s.⁶⁹ While there was at one time a plan to use some of the NPRT to finance the rehabilitation, by the mid-1980s it was clear that there were insufficient funds for this purpose. Instead, Nauru launched a case in the International Court of Justice case that was eventually settled in the early 1990s, with Australia paying a little over \$100 million to compensate the Nauruans for the unusable land on "topside."⁷⁰ Unfortunately, the money was never used to rehabilitate the land, and "topside" continues to be defined by its inhospitable landscape of limestone pinnacles. That the settlement money was incorporated into the Australian aid budget to Nauru is presented by Cait Storr as "an almost poetic

⁶⁸ Beverley Balkau et al., "Factors Associated with the Development of Diabetes in the Micronesian Population of Nauru," *American Journal of Epidemiology* 122, no. 4 (1985).

⁶⁹ Macdonald, *In Pursuit of the Sacred Trust*, 46.

⁷⁰ Storr, *International Status in the Shadow of Empire*.

indictment of the post-independence paradigm of development.”⁷¹ As with many other aspects of this case study, the unmet Nauruan expectations of assistance with rehabilitation of the worked-out areas at the time of independence reveal the obstacles put in the way of the Nauruan population maintaining their living standards.

After decades of high standards of living, by the 1990s and early 2000s Nauru was effectively bankrupt. A financial lifeline was offered by the Australian Government in the early 2000s in the unlikely guise of a so-called “Pacific solution” to a growing refugee crisis. As one part of a much broader attempt to dissuade asylum seekers from attempting to come to Australia by boat, John Howard’s conservative Coalition Government made a deal with the Nauruan government to establish a refugee processing center on Nauru. This was to be completely funded by the Australian government, and enabled some Nauruans to enjoy an income that was at least comparable with the times of the phosphate boom.⁷² While the income provided by the refugee processing enterprise solved Nauru’s immediate financial issues, it perpetuated the longer history of Nauruan dependence on Australia. Julia Morris has examined this process through the prism of “extractivism” to demonstrate that the colonial logic underpinning the phosphate enterprise has been redirected towards Nauruan labor and the physical bodies of refugees.⁷³ In a perverse demonstration of the ongoing Nauruan dependence on singular, finite forms of income, fears have emerged for Nauru’s development in the light of Australian plans to wind down its refugee processing center. It remains to be seen whether the lessons of the phosphate boom have been learned.

Ultimately, Nauru’s story is one where exploitation and immense wealth occurred simultaneously and in the same place. Both Australian and Nauruan leaders embraced the logic of development to inform their attitudes towards the use of Nauru’s phosphate. While this generated great wealth and apparent development, it also created the conditions for Nauru’s rapid economic decline. It is obviously too bold a claim to attribute all the responsibility for Nauru’s economic

⁷¹ Storr, *International Status in the Shadow of Empire*, 251.

⁷² Savitri Taylor, “The Pacific Solution or a Pacific Nightmare?: The Difference Between Burden Shifting and Responsibility Sharing,” *Asian-Pacific Law & Policy Journal* 6 (2005); Jini Kim Watson, “From Pacific Way to Pacific Solution: Sovereignty and Dependence in Oceanic Literature,” *Australian Humanities Review* 58 (2015); Eberhard Weber, “The Pacific Solution – A Catastrophe for the Pacific!?,” *Environment and Ecology Research* 3, no. 4 (2015). It is also important to note that Australia made a deal with its other former colony, Papua New Guinea, to “process” refugee claims at Manus Island.

⁷³ Morris, *Asylum and Extraction in the Republic of Nauru*.

decline to the legacies of Australian colonial rule, but there is no doubt that some of the conditions for what happened in Nauru after independence can be connected to pre-1968 policies. The primary purpose of Nauru as an Australian colony was to be a source of cheap phosphate. This placed the island on a path of dependence on one commodity that it was never able to overcome. Similarly, Australia's developmental policy revolved around using the phosphate income to provide basic services to the Nauruan population, sometimes despite local concerns as to the effects of such a policy. As a consequence, the Nauruan case study reveals the degree to which a high standard of living, seen by many observers as a key marker of development, can exist alongside economic fragility.

Amit Das Gupta

Initial failure, late success? Short-term and long-term effects of Nehruvian development policy

Introduction

“India wasted the first 40 years after independence,” claims economist Meghnad Desai, meaning especially development policy.¹ Tirthankar Roy sees the strategy pursued under the country’s first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru as based on the fundamentally wrong assumption that there had not been sustainable growth of industries during the colonial period. Colonial “dynamism and institution-building in banking, trade storage and futures” were replaced by a regulatory system “that paralyzed trade, and drove private capital away from commercial infrastructure and institutions, reversing almost a century-long trend to the contrary.”² Indeed, many scholars agree with this assessment. Many in India’s current business community also share that point of view, as well as the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), in power in India since 2014, having outmaneuvered the Indian National Congress Party, which had achieved independence and, thereafter, remained in power for decades. J. Bradford Delong writes of a “disastrous wrong turn by India’s first prime minister [...] toward Fabian socialism, central planning, and an unbelievable quantity of bureaucratic red tape. This “licence raj” strangled the private sector and led to rampant corruption and massive inefficiency. As a result, India stagnated until bold neoliberal economic reforms triggered by the currency crisis of 1991.”³ According to this narrative, it needed Prime Minister Narasimha Rao and Finance Minister Manmohan Singh to rectify all the fundamental Nehruvian errors from the period between 1947 to 1964, continued by his daughter Indira and grandson Rajiv Gandhi.

1 “India Has to Stop Being Satisfied with its own Performance,” Business Today, November 13, 2022, accessed September 28, 2024, <https://www.businesstoday.in/magazine/interview/story/india-has-to-stop-being-satisfied-with-its-own-performance-says-veteran-economist-lord-meghnad-desai-351728-2022-11-03>.

2 Tirthankar Roy, “The Economic Legacies of Colonial Rule in India. Another Look,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 50, no.15 (2015): 57.

3 J. Bradford DeLong, “India Since Independence,” in *In Search of prosperity. Analytic Narratives on Economic Growth*, ed. Dani Rodrik (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 184.

Painting in black and white never convinces. This chapter, therefore, first, will emphasize the obvious, namely that the boom of the 1990s did not come out of the blue but was largely based on decisions taken in the Nehruvian era, which, however, took far longer to yield results than contemporary observers had anticipated. Nehruvian development policy prioritized four sectors: First, from the outset, food security was given precedence in the hunger-ridden subcontinent. Second, starting in the early 1950s, the Government of India (GoI), invested in select key industries, most notably steel. It aimed, third, at improving the country's infrastructure, particularly to facilitate the efficient transport of manufactured goods. Last, it sought to develop a pool of indigenous experts capable of managing modern industries, therefore investing into elite education as available in the newly established Indian Institutes of Technology (IIT). These four aspects will be examined in detail in the following chapter.

Leading international economists regarded this policy as coherent and state-of-the-art, and it was based on a broad national consensus. It had, nevertheless, three major flaws. First, its priorities were not consistently balanced over time—most notably, food security was soon overshadowed by major industrial projects. Second, the latter lacked a solid financial foundation, and while foreign aid began flowing a decade after independence, it filled but a fraction of the many gaps. The third miscalculation concerned the time required to achieve tangible progress. Fueled by the enormous enthusiasm around independence, both government and public anticipated rapid advancements—expectations that far exceeded realistic timelines. Once it turned out that India would definitely require more than a generation to catch up with industrialized nations, widespread disappointment set in.

The broad discontent which persists until today began to surface in the late Nehru years, fueled by concerns over corruption, mismanagement, and inefficiency across various sectors—challenges common to many developing economies. This dissatisfaction became widespread during Indira Gandhi's tenure as prime minister, often referred to as two lost decades for democracy and development. Economic consideration was often subordinated to the relentless struggle for domestic political power. Furthermore, concepts valid in the years immediately after independence were not adapted to reflect new experiences or evolving circumstances but became dogmatic. This rigidity was compounded by an oversized bureaucracy, which had entrenched itself in an increasingly inflexible, centrally planned economy. Moreover, Mrs. Gandhi in her struggle for political survival often invoked her popular father's legacy but failed to win the hearts of intellectuals and journalists. Over time, her tarnished image began to cast a shadow over that of her father. While her son Rajiv initiated moderate reforms starting in 1984—which indeed helped lay the groundwork for the economic boom of the 1990s in

certain sectors—the reputation of the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty had been nearly irreparably damaged. It is important to note, however, that Nehruvian development policy with all its flaws and the mismanagement by later prime ministers was crucial for the boom of the 1990s, though it needed much longer than expected to blossom.

From the outset, development policy encompassed much more than development in the narrow sense. As Nehru famously stated in one of his greatest speeches on the eve of independence at midnight of 14 August 1947, India was finally about to make its “tryst with destiny,” awakening “to life and freedom.”⁴ Development was intended to play a crucial role: Domestically, it was meant as a joint effort helping to unify the country’s extremely diverse peoples into a cohesive nation, which barely existed in 1947. It was further meant to raise the living standards of India’s masses, aiming at reducing tremendous inequalities in wealth and therefore opportunities. Internationally, it sought to prepare the new country for a significant role in global politics and economics. A subcontinent that had once been extremely wealthy and influential, contributing significantly to the history of human civilization, had been denied its rightful place by colonialism. With the end of the latter, the stage was set for an old major player to re-emerge—at least, this was how many Indians envisioned it. In this way, development and general policy intertwined long-standing traditions of statehood and thought predating colonial rule with contemporary Western perspectives on nation-building and political philosophies. Nehru, its principal architect, is aptly described as embodying a sometimes contradictory blend of South Asian and European thinking.⁵

Historical backgrounds of Indian development policy

The ancient European and Mediterranean world had known India as a region of riches beyond words. Not only had Alexander the Great reached the Indus. Later, the Roman Empire had maintained trading posts along the shores of South Asia. Centuries later, after discovering the route around Africa and the Ottoman Empire, the European seafaring nations came as traders again. Forceful colonization

⁴ Jawaharlal Nehru, “A Tryst with Destiny,” speech delivered in the Constituent Assembly of August 14–15, 1947, in *Selected works of Jawaharlal Nehru*, 2nd series, vol. 3, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1985), 135–36.

⁵ Amit Das Gupta, *Handel, Hilfe, Hallstein-Doktrin. Die bundesdeutsche Südasienpolitik unter Adenauer und Erhard, 1949–1966* (Husum: Matthiesen, 2004), 111–12.

as it took place in the Americas was not an option. The Mughal Empire was at the peak of its power in the sixteenth century; it was inhabited by one-fifth of the global population and was “producing about a quarter of global manufacturing; indeed, in many ways it was the world’s industrial powerhouse and the world’s leader in manufactured textiles.”⁶ The Mughals were the richest rulers of the globe. European delegations had to plead for trading rights, and soon, large quantities of European silver flowed into South Asia.

The pattern changed when the subcontinent descended into what William Dalrymple aptly describes as “anarchy” in the seventeenth century.⁷ The British East India Company, in particular, established itself as a major player, founding forts and cities, raising armies, and conquering rather than buying more and more territory. As a business enterprise, its primary aim was to maximize profits for its shareholders, which it pursued with ruthless efficiency. Agrarian taxes were high and impoverished large sections of the rural population. To finance the ongoing export of various commodities to Europe, British products were forced upon India, shifting the region from being a major seller to becoming a major market. This shift was most evident in the textile industry. As a result, South Asia had, within two centuries, transformed from one of the wealthiest parts of the world to one of the poorest. The poverty of the Indian masses became as proverbial as the region’s riches once had been.

The East India Company’s profits were extraordinary, but its brutal methods led to an uprising in 1857. After Europeans were nearly driven out of the subcontinent, the British Crown took control, scarcely a more benevolent regime. It continued to prioritize maximizing profits with minimal investments, making British India the most profitable colony in the world. When the British finally left in 1947, they had at least established an extensive railway network, although this was primarily intended to expedite the transport of profitable goods rather than to benefit the local population.⁸

From an Indian perspective, the decline from extraordinary wealth to extreme poverty was a deeply traumatic experience. The generation that founded modern India drew several lessons from this. Firstly, they recognized that full independence was not yet achieved with the transfer of political power in 1947; true sovereignty remained a distant goal as long as economic dependencies persisted.

⁶ William Dalrymple, *The Anarchy. The East India Company, Corporate Violence and the Pillage of an Empire* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), 14.

⁷ Dalrymple, *The Anarchy*.

⁸ Dan Bogart and Latika Chaudhary, “Railways in Colonial India. An Economic Achievement?”, in *A New Economic History of Colonial India*, ed. Latika Chaudhary et al. (London: Routledge, 2016), 140–60.

While the Western world, immediately after the Second World War, understood that complete autonomy was neither practical nor desirable, India pursued *swaraj* (self-rule) and *swadeshi* (self-reliance).

To Western observers, India's aspirations might have seemed like a naïve dream or even hubris given its economic weakness in the mid-twentieth century. However, the subcontinent's history instilled in the indigenous elites a confidence that the country possessed all the resources needed to both reclaim its former wealth and create new opportunities now that the foreign exploiters had departed. This self-assurance was so strong that, until 2015, no Indian government ever demanded reparations from Britain.⁹ Delhi believed that, alongside China with its somewhat similar history of greatness and foreign domination, India was destined to lead other developing nations. Consequently, despite its own needs, India made it a priority to provide aid to even poorer countries right from the start.¹⁰

This remarkable self-confidence had its roots in South Asia's long history of statehood and effective administration, too. Indeed, like previous conquerors, the Europeans had made great use of these established systems.¹¹ It took a long while, though, until top positions in the administration became accessible to a small number of Indians. Due to British manpower shortage, such opportunities grew but from 1924.¹² Already by 1939, the elite cadre of the Indian Civil Service comprised more Indian than European officials.¹³ When India and Pakistan gained independence shortly thereafter, unlike other former colonies, they had experienced administrators available from the bottom to the top levels. Many of these officials had already worked on economic issues, which had been a focus following the Great Depression and during the Second World War.¹⁴

Closely linked with the rise of Indians in the administration were their successes in Western-style education. Particularly within the Hindu community, there was a strong embrace of the opportunities provided by British academic institutions established on the subcontinent from 1857, first and most prominently

⁹ Jitendra Nath Misra, "The Paradoxes of India-U.K. Relations," *Vietnam Journal for Indian and Asian Studies* 4, no. 1 (2022): 62–71.

¹⁰ Srikant Dutt, "Indian Aid to Co-developing Countries," *Economic and Political Weekly* 15, no. 14 (1980): 672–78.

¹¹ Dietmar Rothermund, *The Role of the state in South Asia and other essays* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2000), 13–18.

¹² David C. Potter, "Manpower Shortage and the End of Colonialism. The Case of the Indian Civil Service," *Modern Asian Studies* 7, no. 1 (1973): 47–73.

¹³ Amit Das Gupta, *The Indian Civil Service and Indian Foreign Policy* (Delhi: Routledge, 2021), 25–26.

¹⁴ Amit Das Gupta, *Serving India. A Political Biography of Subimal Dutt, India's Longest Serving Foreign Secretary* (Delhi: Manohar, 2017), 86–88.

Calcutta University. These institutions primarily served British interests by training Indians in European thinking for administrative and other purposes. Wealthier Indians often sent their sons to Britain, where many excelled at Cambridge and Oxford. Among the most successful, many opted for the Indian Civil Service, which was then considered the most prestigious career path.¹⁵ Others established themselves as lawyers, scholars, or economists. By the time of independence, the Indian academic elite rivalled those in European metropoles.

Closely associated with these academic successes was an Indian sense of mission. There was a broad political and societal consensus that while one had much to learn from others, particularly in terms of technical know-how, there was much to offer in return. The subcontinent was home to two world religions, and its spirituality had fascinated Westerners for generations. Therefore, Indians considered themselves among the advanced civilizations—a belief that contributed to widespread self-image as a potential great power.

In sum, India believed that it mostly needed to set free existing capacities for successful and quick development. Furthermore, it considered itself a partner on eye-level with industrialized countries right from the start, a recipient only in the field of modern industries. At the same time, a country aiming for maximum autonomy was not necessarily supportive of partnerships, even at the eye-level.

The fundamentals of Nehruvian development policy

Early Indian development policy was widely regarded as exemplary and state-of-the-art by many Indians, as well as observers from the West and socialist countries. The ambitious goal was to transform an agrarian society into a modern industrial state within a generation—a feat that had taken Europe and North America over a century to accomplish. The methods and strategies adopted reflected Nehru's personal convictions, who aimed at building a nation considering industrial plants its new temples. Drawing inspiration from Stalin's rapid industrialization, Nehru nonetheless believed in Western democracy and the importance of private entrepreneurship. He maintained, though, that the state should control certain sectors of the economy, at least for a certain period. As a politician deeply interested in international affairs, Nehru was fully aware that India could realize its potential as a great power only with the support of a strong industrial base. Overall, successful development was at the very core of Nehruvian politics.

15 Das Gupta, *Serving India*, 33–35.

Nehru's leadership role remained unchallenged throughout his reign and leading industrialists themselves called for a significant role of the state, too. Even before the so-called Bombay Plan of 1944, a scheme on how to develop India published by five leading figures, its authors acknowledged that the task of modernization was too gargantuan for them to handle alone.¹⁶ Indeed, both the industrialists' as well as the politicians' schemes tried to achieve three aims together. Obviously, agrarian India needed to be developed in order to raise the living standards of the masses, considered among the poorest worldwide. This was not only a question of fairness but of internal stability. An uprising of the poor possibly followed by a communist take-over was a nightmare for Indian politicians as well as the business community.¹⁷

Second, after *swaraj* had been achieved, the country was meant to become fully independent. This meant escaping the colonial economic cycle by transforming India from a provider of raw materials into an exporter of manufactured goods. For this purpose, not only would key industries have to come into being, but foreign competition would have to be kept out of the domestic market. This included restrictions on foreign capital. In sum, economics and politics were intertwined perhaps to an even greater extent than usual.

Accordingly, the government of independent India came up with the Industrial Policy Resolution of 1948,¹⁸ much in line with expert advice advocating a focus on infrastructure and heavy industries, driven by substantial state investments. According to the resolution, basic and strategic industries, such as arms, atomic energy, and railways, would be exclusive state monopolies. For key industries, including coal, oil, iron, and steel, the state assumed exclusive responsibility for all future developments, with the situation to be reviewed after a decade. Numerous other relevant industries came under state regulation and supervision. Additionally, the government retained the authority to participate and intervene in all remaining industries. Furthermore, the influence of foreign companies and capital was restricted. Foreign partners had to accept a minority position and not seek to

¹⁶ The 'Bombay Plan' for India's economic development (Bombay, The Commercial Printing Press, 1944).

¹⁷ Sarvepalli Gopal, *Jawaharlal Nehru. A Biography 2, 1947–1956* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1979), 72.

¹⁸ Babita Thakur, "Changing Face of India's Industrial Policies. A Look," *International Journal of Scientific and Research Publications*, "Industrial Policy Resolution 1948" 2, no. 12 (2012): 1–7, accessed December 25, 2024, <https://www.ijrsp.org/research-paper1212/ijrsp-p12104.pdf>.

transfer profits abroad. Factually, it insulated Indian economy from global engagement.¹⁹

It was anticipated that this approach would have beneficial effects on multiple fronts. Firstly, India's trade balance was expected to profit from a shift in the nature of its exports. Additionally, an improved infrastructure, coupled with the availability of manufactured goods "made in India" in the domestic market, was predicted to stimulate the growth of consumer industries in the private sector. Lastly, it was hoped that these developments would lead to increased agricultural productivity.

The 1950s

In the following, the focus will be on the abovementioned four key aspects of Nehruvian development policy: agriculture, infrastructure, steel production, and education. Food crises, often triggered by droughts, crop failures or mismanagement, were challenges that independent India inherited from the colonial period. The most recent devastating example was the Bengal Famine of 1943, which claimed up to four million lives.²⁰ While still under British rule, initiatives such as the Grow-More-Food Scheme had been introduced.²¹ Nehru had hoped for self-sufficiency in food by 1951, a sign of both optimism and naivety.²² With the population increasing from around 240 million in 1900 to 360 million by 1951, India's first Five-Year Plan (1951–1956) prioritized agriculture.²³ Through the first three five-year plans, agriculture grew at an annual rate of 3%, with total production of food grains increasing from 55 to 88.4 million tons between 1949 and 1964.²⁴ This, nevertheless, did not satisfy demand.²⁵ Only Nehru's successor Lal Bahadur Shastri (1964–1966) launched a Green Revolution, long advocated by India's foreign donors. Nevertheless, Indira Gandhi, following Shastri, still faced the challenge of India's dependence on American food aid provided under the PL 480

19 Anthony P. D'Costa, "Economic Nationalism in Motion. Steel, Auto and Software Industries in India," *Review of International Political Economy* 16, no. 4 (2009): 620–48.

20 Madhusree Mukerjee, *Churchill's Secret War. The British Empire and the Ravaging of India during World War II* (New York: Basic Books, 2010).

21 Das Gupta, *Serving India*, 88–91.

22 S. Subramaniam and B.S. Basurkar, "Economic Progress in the Nehru Era," *India Quarterly* 23, no. 2 (1967): 173–82.

23 Hanson, *The Process of Planning* (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), 89–122.

24 Subramaniam, "Economic progress," 173–82.

25 Aditya Mukherjee, *India Since Independence*, ed. Bipan Chandra et.al. (New Delhi: Penguin, revised edition 2008), 450.

scheme. President Lyndon B. Johnson was discontent with India's performance regarding agricultural reforms but even more with its stand vis-à-vis the Vietnam War. Therefore, he implemented a "short-tether policy," authorizing food deliveries to India on a ship-by-ship basis.²⁶ Notwithstanding major reforms, food crises remained a feature of the early 1970s, now hitting certain regions rather than the country as a whole. This continued to effect India's international standing. A good example was the aftermath of Bangladesh's War of Liberation in 1971, which Delhi had effectively supported. Due to droughts in the years thereafter, India was unable to provide large-scale food supplies. The United States, having heftily opposed the creation of the new state, changed tack and transformed from enemy to the new benefactor.²⁷

Progress in infrastructure was underwhelming, too. India aimed to develop its own modern means of transport, with Indo-German joint ventures producing locomotives, wagons, and trucks. Plans to create an Indian equivalent of the Volkswagen, however, never came to fruition.²⁸ Individual car ownership, a hallmark of industrialized nations, was largely dismissed as a luxury in India. The only car widely available until the late 1980s was the Ambassador, a vehicle based on the 1948 British Morris Oxford Series III. With minimal modernization and a high price tag, the Ambassador soon became a symbol of the stagnation in the Indian economy. Rather than investing in highways, India maintained its extensive, outdated, and slow railway network. The main overland route, the Grand Trunk Road, which predated even colonial rule, allowed only slow transport by trucks. Communication, another critical component of a modern economy, also remained a significant bottleneck. Obtaining a phone line for an office or home required considerable patience—by 1990, there were only eight million connections and twenty million on a waiting list. Moreover, making a call within India or abroad was often a gamble. Attempting to call a person in Delhi could unexpectedly connect you with someone in Bombay instead. The government considered telephones a luxury, not a necessity for development, let alone a right. This revealed a profound lack of understanding of the fundamental needs of modern economies.²⁹

²⁶ Marcel Bearn and Marcel, *Weizen, Waffen und Kredite für den indischen Subkontinent. Die amerikanische Südasienpolitik unter Präsident Johnson im Dilemma zwischen Indien und Pakistan, 1963–1969* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1990), 233–41.

²⁷ Das Gupta, *Serving India*, 500.

²⁸ Das Gupta, *Handel*, 83.

²⁹ Shashi Tharoor, *The Elephant, the Tiger and the Cell Phone. Reflections on India in the Twenty-first Century* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2007), 15–16.

The primary focus was on establishing heavy industries, particularly steel plants. Pre-independency production of 8,000 tons per annum by 1943 was abysmal and mostly used for the railways.³⁰ Therefore, already during the First Five-Year Plan, Delhi embarked on an ambitious program, with the goal to first meet domestic demand and eventually become an exporter to global markets. Consequently, contracts were signed for the construction of three major steel plants: Durgapur with the UK, Rourkela with West Germany, and Bhilai with the USSR.³¹ Tata Enterprises built the only private steel plant in Jamshedpur, which was relatively moderate in size.³² The state, moreover, came to own 37% of the shares of the company. The Birlas, the other big Indian family house, were simply denied entry into the steel business.³³

The massive investments in these steel plants soon proved to be unwise. Financially, it took a long time for these investments to yield returns. Therefore, it would have been more prudent to delay payments as long as possible, whereas Delhi settled its accounts even earlier than was typical in the global market, possibly to project self-confidence and trustworthiness. Politically, the decision to order steel plants from three different countries was intended to diversify India's dependencies and minimize the risk of trade and aid coming with political strings attached. Yet, this approach led to significantly higher costs due to the incompatibility of technologies, machinery, and products. Workers trained in Bhilai had to learn Russian under Russian supervisors and use Russian tools and manuals, while their colleagues in Rourkela underwent a comparable training in German under German supervision. Parts down to screws were not compatible. Therefore, workers trained at one plant often could not be transferred to another.

The Second Five-Year Plan, launched in 1956, aimed to significantly accelerate industrialization, building on the contracts for steel works mentioned earlier.³⁴ However, it quickly ran into financial difficulties, first of all facing a foreign exchange crisis. India effectively went bankrupt and became dependent on a group of Western governments that provided large-scale aid through the Aid India Consortium (AIC), established in 1958 with meetings on an annual basis. This assistance was not offered out of sheer generosity. Though donors failed to

³⁰ E.V. Parkinson, "The Development of the Iron and Steel Industry in India," *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts*, 98, no. 4824 (1950): 668–85.

³¹ Santosh Mehrotra, *India and the Soviet Union. Trade and Technology Transfer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 103–14.

³² Blair B. Kling, "Paternalism in Indian Labor. The Tata Iron and Steel Company of Jamshedpur," *International Labor and Working Class History* 53 (1998): 69–87.

³³ D'Costa, "Economic Nationalism."

³⁴ Hanson, "The Process," 123–70.

influence Indian foreign policy directly, they implicitly imposed various economic and financial conditions limiting India's sovereignty.³⁵

The undeniable success of Nehruvian development policy was its focus on elite education. The British had shown little interest in empowering the masses, leaving India with a literacy rate of just 12% in 1947. However, they did establish Western-style academic institutions for the elite, such as Calcutta University, founded as early as 1857. The colonial rulers relied on a highly trained indigenous elite to serve as administrators, reducing the need for the more costly transfer of Europeans to South Asia.³⁶

Indians studying abroad were a rare feature before 1947. Before the Second World War, an annual maximum of 2,000 attended universities in Britain, with another 208 in the US. In 1944, the colonial government started providing stipends for the latter, a policy continued by the Nehru administration.³⁷ For the many who could not go abroad, the government of India continued the emphasis on elite education, now including women via quota regulations. On the contrary, due to the lack of financial resources, compulsory schooling was implemented only in 2009.

A notable feature was the establishment of Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs). These institutions were designed to train skilled engineers and scientists, with the goal of making India self-sufficient in technical expertise. By the end of Nehru's tenure, five IITs had been established. The one at Kharagpur, founded in 1951, enjoyed support from various foreign countries. The later four such institutes were each supported by an individual partner (Delhi/UK, Bombay/USSR, Kanpur/USA, Madras/West Germany), providing personnel, equipment, and financial aid. This approach successfully introduced a variety of ideas into India's engineering education. Unintentionally but beneficially, it also created enduring connections between Indian technical elites and their counterparts in foreign countries, surviving significant political fluctuations.³⁸ Despite a notable brain drain with many IIT graduates migrating abroad, there was also a substantial brain gain, particularly in fields such as early computing, which had a profound impact in the years that followed.

The first computer to arrive was an IBM 1620 at Kanpur in 1959. It was succeeded by a much larger machine in 1963, accompanied by US faculty members staying at Kanpur for about a year. Accordingly, the Indian permanent faculty was selected among those who had received their doctorates in the US. From

³⁵ Amit Das Gupta, "Development by Consortia," *Comparativ* 19, no. 4 (2009): 96–111.

³⁶ David Potter, "Manpower Shortage and the End of Colonialism. The Case of the Indian Civil Service," *Modern Asian Studies* 7, no. 1 (1973): 47–73.

³⁷ Ross Bassett, "Aligning India in the Cold War Era," *Technology and Culture* 50, no. 4 (2009): 788.

³⁸ Ibid., 783–810.

1964, all students at Kanpur received training in computing. Five years later, there existed “a full complement of undergraduate and graduate computer courses, with offerings in software engineering, information theory, hardware design, image processing, and systems engineering.”³⁹ All this was possible because Washington considered Kanpur as a flagship program of engineering-education in India and poured twice as much money into it compared to the Soviets or the West Germans in their respective IIT. This created a strong and lasting link with the US IT community.

The end of the Nehruvian Era—towards stagnation and frustration?

The first decade of independent India was marked by tremendous enthusiasm, but by the late 1950s, disillusionment began to set in. Firstly, the policy of not relying on a single source for industrialization led to inflated costs. Secondly, the Nehru administration’s well-intentioned policies were often not effectively implemented at the local level, where old elites pursued their own interests. Thirdly, corruption became widespread, extending even to the union cabinet. This issue was closely linked to inefficiencies of an ever-growing bureaucracy, overseen by the equally inefficient Planning Commission.⁴⁰ The state’s attempt to regulate all aspects of the economy led to what was known as the “licence raj,” requiring bureaucratic approval for virtually everything.

While many of these problems were self-inflicted, Delhi also faced challenges beyond its control. The government had no effective means to curb the population explosion: during the Nehruvian period, the population surged from 340 to 490 million, offsetting much of the economic progress achieved. In a poor, conservative, yet democratic society where children were seen as a form of security in old age, population control measures typical of Western societies or those imposed in the People’s Republic of China were not acceptable. Additionally, escalating tensions with China and Pakistan forced India into an arms race with significant costs. For many, India came to symbolize the broader challenges faced by developing nations, with problems so severe that even the combined efforts of Western and socialist donors appeared insufficient to address them.

³⁹ Ibid., 793.

⁴⁰ Sarvepalli Gopal, *Jawaharlal Nehru. A Biography 3, 1956–1964* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1984), 244–46.

This view was not held by experts, with leading economists like Paul Rosenstein-Rodan or Walt Rostow instead praising India a model for sustainable economic development.⁴¹ Many of India's Western donors tacitly shared this perspective. When the AIC was established, the initial expectation was that Delhi would soon overcome what were considered short-term problems. However, as it became clear that aid would need to continue at an annual rate of around one billion US dollars for a much longer period, dissatisfaction grew with India's performance. Western governments, media, and public opinion increasingly viewed the country as a bottomless pit.⁴² Given this context, providing taxpayers' money for a non-aligned country whose prime minister had not endeared himself in most western capitals became hard to justify.

Indeed, foreign aid contributed only about 10 % of the funds Delhi invested in economic development, a much smaller proportion compared to many other developing countries including neighboring Pakistan, which was seen as a model of development policy in the early 1960s.⁴³ Moreover, when calculated on a per capita basis, India received significantly less aid than other developing countries.⁴⁴ If aid had been allocated proportionally, based on this comparison, Delhi would have required amounts far beyond what Western governments and voters were prepared to provide.

The Indira Gandhi years—Public discontent via tacit donor content

Donor satisfaction with India's performance was evident during the terms of Indira Gandhi (1966–1977, 1980–1984). The overwhelming majority showed little concern for India's Soviet-backed involvement in the Bangladesh War of 1971⁴⁵ or its first nuclear test in 1974. This tacit mutual understanding was influenced by the events of 1966. Nehru's death in the summer of 1964 led to a period of domestic instability. His unimpressive successor Lal Bahadur Shastri gained some credibil-

⁴¹ Paul N. Rosenstein-Rodan, "International Aid for underdeveloped Countries," *The Review of Economics and Statistics* 43, no. 2 (1961): 107–38; Walt Rostow, *The Stages of Economic Growth. A non-communist Manifesto* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961).

⁴² Das Gupta, *Handel*, 336.

⁴³ Das Gupta, "Development," 101–2.

⁴⁴ Amit Das Gupta, "The Alliance of the Crestfallen," *Outlook*, May 25, 2015, accessed December 25, 2024, <https://www.outlookindia.com/opinion/the-alliance-of-the-crestfallen-news-294337>.

⁴⁵ Srinath Raghavan, *1971. A Global History of the Creation of Bangladesh* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 108–30.

ity by not losing the Kashmir War of 1965 but died during the subsequent peace negotiations in January 1966.⁴⁶ Gandhi was chosen by the top echelons of the Indian National Congress (INC) partly due to her status as Nehru's daughter and her association with the Gandhi surname, despite not being related to the Mahatma. More importantly, she was seen as a figurehead with limited power.⁴⁷ Much of her tenure was marked by efforts to consolidate her authority.

In 1966, with her position particularly fragile, she had to adopt significant economic reforms long demanded by the World Bank and Western donors. These included devaluing the rupee and liberalizing the Indian market, which, however, would have needed backing by substantially raised foreign aid provided by the AIC—approximately four times the consortium's usual annual contributions.⁴⁸ The donors, however, failed to pledge their part to the deal. Therefore, once Delhi implemented these changes, they all failed. Donors' concepts had proven impracticable for a country as large and complex as India.⁴⁹

Another such lesson was learned in 1969 when Sweden joined the AIC with enthusiasm and immediately advocated for a special session on family planning. India, along with other donors, responded rather tepidly, recognizing the challenges of applying Western concepts to a traditional Asian society. Nonetheless, it participated to demonstrate goodwill on an important issue. As anticipated, the session proved inconsequential, and India signaled that its involvement had been under external pressure and that it had no interest in pursuing further discussions, which indeed never occurred.⁵⁰ Over time, a sense of trust had developed between donors and recipient. Despite India's inefficiencies, there was general belief that aid was, by and large, used for its intended purposes. The one exception, the United States, had withdrawn from the AIC following the wars of 1965 and 1971 but for political reasons. Washington with its characteristically short-term political outlook expected quick, significant results from its substantial aid—an expectation often unrealistic for the long-term nature of sustainable economic development policies.

⁴⁶ Chandrika Prasad Srivastava, *Lal Bahadur Shastri. A Life of Truth in Politics* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005).

⁴⁷ Dennis Kux, *Estranged Democracies. India and the United States, 1941–1991* (New Delhi: Sage, 1994), 248–49.

⁴⁸ David C. Engerman, *The Price of Aid. The Economic Cold War in India* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018), 257–59.

⁴⁹ Petra Glietsch, *Der Einfluss der Weltbank auf die wirtschaftliche Entwicklung Indiens* (Frankfurt a. M.: Lang, 1993), 93.

⁵⁰ *IBRD Archives*, 1844844. Letter no. 378, Baneth to Cassen, IBRD, November 13, 1969.

Donor content was highlighted once again in May 1974, when India spent a considerable amount of money to develop and detonate its first nuclear device. This test was presented to the world as a “Peaceful Nuclear Explosion” like foreseen in the Operation Plowshare initiative, which envisioned using nuclear detonations for non-military purposes such as constructing canals, harbors, or mines.⁵¹ However, few believed the test lacked military implications. Given China’s nuclear capabilities, ongoing tensions with Pakistan, and the threat of U.S. military intervention in the Bangladesh War, it was clear that Delhi aimed to deter both real and potential adversaries. The only donor pulling out for years, nevertheless, was Canada which had provided the nuclear reactor of which, against contractual agreements, materials had been used for the nuclear test. Meanwhile, other donor countries followed the World Bank’s advice “that the principal issue . . . was political and that the Consortium was not the appropriate forum for discussion of this aspect.”⁵² Accordingly, the consortium maintained a “business-as-usual” approach. This response was likely influenced by the fact that an Indian bomb had been anticipated since the early 1960s, as the country had already possessed the necessary expertise and resources to develop it as soon as it decided to proceed. In fact, before China detonated its first nuclear device in 1964, the Kennedy administration had even considered assisting India in developing the first Asian bomb.⁵³ Moreover, India was hit particularly hard by the oil crisis. Cuts in aid might have led to a serious financial crisis.⁵⁴

In sum, unlike in the early 1960s, international donors refrained from criticizing India’s development policies, even in private discussions with Delhi’s representatives, believing the country to be on a slow but steady path. Public perception, however, was starkly different. The dismissive phrase “Hindu rate of growth” became widely used to describe India’s economic stagnation. Droughts, crop failures, and controversial policies such as the nationalization of banks and insurance companies further hindered progress. Private initiative by large domestic business houses was effectively hindered by the Monopolies and Restrictive Trade Act (MRTP) and the Foreign Exchange Regulation Act of 1973, aiming at lim-

⁵¹ Teno Roncalio, “Plowshare. A Technology in Search of a Use,” *Atomic Energy Journal* 16, no. 2 (1974): 93–140.

⁵² *IBRD Archives*, 30125567. Meeting of India Consortium on 14/15 July 1974, Chairman’s Report of Proceedings, July 22, 1974.

⁵³ Paul McGarr, “The United States, Britain and the Sino-Indian Border War,” in *The Sino-Indian war of 1962. New Perspectives*, ed. Amit Das Gupta et al. (Milton Park: Routledge, 2017), 111.

⁵⁴ *IBRD Archives*, 30125567. South Asia Department, Bank Staff Note on Adjustment Policies being undertaken by the GoI, May 28, 1974.

iting foreign exchange outflows.⁵⁵ Even worse, the country seemed on the way to authoritarian rule once Mrs. Gandhi imposed the infamous Emergency in 1975. This followed a High Court ruling that found Gandhi guilty of illegal campaign funding, leading to her disqualification from parliament and a six-year ban from holding office. In the 1977 elections, Gandhi lost power, only to regain it in 1980. Against this backdrop, her father's legacy further lost reputation.

Nearly completely overlooked by then, a success story unfolded in the Indira Gandhi years in the IITs. While the US in the context of the general cooling down of relations after the Bangladesh War massively reduced their financial support, the ones learning from the earlier intense US engagement were the West Germans. IIT Madras received its first computer in 1963. Although a computer center was inaugurated only in late 1973, it became the most relevant in India soon after, as Madras managed to recruit leading experts from Kanpur. On the contrary, the USSR missed the opportunity to forge similar bonds. Moscow via UNESCO provided a single computer in 1965, which due to funding problems commenced operation only in 1968. It remained a one-off machine.

Initially, computing did not enjoy full-hearted support in India. Given mass unemployment, labor unions blamed computers as job eaters. Private companies, nevertheless, understood the opportunity provided, first of all the House of Tata, which established a computing enterprise in 1967—it came to be known as Tata Consultancy Services and transformed into the country's leading IT firm. This took place under the guidance of F.C. Kohli, who had been in close touch with the IITs in Bombay and Kanpur earlier.⁵⁶

The boom of the 1990s and its Nehruvian Roots

The 1980s must ultimately be regarded as a lost decade for Indian development. While there were undeniable achievements, such as attaining self-sufficiency in food, and improvements in the balance of payments and debt service ratio compared to the early 1970s, several challenges remained. Domestic savings and investments grew rapidly, the stock market became a key source of industrial funding, industrial growth reached an impressive 7.7% annually, and the net import of oil products was reduced by a third. However, the overall situation was far from ideal. Aditya Mukherjee identifies three core issues. First, structural inefficiencies were deeply embedded in the system. An ever-expanding bureaucracy stifled

55 D'Costa, "Economic Nationalism," 620–48.

56 Ibid., 796–801.

progress, and both public and private sector failed to compete in global markets. This was further exacerbated by the government's takeover of "sick" companies. All this "went against the basic laws of capitalism such as the need for continuous expansion on the basis of innovation and efficient investment." The formerly successful pursuit of economic autonomy destroyed precisely this autonomy.

The second issue was India's inability to adapt to significant changes in the global economy. Instead of embracing globalization—an opportunity from which many East Asian countries greatly benefited—India remained committed to the Nehruvian model of inward-oriented, import-substitution-based strategies. As a result, India's share in global exports declined. Third, domestic policies further exacerbated the country's downward trajectory. Fiscal discipline was abandoned in favor of populist measures, leading to a sharp rise in deficits. The high growth rates of the 1980s were fueled by excessive borrowing and overspending. By the financial year 1990/1, the debt service had reached 35%. By July 1991, foreign exchange reserves were barely enough to cover two weeks of imports, and even this was only possible due to emergency loans from the IMF.⁵⁷

By the summer of 1991, the situation had become so dire that even a minority government led by Narasimha Rao won sufficient support in parliament to implement major reforms. These reforms marked both a departure from the Nehru-era mindset and an acknowledgment of the significant achievements made during that time. In the 1950s and 1960s, policies of import substitution and protectionism had been efficient, enabling the rapid growth of domestic industries by shielding them from international competition. These measures also had enabled India's transition from an agrarian economy to a more industrialized one, shifting its role from a supplier of raw materials to a producer of manufactured goods.

Moreover, the core goals had not changed. India had largely preserved its political independence, underpinned by self-sufficiency in many sectors. It had maintained its claim to be an equal partner on the global stage, helping to restore the dignity of a nation long under colonial rule. However, the means to achieve these goals needed to evolve. After the end of the Cold War, India required foreign investments and technology to capitalize on the opportunities of globalization. Productivity and efficiency had to be enhanced by dismantling protectionist policies, allowing global competition to strengthen capable industries while weaker ones declined. Decades of export pessimism had to give way to export optimism.

This is not the place to delve into the specifics of the measures taken in 1991. In broad terms, bureaucratic control over virtually everything was drastically reduced, though not entirely abolished. Additionally, India embraced globalization,

57 Muhkerjee, *India*, 461–74.

allowing foreign companies to enter the Indian market and, albeit cautiously, welcoming foreign capital. Overall, the reforms were highly successful, leading to remarkable growth across many sectors, increased employment, and a surge in exports.

As mentioned in the introduction, four aspects of Nehruvian development will be examined to assess their contribution to the economic boom of the 1990s. Agricultural reforms, particularly the Green Revolution, had led to self-sufficiency in food. However, this achievement is credited not to the Nehruvian era but to Prime Ministers Shastri and Gandhi, influenced by significant foreign pressure. It wasn't until the 1980s that poor harvests no longer resulted in famines across India. By the 1990s, the need to import food items had decreased to "nearly zero."⁵⁸ Instead, India became a food exporter.⁵⁹

In another sector, even Nehru's successors struggled to address severe shortcomings. By 1990, India's infrastructure was in poor condition. Indian Railways, one of the largest railway systems in the world, was particularly neglected. The colonial-era legacy of varying track widths persisted, and inadequate maintenance led to frequent accidents. From the early 1990s, railways began losing their dominance in favor of highways, which became the preferred mode of transport.⁶⁰ Despite the general liberalization that began in 1991, no substantial reforms were initiated until 2013. Indian trains, for passenger and particularly for freight services, continue to operate at very low average speeds (25–30 km/h). As a result, by 2011/12, 69% of freight traffic had shifted to road transport.⁶¹

Against this backdrop, it was no surprise that the demand for cars grew. By late 1983, alongside the outdated Ambassador, the Maruti 800 was introduced. Maruti Udyog Limited had signed a license and joint venture agreement with Suzuki Motor Corporation and formed Maruti Suzuki India Limited. Two additional models were launched until 1985, and by 1987, cars were being exported. This joint venture revolutionized personal transportation in India and remains a tremendous success. Although delayed for decades, India eventually developed

⁵⁸ Utsa Patnaik, "Export-Oriented Agriculture and Food Security in Developing Countries and India," *Economic and Political Weekly* 31, no. 35/37 (1996): 2429–49.

⁵⁹ For a list of products see Kehar Singh and Inder Sain, "Prospects of Agricultural Exports of India. A Composite Index Approach," *Indian Journal of Agricultural Economy* 58, no. 4 (2003): 781–99.

⁶⁰ Prachee Mishra, "State of Indian Railways," *Policy Analytical Reports*, September 2016, last accessed October 4, 2024, https://prsindia.org/files/policy/policy_analytical_reports/State%20of%20Indian%20Railways.pdf.

⁶¹ Mridul Dutta, "Organisational Restructuring of Indian Railways," *Case Studies on Transport Policy* 10, no. 1 (2024): 66–80.

an automobile industry that had long driven economic growth in North America and Europe.⁶² It was not until 1997 that Indian governments responded to this shift, establishing the National Highways Authority of India. In 2001, a National Highway Development Programme was launched, adopting public-private partnerships.⁶³

By 1991, the telecommunications situation was equally bleak. Despite the booming IT sector's demand for modern communications, the telephone market was not liberalized until 1997. By 1990, India had only twenty million telephone lines, a number that grew to just 28 million over the following decade. Until then, telecommunications services and products were provided by a state-owned monopoly. Only with the advent of the new millennium was a competitive market system introduced.⁶⁴ The introduction of mobile phones on relatively low costs finally connected Indians across all social classes, at least in urban areas.

Until 1991, investment allocations in India's steel industry, which was mostly reserved for the public sector, were controlled by the Planning Commission and the Steel Authority of India. The reforms de-licensed and de-regulated this sector, removing price and distribution controls. By 2006, the private sector accounted for nearly two-thirds of the countrywide steel production, and India had become the eighth largest steel producer in the world.⁶⁵ The steel industry had gone a long way by then. The four plants launched in the late 1950s, three of them in the public sector, had been complemented by two more, both with assistance by the Soviet Union. The Bokaro plant was established in 1964, while the contract for the Visakhapatnam plant was signed in 1981. Initially, the US had offered to finance Bokaro, but typically, the plan fell through due to US Steel's demand for managerial control over ten years.

In the mid-1980s, 70 % of the total steel output came from state-owned mills, which dropped to 56 % by July 1996. By the late 1980s, annual crude steel production in the public sector had grown to 12.4 million tons, while the private sector contributed an additional 2.3 million tons. The share of public sector investment

⁶² Vishal S. Rana and Murlidhar A. Lokhande, "Performance Evaluation of Maruti Suzuki India Limited. An Overview," *Asia Pacific Journal of Marketing & Management Review* 2, no. 2 (2013): 120–29.

⁶³ Ramakrishna Nallathiga, "Highways and Development in India. Progress and Prospects," *MEDC Economic Digest* II, no. 4 (2019): 13–17, accessed December 25, 2024, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/338066888_Highways_and_Road_Development_in_India_Progress_and_Prospsects.

⁶⁴ Rafiq Dossani, "Telecommunications Reform in India," *India Review* 1, no. 2 (2002): 61–90.

⁶⁵ Sajal Ghosh, "Steel Consumption and Economic Growth. Evidence from India," *Resources Policy* 31 (2006): 7–11.

in total outlay declined from a peak of 67.29 % in the Third Plan (1961–1966) to 51.7 by the late 1980s. Meanwhile, the share of public sector steel investment in total industry outlay fell from 5.29 % to 1.84 %.

Overall, before 1990, the public steel sector struggled with inefficiency, construction delays, and operational losses, making it uncompetitive on the global markets. Despite providing a crucial infrastructural base, it also caused significant financial strain.⁶⁶ Nehruvian decisions, grounded on in national consensus and aligned with the views of global economists, nevertheless, had laid the foundations for the remarkable Indian success on the global steel market after liberalization. Mismanagement on various levels from the early stages onwards, poor political decisions after Nehru's term, and massive restrictions on private sector involvement had led to the creation of a financially burdensome but potent industry. Once liberalization lifted state controls, this "sleeping giant" began to realize its full potential, contributing to India's success on the global steel market in the new millennium.

The most obvious success story of the 1990s, grounded in Nehruvian development policy, was the rise of the IT industry. Thanks to the IITs, a steadily growing number of young Indians had become skilled in computer science. Many of these graduates had moved to the US, where they made significant contributions to the US computer industry. This migration was partly supported by Indian scholarship programs and US investments in IIT Kanpur. What initially seemed like a major brain drain eventually became a crucial driver of India's IT boom in the 1990s.

By the late 1980s, the United States had become the global leader in computer sciences, and Indian IT engineers in Silicon Valley earned a reputation for their exceptional talent, work ethic, and reliability. Unlike many other Asian professionals, Indians were also fluent in English, which further boosted their prospects. Their positive reputation, professional networks, and personal connections to India provided a strong impetus for the country's already burgeoning IT sector.

Apart from Tata Consultancy Services, most Indian IT companies in the 1980s were small, which allowed them to avoid the strict overregulation affecting larger industrial houses, such as the Monopolies and Restrictive Trade Practices (M RTP) Act. Additionally, the infrastructure bottlenecks that plagued India's railways, roads, ports, and airports had little impact on software development, which did not rely heavily on physical infrastructure. It is also important to acknowledge that India's success in the IT sector was partly due to its having missed the manufacturing revolution that greatly benefited other Asian countries. As a result, India's intellectual resources were free to participate in the knowledge revolution.

66 D'Costa, "Economic nationalism."

Outsourcing software development—and later, call centers—to India proved cost-effective due to relatively low wages and a large pool of skilled workers. Moreover, Indians who had established successful careers in the US founded companies there and created platforms to raise funds for promising Indian start-ups and Indo-US joint ventures.

In India, the demand for technical education outpaced the capacity of the IITs, leading to a boom in private colleges and universities.⁶⁷ Although not explored in detail here, the Nehruvian focus on higher education also paved the way for advancements in other high-tech fields, including space technology, the civilian use of nuclear energy, modern medicine, and pharmaceuticals.

Conclusion

Was Nehruvian development policy truly the failure it is often portrayed as today, especially within India? There is more to the story than merely defending India's first prime minister by citing his good intentions, reliance on contemporary expert advice, and ability to build a national consensus. As demonstrated, Nehru's focus on modernist, elite education—especially the establishment of institutions like the IITs—proved to be a long-term success. This investment in higher education created a skilled workforce that later propelled India into the global high-tech arena.

The creation of state-run steel plants, intended to meet domestic demand and reduce the budget burden, was a well-conceived idea, even if poorly executed. In hindsight, the strategy itself was sound but its implementation was flawed. In many sectors, it was not Nehru, but his successors, who failed to recognize when state control should have been relaxed in favor of market forces. By 1991, the Indian steel industry was poised for a transformation, and liberalization allowed a “sleeping giant” to awaken—a giant that had existed all along but had been held back by overregulation.

Self-sufficiency in food production, another key aim of Nehruvian policy, should have been pursued with greater urgency. Achieving food security would not only have relieved budgetary pressures but also strengthened national sovereignty. Yet, the most glaring shortcoming of Nehruvian development policy was its neglect of infrastructure. This issue persisted well into the 1990s, and it wasn't foresight but rather global developments—such as the advent of digitiza-

⁶⁷ Devesh Kapur, “The Causes and Consequences of India’s IT Boom,” *India Review* 1, no. 2 (2002): 91–110.

tion—that mitigated the effects of these infrastructural deficiencies. For the wealthier segments of Indian society, the rise of mobile phones, the internet, and modern airports serviced by private airlines have made daily life as convenient as in Western countries. The most significant failure of India's post-1947 development policy is that it left many citizens behind. The widening gap between the flourishing parts of society and those who remain in poverty continues to grow with each passing year.

However, with the end of the Cold War, India experienced a remarkable resurgence. Seemingly unexpectedly, its market underwent liberalization. It emerged as a leader in fields such as information technology, high-tech medicine, space technology, and pharmaceuticals. India offered a unique combination of low wages and a highly skilled, disciplined workforce in a democratic setting. Yet, few recognized the connection between the economic boom of the 1990s and the purportedly failed Nehruvian development policies. Indeed, as the author contends, there are clear continuities from the 1950s to the post-Cold-War era. Despite the disdain expressed by the current power brokers in India towards Nehruvian politics, and particularly its economic performance, many of the foundations of India's later success can be traced back to the years when Nehru set the country on its course.

Paul Sprute

A Gateway of Development: San Pedro's New Port project and continuing histories of Development in South-West Côte d'Ivoire

Introduction

In San Pedro (Figure 1), a municipality located in the remote southwestern region of Côte d'Ivoire, a new port commenced operations in December 1972.¹ The construction of the port had been a lengthy process, initiated under French colonial rule prior to 1960. At the time, it was regarded as the most comprehensive development project in post-colonial Côte d'Ivoire. In addition to the construction of a deep-sea port, the project encompassed the development of a "new town" and a program of "regional development."

In this contribution, I analyze the role of the port as a "gateway of development" and seek to understand how the construction of the port as a development project impacted the new town and regional development and how both continued to be the objects of development aid as a result of that impact. Then, I put the focus on the entanglement between Ivorian and West European development actors. My particular emphasis is on the role of West German development aid alongside West German construction companies. (West) German development aid to Côte d'Ivoire has been significant since the 1960s but remains understudied, with construction companies playing a crucial executing role into the 1970s.

The case study of San Pedro is situated within a broader historical context, namely the construction of numerous ports across West Africa in the 1960s and 1970s. This type of infrastructure was a focal point of national development projects and constituted a crucial element in broader material and spatial connections.

San Pedro was conceived by the post-colonial Ivorian government and its development partners as a "gateway of development," a space in which development projects of different scales and scopes were to interlink. I introduce the idea of the

¹ See the official Ivorian newspaper, *Fraternité Matin*, for coverage of the 12-day festivities to mark the occasion of the opening. E.g. "San Pedro: La Porte de l'Avenir," *Fraternité Matin*, December 5, 1972, 1, 5–8.



Figure 6.1: Map of San Pedro and its hinterland indicating Bardo as the center of the settlement and suggesting surrounding land use through a satellite image. Map by Anastasia Betsa, 2023.

“gateway of development” as a variation of the conception of the “portal of globalization.” Such a “portal” describes a space in which globalization clots or crystallizes.² It allows one to conceive at the same time its spatial implications as well as the connected practices. The “gateway of development” can accordingly be seen as a space in which “development” crystallizes through economic and dwelling practices. In staking out the multi-scaled scope of the “gateway of development” and its spatial framing, I relate to perspectives from architectural history on spatial interrelations of connected activities.³ The conception of the port of San Pedro

² Geert Castryck, “Introduction – From Railway Juncture to Portal of Globalization,” *Comparativ: Zeitschrift für Globalgeschichte und vergleichende Gesellschaftsforschung* 25, no. 4 (2015): 7–16.

³ Compare, for example, Johan Lagae, “S, M, L, XL: Mapping a colonial taskscape along the Matadi-Kinshasa railway line, DR Congo, from a transimperial perspective” (paper presented at International Congress: Colonial and Post-Colonial Landscapes, Lisbon, January 2019). Marco di Nunzio, “Anthropology of Infrastructure,” *Governing Infrastructure Interfaces – Research Note* no. 1 (June 2018): 1.

as a “gateway of development” makes visible how the port induced, channeled, and continuously recreated development at and around the harbor project.

Understanding the port construction as a “gateway of development” brings the contradictory and ambivalent nature of development to the fore in an exemplary manner. To gain a clearer understanding of this ambivalence, a broader frame of analysis is required—both temporal and geographical. This contribution shows how the port functioned as intended in a narrow sense, serving its purpose of integrating the country’s South-West into the global economy. At the same time, expanding the geographical and temporal frame illuminates the ambivalent and contradictory nature of development, in the hinterland and over subsequent decades.

This ambivalent nature consists of the downsides of the intended effects, especially in the regional economy. Despite having measurable development effects, the port as a “gateway of development” also created new development problems as attested to by continuous development projects. The development at first induced by the port exhausted its spatial surroundings and ultimately denied the hinterland’s chances for development over the long run. For the regional economy that meant that the port was a crucial stimulus for the forestry sector but did not lead to the anticipated establishment of a range of industries. Rather, deforestation was its consequence and cacao cultivation came to dominate the regional economy, equally generating the ambivalent effects of economic growth coupled with exploitative structures.

This assessment of the contradictory effects of the port’s construction is supported by the observation that the manner in which the port construction was executed had strongly distorting effects over the long term, especially for the new town of San Pedro. For the new town this meant that the lack of housing provided for port construction workers, a short-term neglect in view of the long-term goal to build an exemplary post-colonial Ivorian town, instead catalyzed the establishment of informal settlements. The dominance of these settlements effectively prevented the town model from being implemented and shapes the town of San Pedro to this day.

The background of the San Pedro port construction: from French colonialism towards a multi-lateral post-colonial development project

The South-Western part of Côte d’Ivoire came under French colonial rule in 1896 when the boundary between the Republic of Liberia and French interests was

fixed from the Atlantic coast into the hinterlands.⁴ Along that coast, there was a range of established landing sites, among them—from West to East—Tabou, San Pedro, and Sassandra.⁵ The colonial power treated the home region of the Kru people as a labor reservoir.⁶ The Kru were known along the West African coast as sailors and oarsmen manning the boats which lightered goods from ocean vessels to smaller landing boats due to the absence of natural harbors.⁷ The area was otherwise rather neglected by the colonial power and, as the concession of Kong, handed over to a series of companies from 1900 onwards, which created an economy of limited extraction without major investments in the region's infrastructure.⁸ Though a wharf was eventually built in Sassandra in 1950, turning the town into the most important landing site of the region, the continuing need for lighter ships increasingly created bottlenecks for the shipment of goods.⁹

Rather, the center of economic activity was the eastern region of Côte d'Ivoire, where the colonial government had already built wharfs in Grand Bassam and Port-Bouët in the early twentieth century.¹⁰ In the East, the colonial economy of resource extraction took off with the opening of the deep-sea port of Abidjan in 1951, the prerequisite of which had been the digging of the artificial Vridi canal which made the lagoon system of Abidjan accessible for ocean vessels.¹¹ The massive construction was exemplary for the era of late-colonial infrastructural development serving economic extraction, connected in French colonialism to the claim of "mise en valeur" (enhancement, but also an increase in value).¹² In subsequent years, economic and social development in Côte d'Ivoire concentrated ever more around Abidjan, which had been made the colonial capital in 1936

4 "Carte Croquis de la Mission Blondiaux," *Annales de Géographie* 39 no. 8 (1899): 288.

5 Jacques Souillou, ed., *Les Rives Coloniales: Architectures de Saint-Louis à Douala* (Marseille: Édition Parenthèses, 1993).

6 For example : Archives Nationales de Côte d'Ivoire Abidjan, IFF56 (1903).

7 Megan Crutcher, "For King and Empire, The Changing Political, Economic, and Cultural Identities of Kru Mariners in Atlantic Africa, 1460–1945," *Journal of African History* 63 no. 3 (September 2023): 437–48.

8 See, for example, the map of the San Pedro concession, printed in Archives Nationales de Côte d'Ivoire Abidjan, 3.38/28, "Le Port d'Abidjan Hier Aujourd'hui Demain... perspectives de San Pedro."

9 For port development along the coast, more broadly, see H.P. White, "The Morphological Development of West African Seaports," in *Seaports and Development in Tropical Africa*, ed. B.S. Hoyle and D. Hilling (London: Macmillan and Co., 1970), 11–25.

10 Souillou, *Les Rives Coloniales*, 124–25.

11 Archives Nationales de Côte d'Ivoire Abidjan, 3.38/28, "Le Port d'Abidjan Hier Aujourd'hui Demain... perspectives de San Pedro."

12 Corinna R. Unger, *International Development: A Postwar History* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 36.

and was the terminus of the French colonial railway to Ouagadougou built from 1904.¹³

In the early 1950s, the colonial administration nonetheless began to develop plans to intensify investments into the South-Western part of the colony. The palpable result of this drive was a study by the French public office Bureau d'Études pour les Équipements d'Outre-mer, published in 1959, which put the construction of a second deep-sea port in the South West of the country on the political agenda. According to this plan the South-Western concession was acquired by the colonial state in 1959 but no concrete steps towards the construction of the port were taken before Ivorian independence in 1960.¹⁴

At Ivorian independence, the South-West of the country had truly turned into a backwater. Few roads connected this area to the rest of the country, population density was very low, while the region was characterized by dense tropical forest. In the east of the country, this kind of forest had already been considerably thinned out by logging and the shipping of logs through the port of Abidjan.¹⁵

An independent Côte d'Ivoire, under the leadership of the towering political figure of Félix Houphouët-Boigny, president from 1960 to his death in 1993, sought to fulfil its nation-building and modernization through a range of large-scale development projects: "Great operations" with the aim of the "the diversification of the economy."¹⁶ Among them were, for example, the dam and hydropower plant of Kossou, built from the late 1960s, and the further expansion of the port of Abidjan. This agenda culminated in the late 1970s in the construction of the new capital city of Yamoussoukro.¹⁷

The port construction of San Pedro is an integral part of post-colonial Côte d'Ivoire's national development strategy, and was even awarded the superlative of the "apotheosis of independence."¹⁸ The project included the construction of a

¹³ David Drengk, "Instandhaltung und Reparatur als Rückgrat kolonialer Eisenbahnen: Zentrale und mobile Werkstätten und Krankenstationen im ivorischen Wald," *Technikgeschichte* 89, no. 2 (2022): 158–61.

¹⁴ Archives Nationales de Côte d'Ivoire Abidjan, 3.38/28, "Le Port d'Abidjan Hier Aujourd'hui Demain... et perspectives de San Pedro," 107–118.

¹⁵ Nieves Izquierdo, "Deforestation in West Africa," *Cartografare il Presente* (UNEP: Grid Arendal, 2005), <https://www.grida.no/resources/7039>; Archives Nationales de Côte d'Ivoire Abidjan, 3.33/5, "Le Bois dans l'économie ivoirienne."

¹⁶ Guy Canagh and Simon-Pierre Ekanza, *La Côte d'Ivoire par les Textes* (Abidjan: Les Nouvelles Éditions Africaines, 1978), 225–28.

¹⁷ For a brief introduction, see "Yamoussoukro," in *Architectural Guide: Sub-Saharan Africa*, ed. Philipp Meuser and Adil Dalbai (Berlin: Dom, 2021), volume 3: "Western Africa: Along the Atlantic Sea Coast," 246–249.

¹⁸ Canagh and Ekanza, *La Côte d'Ivoire par les Textes*.

new town and regional development schemes. Beyond the South-Western region, the project was supposed to have national implications.

Until the 1980s, the Ivorian government promoted an integrated vision of rapid national development, an “Ivorian miracle,” of which the port construction was an important part.¹⁹ The national reach of the port is, for example, visible in glossy publications that the post-colonial Ivorian government commissioned throughout the 1960s and 1970s.²⁰ These publications implied that the port construction was the means to achieve national balance and symmetry through a second, Western pole of development to counterbalance Abidjan in the East.²¹ It was presented as a prerequisite for the construction of the unified post-colonial nation.

In order to realize the vision of the San Pedro project, a range of public Ivorian agencies was involved, such as the Abidjan Port Authority and public housing agencies. The creation of new agencies was also deemed necessary by the Ivorian government. First among them was the establishment of the regional planning authority of ARSO (Authorité pour l’Aménagement de la Région du Sud-Ouest), following the US example of the “New Deal” Tennessee Valley Authority.²² Yet, for the execution of the port construction project, the Ivorian state approached a variety of international partners.

Following Ivorian independence, the government of Houphouët-Boigny sought out technical and capital aid for its national development. The former colonial power of France, with which the pro-capitalist and pro-Western Ivorian president continued to maintain close relations (he had himself served in the French cabinet), and the United States, as the dominant power and model for the capitalist world, were considered obvious partners. The Ivorian government found an additional partner in the Federal Republic of Germany, which was taking its first steps on the stage of development aid.²³ West Germany’s early development aid had a regional focus on West Africa. In the mid-1960s, the West German

¹⁹ Compare, e.g., Robert M. Hecht, “The Ivory Coast Economic ‘Miracle’: What Benefits for Peasant Farmers?” *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 21 no. 1 (March 1983): 25–53.

²⁰ Archives Nationales de Côte d’Ivoire Abidjan, 3.38/28, “Demain le Sud-Ouest.”

²¹ For the “second pole” and respective cartographic representations, see Archives Nationales de Côte d’Ivoire Abidjan, 3.38/28, “Demain, le Sud-Ouest” but also Abou B. Bamba, *African Miracle, African Mirage: Transnational Politics and the Paradox of Modernization in Ivory Coast* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2016).

²² Bamba, *African Miracle, African Mirage*.

²³ “Bonns Entwicklungshilfe in Afrika: Mit der Gießkanne,” *Der Spiegel*, December 1, 1964, 47–65. For the chronology of West German development aid, see Michael Bohnet, *Geschichte der deutschen Entwicklungspolitik: Strategien, Innenansichten, Erfolge, Misserfolge, Zeitzeugen, Herausforderungen* (Stuttgart: UTB, 2019).

government also funded the construction of the deep-sea port of Lomé in Togo which was planned by West German engineering offices and built by a range of West German general contractors.²⁴

The Ivorian and West German governments negotiated funding for the deep-sea port construction in San Pedro from the mid-1960s, along with a range of other projects of capital and technical aid. The West German government originally planned to build the port at San Pedro as a bilateral development project, which would have given German companies the leading role in its execution. However, the evolving politics of Western European integration meant that large-scale development projects, such as the San Pedro port construction, were coordinated with other Western European partners in the European Economic Community.²⁵ First and foremost, the former colonial power of France took a keen interest, and France and West Germany agreed to co-fund the project as international donors, with additional funding from Côte d'Ivoire's state budget.²⁶

The wide-ranging construction works were to be executed in consortia between West German and French companies, with the French partner taking the lead, as well as an additional West European partner. Following the tender process, the French Grand Travaux de l'Est, the West German Julius Berger AG, and the Italian Vianini were awarded the leading roles in the contract.²⁷ A range of further contractors and institutions were involved, in a secondary capacity among them the French contractor Borie, the West German Philipp Holzmann AG, and an institute of the University of Hanover in West Germany conducting studies of ocean currents around the port.²⁸

²⁴ Compare Paul Sprute, "Harbouring Globalizations: Post-colonial projects of German port constructions and West African hinterland connections, 1950s-1970s" (PhD Diss., Bauhaus-Universität Weimar, 2024).

²⁵ Urban Vahsen, *Eurafrikanische Entwicklungskooperation: Die Assozierungspolitik der EWG gegenüber dem subsaharischen Afrika in den 1960er Jahren* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2007).

²⁶ The lengthy negotiation process leading to this outcome is well documented in the West German Federal Archives. Bundesarchiv Koblenz, Bundesministerium für Wirtschaft, B 102/67726 and B 102/67728, Kapitalhilfe für die Elfenbeinküste, Hafen und Region San Pedro (1965–1969).

²⁷ Archives Nationales de Côte d'Ivoire Abidjan, 3.38/28, Demain, Le Sud-Ouest, 6.

²⁸ Bundesarchiv Koblenz, Bundesministerium für wirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit, B 213/4020, Modellversuche für den Hafen San Pedro.



Figure 6.2: Construction signs at the port of San Pedro against a forested background, as printed in a government brochure. Archives Nationales de Côte d'Ivoire Abidjan, 3.38/28, Demain, Le Sud-Ouest, 6.

Establishing the “gateway of development”: from the San Pedro “new port” and “new town” towards the region

Port constructions began in 1968 and lasted well beyond the official opening of the port in December 1972. The port was built in close proximity to the existing village of San Pedro, and at the mouth of its namesake river. The river's course was accordingly changed. The construction sign (Figure 2), which was set up in the lush landscape of San Pedro, not only names the many actors involved in the port construction but also highlights the different parts of the overall project,

with a “port en eau profonde” (deep-sea harbor), a “ville” (town), and “voirie urbaine” (urban road network), as well as “liaisons routières” (road connections).²⁹

For West German Julius Berger AG and Philipp Holzmann AG, construction responsibilities lay in the dredging and the building of the two moles circumscribing the approach to the port as well as of the quays. The two companies sought to make use of expertise gained at other port construction sites in West Africa, such as the port for the West-German-led Bong Mining Company in Monrovia (Liberia), as well as the previously-mentioned development project in Lomé and coastal constructions for the government in Nigeria. Julius Berger also moved machinery, such as the water dredger “Minden,” from Nigeria to San Pedro.³⁰ Both companies sought to further anchor their long-term presence in West Africa, with their respective bases in Liberia and Nigeria, through their works in Côte d’Ivoire. This goal was ultimately undermined, however, by the sketchy course of the construction process.

The crucial incident complicating the course of construction for the contractors was the collapse in September 1969 of one of the main structures, the Southern quay wall. This event led to a delay of around half a year but is not known to have caused any casualties. The reason for the collapse was subsidence of part of the seabed at the port, already reflecting, during construction, the planning limitations of the port project. The contractors listed the collapse of the quay wall alongside other information on the port construction in their execution report.³¹ Financial records show that the project could be concluded with a profit, in spite of the collapse of the quay wall. Still, there were major differences in opinion regarding the shares of the profits which the different companies should receive.³²

This glimpse into the construction process, as well as its financial success, already highlights the gulf between planning and execution in this port project. The construction execution report and the attached financial documentation also reflect what information the contractors perceived as crucial in steering the project. Here, omissions can be as revealing as the included information. For example, that the West German contractors did not file any information about the Ivorian workers executing the construction suggests that their labor was considered a readily available and disposable resource, and no matter of concern. In fact,

²⁹ Archives Nationales de Côte d’Ivoire Abidjan, 3.38/28, “Demain, Le Sud-Ouest,” 6.

³⁰ Stadtarchiv Mannheim, Bilfinger SE, A9067, Bauausführungsberichte III (1–99) / I (1–25) (1964–1972), Hafenbau San Pedro, Elfenbeinküste, Julius-Berger-Bauboag-Aktiengesellschaft: Bauausführungsbericht.

³¹ Hafenbau San Pedro [...]: Bauausführungsbericht.

³² Stadtarchiv Mannheim, Bilfinger SE, A8789, Auslands-Bilanz 1971/ I (1970–1972), Arbeitsgemeinschaft San Pedro, Arge-Ergebnis (December 31, 1969), San Pedro Bilanz (December 31, 1972).

this disregard played an important role in the long-term development of the San Pedro port town.

The “new port” was the core of the San Pedro project, to be complemented with the construction of a planned “new town.” This town was to be settled step-by-step by the employees and workers of the port and port-centered economies.³³ Here, the West German contractors were less involved. Apart from the French and Italian construction companies, Ivorian state agencies, chief among them the regional development authority ARSO, were directing these constructions. Ivorian public housing agencies, such as SOGEFIHA (Société de Gestion Financière de l’Habitat), built individual settlements.³⁴ Overall, the town was planned as a sprawling and spatially generous, functionally differentiated, and socially segmented settlement. The different economies and social groups specified in plans for the town together covered the breadth of dimensions of the Ivorian post-colonial modernization project.³⁵

The town planning relied on the distinctive features of the landscape by using the coastal hills as barriers between the port area on the one side and the administrative and commercial core of the town, as well as the seaside district of *La Corniche*. Those breezy hills along the coast were the preferred sites for housing the bureaucratic and business elite of the new town. The lagoon and, indeed, the coastal swamps were equally used to structure the new settlement, separating the commercial center from the mid-scale and affordable housing districts, which were also closer to the areas planned for industrial development. The lagoon itself was envisioned to be used for touristic development, following the example of the riviera project in Abidjan.³⁶

The specific constellation of different functions expressed in the town planning and the setting in the landscape reflects that San Pedro was intended as a model project of post-colonial nation-building.³⁷ The town was supposed to

³³ On “new towns” in Africa, see Michele Provoost, “Exporting New Towns: The Welfare City in Africa,” in *Architecture and the Welfare State*, ed. Mark Swenarton et al. (London: Routledge, 2014), 277–97. For a contemporary source, discussing San Pedro as an African “new town,” see “Habitat, urbanisme, architecture en Afrique,” *Jeune Afrique*, July 1970, 37.

³⁴ “Culture, Construction et P.T.T.: Trois Réussites,” *Fraternité Matin*, December 11, 1972, 1, 7.

³⁵ Archives Nationales de Côte d’Ivoire Abidjan, 6.62/22, ARSO, “Sud-Ouest Ivoirien,” 2.

³⁶ Ayala Levin, “The African Riviera: Tourism, Infrastructure, and Regional Development in the Ivory Coast,” in *Coastal Architectures and Politics of Tourism: Leisureescapes in the Global Sunbelt*, ed. Sibel Bozdogan, Panayiota Pyla, and Petros Phokaides (Abingdon: Routledge, 2022), 181–96.

³⁷ Jo Guldi, “Landscape and Place,” in *Research Methods for History*, ed. Lucy Faire and Simon Gunn (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 67–74.

serve as an exemplary crystallization point of the whole post-colonial Ivorian state's integrated development.

The actually existing coastal settlement of San Pedro and its inhabitants are almost lost from view in these plans and their execution. The neat segmentation in the planning of the “new town” as a project of development had little significance for the ways in which the town actually developed over the following decades, directed by the port's working as a “gateway of development.” This was clearest for the local population that was disregarded by this project. Furthermore, construction of the town ultimately proved to be an intermediary step towards a larger-scale regional development, which was tied to the port project.

The San Pedro project was intended to restructure the entire South-Western region of Côte d'Ivoire by establishing transport infrastructures, and, especially, a denser network of roads.³⁸ These roads were to play a crucial role in facilitating the establishment of planned industries that would make use of the port, including plantations for producing export commodities, among them wood for paper production, oil palms, and rubber trees.³⁹ The planning of agrarian industries followed development ideas for the San Pedro concession developed in colonial times,⁴⁰ which the West German development apparatus supported.⁴¹

In addition, the Ivorian government and West German development apparatus expected that processing industries would be added to produce higher-value commodities based on plantation products, an important step in overcoming their colonial models of export-oriented resource extraction. The West German ministries also pursued domestic interests and negotiated with West German companies who expressed interest in investing in the processing industries of South-Western Côte d'Ivoire. The crown jewel for their industrialization plan was Karl Danzer's furniture company, which developed plans for establishing a processing plant following the port construction. The company explained to West German development authorities that earlier investments had been prevented by the lack of

³⁸ For the historiographical potential of a focus on roads, see for example, Marcus Filippello, *The Nature of the Path: Reading a West African Road* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

³⁹ For the relation between industrialization and plantations (“the palm oil plan”), see Canagh and Ekanza, *La Côte d'Ivoire par les Textes*.

⁴⁰ Archives Nationales de Côte d'Ivoire Abidjan 3.38/51, Port Autonome de San Pedro, “Sketch Plan Relating to the San Pedro Territory.”

⁴¹ Bundesarchiv Koblenz, B 102/67726, Bundesministerium für Wirtschaft, Kapitalhilfe für die Elfenbeinküste, Hafen und Region San Pedro (1965–1969), Kreditanstalt für Wiederaufbau, Projektprüfungsbericht Elfenbeinküste, Hafen San Pedro, October 31, 1967.

transport connections from plantations in the South-Western hinterland to the coast.⁴²

The West German plans for investments were well-suited to the Ivorian government's regional development goals to provide livelihoods for Ivorians who had moved from other parts of the country, with the help of simple means such as building road connections. For instance, thousands of internal migrants resettled in the area around San Pedro because of the dam construction at Kossou, another major development intervention, with which San Pedro was often compared. The government planned to settle these migrants in newly founded villages along the roads built in connection with the San Pedro project as pioneer agriculturalists to help cultivate an expanding forest economy and wood industry.⁴³

The projected "liaisons" also included the longer term master plan for a railroad which should lead all the way from the coast, at San Pedro, to the Ivorian part of the Nimba mountain range.⁴⁴ There, iron ore mining was to be established following the example of the mining activities on the Liberian side of the border where the Swedish-American LAMCO mining company operated. Although an extractive industry, iron ore mining represented a next step for the envisioned economic post-colonial nation-building of Côte d'Ivoire. It was planned to pave the way for the introduction of heavy industries at the port of San Pedro.⁴⁵

The San Pedro port and region as "gateway of development"

The San Pedro port appears as a "gateway of development" because the core multilateral development aid project centered on the construction of the port spawned an array of further and follow-up development projects. This is true for both "capital aid" and "technical aid," to use the West German denomination and differentiation on which I will now focus. "Technical aid" describes limited

⁴² Bundesarchiv Koblenz, B 102/67725, Bundesministerium für Wirtschaft, Kapitalhilfe für die Elfenbeinküste, Hafen und Region San Pedro (1965–1969), Karl Danzer G.m.b.H. Furnierwerke to Bundesministerium für Wirtschaft, October 4, 1965.

⁴³ "De Kossou à San Pedro: Le Pays de Demain," *Fraternité Matin*, October 9, 1972, 1.

⁴⁴ Archives Nationales de France Paris, 19990203/11 2.1, DAD, Études d'Urbanisme de San Pedro, DAD, "Plan directeur d'Urbanisme de San Pedro. Document de Travail No.11. Voie Ferrée – Localisation," November 15, 1975.

⁴⁵ Bundesarchiv Koblenz, B 102/67726, Kreditanstalt für Wiederaufbau, Projektprüfungsbericht Elfenbeinküste, Hafen San Pedro, October 31, 1967.

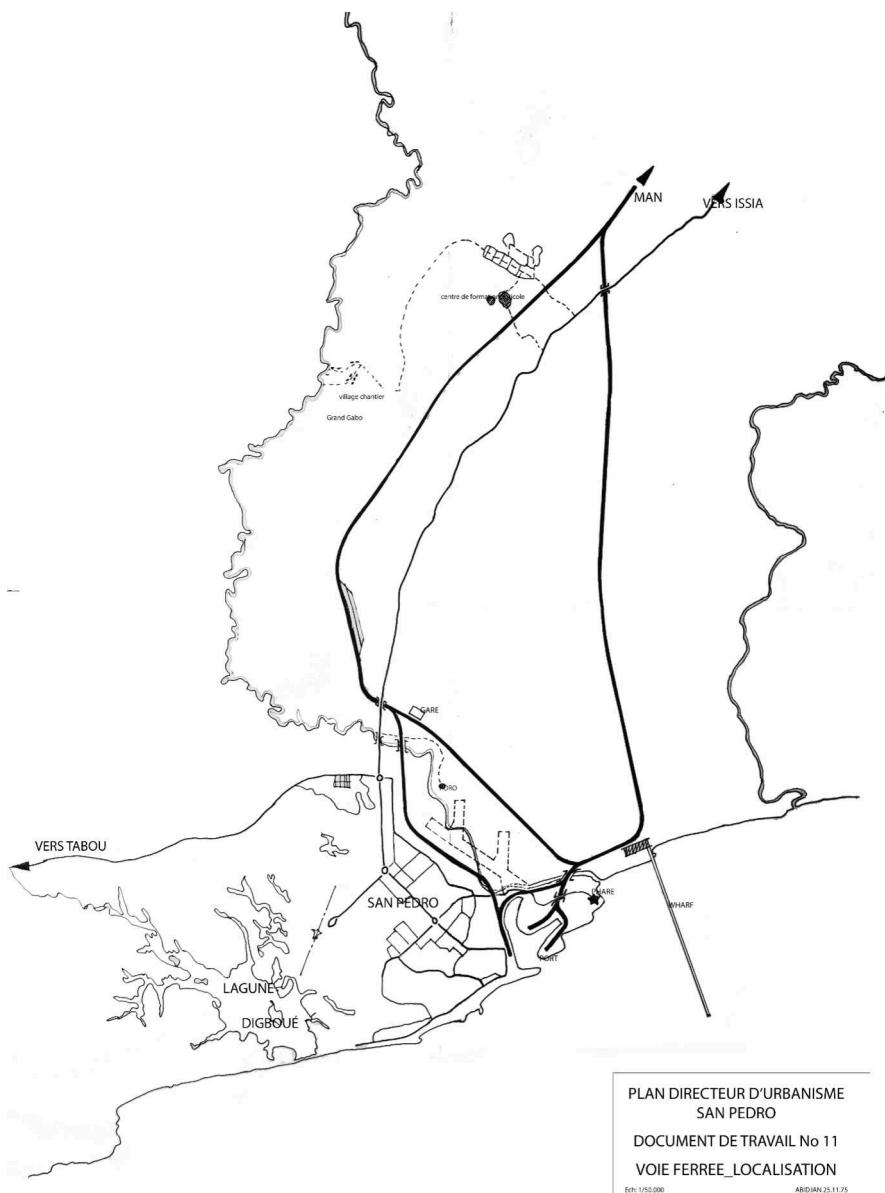


Figure 6.3: The general plan of the San Pedro port, including a planned railway line. Plan drawn by Anastasia Betsa, 2025, based on Archives Nationales de France, 19990203/11 2.1 1975/1976.

capacity-building projects, while “capital aid” concerns financial transfers. The original port construction project at San Pedro embodied both.

With regards to “technical aid,” the port became the stage for the deployment of a West German expert between 1972, the year of the port’s opening, and 1977. This port engineer, by the name of Klingenhäger, was tasked with accompanying and consulting the operation and continued construction activities of the port of San Pedro in its early years.⁴⁶ Klingenhäger’s reports reflect the port’s unordered but effective functioning and further speak to his frustrations regarding the management of the port’s construction and operation. *Inter alia*, Klingenhäger emphasized the lack of funds for standard maintenance construction work.

Given Klingenhäger’s complaints about the port’s management, it was far from self-evident that the West German government would co-fund the first expansion of the San Pedro port construction in the mid-to-late 1970s.⁴⁷ This is especially true as this expansion was not even co-executed by West German contractors, who had not achieved the desired success in the sketchy course of the port’s first phase of construction. The further expansion of the port (with the assistance of development aid) underlines its character as a “gateway of development.”

The port expansion also seems to speak to the success of the initial port construction and, by extension, of the associated development project. The port definitely was a success in terms of the volume of goods shipped, making the expansion necessary. Yet, the assessment of the port’s success needs to be nuanced, as the port construction led to a different “regional development” than intended in the original development project. The port of San Pedro was initially intended to promote the logging and shipping of tree trunks, which was also visible in the set-up of the port, with the two large floating basins (Figure 3). Already during the construction of the port, these floating basins were extended, suggesting the dynamics which would shape the port.⁴⁸ As a port to ship logs of tropical wood, San Pedro was a complete success: it made it possible to avoid the long overland transport routes to Abidjan. The consequence was the rapid deforestation of the West of the country, thus catching up with eastern Côte d’Ivoire in that regard.⁴⁹

The logging of naturally grown trees and the clearing of land, which had been envisioned as a first step, was not followed by the second step of establishing an alternative, value-added wood-processing industry. The West German and Ivorian

⁴⁶ Bundesarchiv Koblenz, Bundesministerium für Verkehr, B108/41767, Auswärtige Angelegenheiten, Hafen San Pedro, Einsatz eines deutschen Hafeningenieurs (1972–1977).

⁴⁷ Bundesarchiv Koblenz, Bundesministerium für wirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit, B 213/11771, B 213/11773, B 213/21677, Kapitalhilfe für Côte d’Ivoire, Ausbau Hafen San Pedro (1972–1983).

⁴⁸ Bundesarchiv Koblenz, B108/41767, Report Klingenhäger.

⁴⁹ “Deforestation in West Africa,” <https://www.grida.no/resources/7039>.

agencies had planned the reforestation and timber plantations to provide the base product for paper mills and furniture factories, among them the aforementioned Danzer company.⁵⁰ To the contrary, geographer José Luis Luzón observed in the early 1980s that the port had not become a bustling portal of economic exchange but rather remained a simple loading quay (for wood).⁵¹

The third step of establishing an alternative industrial economy equally failed to take off. Hardly any industry established itself at the port of San Pedro, with the exception of a cement clinker mill, opened in 1982. This clinker mill was part of the system underpinning the export of timber (and other agricultural products). The inland transport of cement provided cargo loads for the trucks transporting timber to the coast, which otherwise returned empty into the hinterland.⁵²

The trajectory of San Pedro's timber economy belies the contemporary hope that the development intervention of infrastructure construction would lead to transformed economic relations. Instead, it led to transformed development projects: deforestation, the result of such large-scale development interventions, came to be tackled as a development problem, addressed by smaller projects of technical development cooperation, the most important of which was the Taï National Park. This rainforest reserve, West Africa's largest, was carved out following the construction of the port. Since then, it has been supported by West German technical cooperation.⁵³ With the dwindling of the forest around the National Park, the balancing of the neighboring population's economic interests and the preservation of the wider ecosystem have taken center stage.

The workings of the port of San Pedro as a “gateway of development” can be further circumscribed by the economy which developed after deforestation. As seen, all kinds of different economies were projected to take hold in San Pedro and in the entire South-Western region of Côte d'Ivoire. The one industry to eventually take off was cacao cultivation, which had not appeared as central in the port's planning—again, this reproduced the pattern established in eastern Côte d'Ivoire. Today, San Pedro is the single most important port for the shipment of cacao globally. In fact, more than twenty percent of global cacao production is

⁵⁰ Archives Nationales de Côte d'Ivoire Abidjan, 6.62/43, ARSO, “Projet San Pedro (Première Tranche) Note d'Information pour la Réunion Technique FAC – KFW” (December 1970).

⁵¹ José Luis Luzón, “San Pedro: nouveau port du sud-ouest de la Côte d'Ivoire,” *Cahiers d'outre-mer* 38 (January 1985): 81–87.

⁵² Luzón, “San Pedro.”

⁵³ Paul Scholte, “Strengthening governance and sustainable management of natural resources in the Comoé and Taï regions,” last modified February 2021, <https://www.giz.de/en/worldwide/30013.html>. Also compare, “Côte d'Ivoire: Die GIZ vor Ort,” accessed May 8, 2024, <https://www.giz.de/de-weltweit/346.html>.

shipped through the port of San Pedro. This accounts for more than half of the entire Ivorian production, which—cumulatively—accounts for more than one seventh of Ivorian GDP and around half of its exports. Rather than being characterized by basins of floating tree trunks, the port of San Pedro is nowadays dominated by the warehouses of large agrobusiness companies, such as Cargill.

Unlike cash crops such as coffee or oil palm, which are grown on large plantations, the cultivation of cacao is dominated by smallholder agriculture. This means that it requires relatively limited upfront investment or state involvement, apart from the price setting of the Cacao Marketing Board in Abidjan. This also means that cacao cultivation provides a livelihood to a large share of the Ivorian population, around one-sixth of whom depend on it directly. Yet it is precisely this type of agriculture that has turned into Côte d'Ivoire's central developmental problem.⁵⁴ The cultivation of cacao has, indeed, become notorious as an environmentally and socially exploitative form of agricultural production, as well as for the export of unprocessed raw materials. Most visible are the exploitation of smallholders and child labor. These problems have provoked responses from the international cacao industry and development aid, e.g. with regards to certification. Alongside deforestation, cacao cultivation is also a field in which (West) German development cooperation has been strongly involved.⁵⁵

As an ambivalent effect, the prevalence of cacao cultivation links directly to the large-scale infrastructural development intervention of port construction and the concomitant failure to establish an industrial base at the port. The port construction created its own dynamics. Planned to promote industrialization, the port instead made cheap and large-scale shipping of raw materials from the South-Western region of Côte d'Ivoire possible, thus undermining industrialization. While the cultivation of cacao has been closely associated with and been branded as a cause of deforestation, the study of the port's construction would

⁵⁴ Orla Ryan, *Chocolate Nations: Living and Dying for Cocoa in West Africa* (London: Zed Books, 2012); William Gervase Clarence-Smith, ed., *Cocoa Pioneer Fronts since 1800: The Role of Small-holders, Planters and Merchants* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1991). For an accessible overview, “La culture du cacao en Côte d'Ivoire,” Parlons Ivoire, August 6, 2021, <https://medium.com/@Nanaboa/la-culture-du-cacao-en-c%C3%B4te-divoire-2-e5663ad9ed66>; with reference to land conflicts against the background of migration, “Les conflits fonciers dans l'ouest ivoirien,” Parlons Ivoire, August 15, 2021, <https://medium.com/@Nanaboa/les-conflits-fonciers-dans-louest-ivoirien-366b8e6040e1>.

⁵⁵ Deutsche Gesellschaft für internationale Zusammenarbeit, “Professionalisierung des Kakaoanbaus: Förderung von Kleinbäuerinnen und -bauern und Stärkung ihrer Bauernorganisation,” accessed May 10, 2024, <https://www.giz.de/weltweit/63325.html>.

suggest that it is also, in fact, a consequence of deforestation.⁵⁶ The development problem of cacao cultivation has not previously been linked to its underlying relation to the construction of the attendant infrastructure, following transportation axes from the port. Centering the port thus adds an important dimension to the history of Ivorian cacao production.

The two problems of development presented in this contribution, deforestation and cacao cultivation, are therefore deeply entangled and both link to the construction of the port and the specific ways in which it was set up as an infrastructural development intervention. Together, they cast ambivalent shadows on the planning and implementation of development projects. Deforestation was an intended consequence of the port construction but was supposed to be followed by reforestation for the wood-processing industry, which never took hold. Instead of these investments, the built infrastructure led to the clearance of the forest for cacao cultivation, which did not need the same scale of upfront investment, yet rather conveniently benefited from the new possibilities for shipping. These two development problems have been operationalized and tackled in a myriad of development projects, not least by (West) German development aid, up to the present day. While they clearly appear as development problems, it remains crucial that both problems have also been treated as paths towards development. Not only was deforestation contemporaneously seen as one step towards the development of the country, but cacao cultivation has, in its own right, become the central development success of Côte d'Ivoire, as macro-economic data will attest.

The long-term history of the new town as a “gateway of development”

The planning of the “new town” of San Pedro already began unravelling during the construction period. This was because the planning authorities and German construction companies had not taken into account the evident necessity to house the construction workers. The same was true for local residents displaced by the construction site. As construction companies did not provide housing for the construction workers, the latter took matters into their own hands (alongside

⁵⁶ For example : “Abidjan veut ‘sauver la forêt ivoirienne’ dévorée par la culture du cacao,” *Le Monde*, October 8, 2019. Also see: “Six Maps that Explain the Ivory Coast Cocoa Crisis,” MightyEarth.org, October 10, 2017, <https://mightyearth.org/article/six-maps-explain-ivory-coast-cocoa-crisis/>.

other fortune-seekers arriving from all parts of the country as well as from neighboring countries). The newcomers settled independently and in an unorganized manner around the construction site. The local population, which had lived in a cluster of villages, among them the fishing village of San Pedro, partially offered housing as landlords, provided they themselves had not been displaced. The local authorities decided that the emerging construction settlement, as well as the existing villages of San Pedro were too close to the new planned town, leading to their destruction and pushing inhabitants further inland.

These dynamics of housing and building the new town were observed by Ingolf Ludwig, a German employee of the construction company Julius Berger, writing an illustrative report in the company magazine:⁵⁷

Initially, the locality consisted of twenty clay huts with roofs of palm leaves. It was located directly behind the beach at the sea; there was only one road. Today, the old locality does not exist anymore, it was levelled by bulldozers and fire. On the beach, there now stretches the new seafront promenade... The new San Pedro was stomped out of the bush seven kilometers inland; the huts cannot be counted anymore. The number of inhabitants has grown to around eight thousand. Most men are employed with our joint venture or its sub-contractors.

Ludwig points out that the “new San Pedro” was established inland by inhabitants of the old locality as well as construction workers. This unplanned “new San Pedro” was the informal settlement of Bardo. Bardo pulled in between 70 and 90 % of the population living in San Pedro.

The Ivorian urban planner Joachim Bocuhe further spells out how the informal settlement of Bardo emerged.⁵⁸ Bocuhe details how some inhabitants of Bardo co-shaped the unplanned development of the settlement by speculating with the land and estates to which they had access during high migration. They used this land to construct housing for the port construction workers.

57 Hilfsmaschinenmeister Ingolf Ludwig, “San Pedro,” *Berger-Welt*, December 1969, 7, own translation. In the original: “Anfangs bestand die Ortschaft aus ca. zwanzig Lehmhütten mit Palmlatmatten-Dächern. Sie war gleich hinter dem Strand am Meer gelegen; es gab nur eine Straße. Heute besteht die alte Ortschaft nicht mehr, sie wurde mit Planieraupen und Feuer eingeebnet. Am Strand zieht sich jetzt die neue Uferpromenade ... Das neue San Pedro wurde etwa sieben Kilometer landeinwärts aus dem Busch gestampft; die Hütten lassen sich gar nicht mehr zählen. Die Bevölkerungszahl ist auf rd. achttausend Einwohner angestiegen. Die meisten Männer sind bei unserer Arge oder deren Subunternehmern beschäftigt.”

58 Archives Nationales de France Paris, 20090424/38, Ministère de l’Environnement du Cadre de Vie, Mémoire No Inv 11209, Unité Pédagogique d’Architecture, Travail de 3cycle d’Architecte DPLG tome 1, Joachim Bocuhe, L’urbanisation exogène facteur de crise urbaine dans le tiersmonde: le cas de la côte d’ivoire. See especially, 239–53, 254–87.

In response to the emergence of the vast, unplanned settlements, the Ivorian public housing companies built additional affordable housing, which the earlier planning of the new town had not prioritized. Yet, these efforts were too little, too late, as public housing companies could not provide attractive low-cost housing in the necessary quantity or in time.⁵⁹

Bardo turned into a permanent settlement, not only for the construction workers but for everyone seeking employment in the emerging port town. It remained the core of San Pedro in terms of population as well as of economic activity. The informal settlement Bardo was a problem for the local development authority, ARSO, as it denied the new town its character of being finely planned and ordered. Instead, it seemed to lie entirely beyond the purview of the development authority's control. As such, ARSO came to tackle the settlement as a developmental problem in the following years. However, as ARSO did not have the means to transform Bardo, this was a long and protracted process of push-and-pull with different Western development cooperation partners (French institutions first and foremost). Bardo was predominantly reorganized on paper, by formulating plans and schemes. This is, for example, evident in the manifold publications of the French developmental research institution Office de la Recherche Scientifique et Technique Outre-mer, for which Bardo became a preferred object of study.⁶⁰

Here, several examples of the mostly conceptual development projects concerned with the informal settlement of Bardo are pertinent. The first of these development projects was developing a land register and clarifying ownership structures in preparation for the goal of Bardo's transformation.⁶¹ This goal was, for example, depicted in a video produced for the UN Habitat Conference in 1976, in Vancouver. This video lay drawings of the new orderly Bardo district over images of the status quo.⁶² Finally, this status quo also provoked a controversy about the development possibilities of Ivorian and international partners, as is visible from Bocuhe's writing.⁶³ Bocuhe had already formulated the criticism that the basic constellations in Bardo remained unchanged notwithstanding the continu-

⁵⁹ "Culture, Construction et P.T.T.: Trois Réussites," *Fraternité Matin*, December 11, 1972, 1, 7.

⁶⁰ Compare Philippe Haerlinger, *La recherche urbaine à l'Orstom: Bibliographie analytique* (Paris: ORSTOM, 1983).

⁶¹ For example, Jean-François Tribillon, *Problèmes Juridiques et Fonciers posés par l'Opération de Restructuration du Quartier du Bardo à San Pedro – Côte d'Ivoire* (Paris and San Pedro: Ministère de la Coopération – ARSO – Secrétariat des Missions d'Urbanisme et d'Habitat, 1975).

⁶² Société Ivoirienne de Cinéma, "Ivory Coast – Bardo" (Vancouver: Habitat Conferences Digital Archive, 1976), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rtoTho7BGGIk>, min. 2:39.

⁶³ Bocuhe, L'urbanisation exogène.

ous study of or concern with Bardo's state of development. This perspective remains prevalent up to the present as Bardo is continuously presented in strikingly similar ways to the 1970s.⁶⁴

Like the ambivalent effects of "regional development," the long-term history of the informal settlement of Bardo, as the core of San Pedro, is closely interlinked with the specific ways the port construction was set up as a development project. The lack of planning or disregard for the housing of construction workers during the initial port construction phase had the contradictory effect of denying San Pedro its character as a planned "new town." This persistence is a long-term consequence of West German development aid, which would have remained invisible without the focus on the construction companies as actors of development aid.

Conclusion

From the outset, the port of San Pedro was an example of an integrated development project. The main infrastructural development project of the port of San Pedro was meant to be a "gateway of development." This was to grasp the urban development with the "new town" of San Pedro as well as to transform the economic structure of the entire region and contribute to post-colonial nation-building as a whole.

This contribution has shown that San Pedro did indeed turn into a "gateway of development" but of a different character. Addressing the port construction, this contribution already highlighted the cleft between the plans and execution of development projects in the short term. Addressing the new town and the regional scope, this contribution highlighted how, over the longer term, the infrastructural development project did not lead to the industrial transformation of the region's economy and the emergence of a post-colonial model town. Rather, a different kind of agricultural transformation emerged out of deforestation and cacao cultivation, and an informal settlement grew, organically and entirely beyond the purview of the development agenda. This settlement shapes San Pedro to this day.

This perspective has two consequences. First, it shows how an infrastructural development project, as a "gateway of development," gives birth to transformations which grasp both the "good" and the "bad," as seen with cacao cultivation as a major driver of the Ivorian economy. Second, it also shows how infrastructural projects give rise to continuing development projects. This is because the

⁶⁴ NCI Reportages, "Bardot, l'autre visage de San Pédro" (Abidjan : Nouvelle Chaîne Ivoirienne, 2021), <https://youtube.com/watch?v=sMLOEGob2z8>.

adopted perspective on the history of development starting from the port pursued it over the long term, across different scales and different sectors. This is complementary to more segmented perspectives on development which foreground the history of ARSO, the Bardo settlement, or the plans for tourism in San Pedro.⁶⁵

Through this perspective, analyzing the “gateway of development” of San Pedro therefore contributes to the study of integrated histories of development, and generatively explores the unintended or self-perpetuating historical dynamics of development projects more broadly.⁶⁶ As the following epilogue shows, this study of San Pedro could serve to historically ground more practically-oriented analyses.

The epilogue invites a presentist perspective on San Pedro with two foci. The first is a focus on the ongoing port construction as well as the present state of Bardo and its regional development; the second is an encounter with the former head of the German technical development cooperation in Côte d’Ivoire and his criticism of the history of development aid.

The ongoing construction to expand the port of San Pedro is again legitimized by an expansive plan, not unlike the one of the 1970s (Figure 4). This illustrates the present relevance of this contribution’s discussion of the ambiguous, contradictory, and unplanned consequences of port constructions and large infrastructure projects more generally. This contribution’s attempt to further develop a historical awareness of the cleft between past development projects and their transformation-in-execution buttresses critical perspectives on such projects in the present day. This seems all the more relevant because the port authority in San Pedro retains no historical documentation, as I learned during historical fieldwork in San Pedro in late 2021.

This is not only relevant to the broad economic and social repercussions of port construction but also rather specifically to investigations into the history of development aid. The need to contribute to historically-grounded discussions becomes apparent against the backdrop of the German-Ivorian expression of development aid. Its historical ignorance broadly encompasses the ways through which the German GIZ continues to work through the repercussions of the port project

⁶⁵ Bamba, *African Miracle, African Mirage*; Levin, “The African Riviera.”

⁶⁶ Compare Dirk-Jan Koch, *Foreign Aid and its Unintended Consequences* (London: Routledge, 2004); Paul Hoebink, “Unintended Consequences of Development Cooperation: Some Historical Notes,” Special Working Paper Series No. 2017/5 (Nijmegen: Radboud University, 2017). The self-perpetuating dimension reminds of classical studies of the stabilizing mechanisms within the development regime, e.g. James Ferguson, *The Anti-Politics Machine: Development, Depoliticization, and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1994).

in the case of its long-term projects on cacao cultivation and deforestation, as described above.

More specifically, the former country director of the German GTZ technical cooperation agency (predecessor of the GIZ) in Côte d'Ivoire, Frank Bremer (himself a historian), engages in historical discussions on German-Ivorian development aid without considering the history of San Pedro. From an insider perspective, he criticizes the forgetfulness of the development aid complex about its own project history in a book published in 2021.⁶⁷ Bremer calls these development aid projects "straw fires" and demands an end to project-centered technical aid. Instead, he sees the construction of infrastructure projects as the only viable alternative. Underlining the importance of infrastructure for development is surely not an outsider perspective. Yet, incidentally, Bremer's call is a prime example of that same forgetfulness he himself criticizes, as Bremer was unaware of the crucial West German funding and role in the initial phase of the port's construction, as an important infrastructure construction. Bremer can be forgiven as the initial port infrastructure construction has been built over and later port expansions were not executed by German contractors, merely with (West) German funding.

Little visibility does not mean little importance, however. This contribution therefore makes a relevant contribution towards nuancing the conceptions held by Bremer and others in the international development apparatus, as well as filling a void in the historical awareness of this particular case. It underlines that infrastructure has important development effects over the long term—as Bremer suspects—but uses an empirical study to flesh out their spatial and chronological breadth. This makes apparent how they play out in ambiguous or contradicting ways, which problematizes Bremer's general understanding of development aid as "straw fires." For San Pedro, pointing to these contrarian long-term effects makes a contribution towards furthering the discussion on how current port expansion work might affect the community and region in the longer term, and also makes a contribution to German and Ivorian development history.

⁶⁷ Frank Bremer, *50 Jahre Entwicklungshilfe: 50 Jahre Strohfeuer* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 2021); Compare with another (West) German insider perspective with Bohnet, *Geschichte der deutschen Entwicklungspolitik*.



Figure 6.4: The present aspirational master plan of the San Pedro port construction on the wall of the building of the San Pedro port authority. The photo was taken on October 4, 2021 during historical fieldwork which determined that historical sources on the port construction and its consequences were not readily available in San Pedro.

Matthias Heymann

Narratives of global fat: Aarhus Oliefabrik and United Plantations Company

Introduction: The needs and challenges of investigating global resource chains

In the modern era, competition for global natural resources has become a key concern.¹ At the same time, resource exploitation has created enormous problems on a global scale, such as growing inequality between the Global South and the Global North, and dramatic social and environmental impacts.² In the early twenty-first century, tensions over global resources have increased significantly, creating additional pressures. Rising demand for resources from China and other emerging economies has led to aggressive competition for global resource rights, with resource markets experiencing soaring prices and increasing volatility. At the same time, resource demand in the industrialized North has driven global deforestation and environmental change. In 2013, for example, Europe's net imports of soybeans and soybean products for oil production and animal feed totaled around 27 million tons. These imports required global plantations for their production, accounting for more than 6 % of the European Union's total agricultural area and causing significant deforestation and carbon dioxide emissions (see Figure 7.1).³

In today's world, the demand for resources around the globe poses at least three major challenges that have evolved and dramatically increased since the nineteenth century: resource security and the global scramble for resources; global economic inequality and the quest for global justice; and the environmental consequences of global resource exploitation and use, with the urgent need for a transformation towards sustainable resource use and development. Historical

¹ Edward Barbier, *Scarcity and Frontiers: How Economies Have Developed through Natural Resource Exploitation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011). Michael T. Klare, *The Race for What's Left: The Global Scramble for the World's Last Resources* (New York: Picador, 2012).

² K. S. Jomo, ed., *The Great Divergence, Hegemony, Uneven Development, and Global Inequality* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005); Corey Ross, *Ecology and Power in the Age of Empire: Europe and the Transformation of the Tropical World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

³ Numbers are based on European Environmental Agency, "Infographic EU Animal Feed Imports and Land Dependency," INF-78, November 23, 2020, accessed December 23, 2021, <https://www.eea.europa.eu/media/infographics/eu-animal-feed-imports-and-1/view>.

research on these multifaceted, interrelated challenges is the focus of the Research Group on Technologies, Environment and Resources, an initiative of the Tensions of Europe Network, which brings together some 50 scholars.⁴ One of its focus areas has become the investigation of global resource chains and their sustainability challenges.⁵ An important element in the scramble for global resources has been the establishment of large-scale plantations for tropical fruits by colonial powers, global corporations, and emerging economies in the Global South. Several colleagues in our Research Group have begun to focus on global plant oil resources and the increasing production of and trade in oil crops such as coconut, soya, and oil palm.⁶ Vegetable oil production has risen from less than 20 million tons in 1960 to more than 160 million tons in 2014, and has raised considerable debate, particularly because of the tropical deforestation it has caused in countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brazil.⁷

⁴ See <https://www.tensionsofeurope.eu/technology-environment-and-resources/>, accessed July 26, 2024.

⁵ Other focus areas are Resource Perceptions and Constructions of Scarcity and Resource Security and the Limits of Expert Knowledge. Matthias Heymann et al., “Challenging Europe: Technology, Environment, and the Quest for Resource Security,” *Forum Grand Challenges, Technology and Culture* 61, no. 1 (2020): 282–94. Anna Åberg and Frank Veraart, “Creating, Capturing and Circulating Commodities: The Technology and Politics of Material Resource Flows, From the 19th Century to the Present,” introduction to a special section, *The Extractive Industries and Society* 7, no. 1 (2020): 1–67.

⁶ The workshop “Global fat resources: Connecting Themes, Approaches and Narratives, ca. 1850–2022” was held on May 23–24, 2023 at the University of Bergen. One special issue deriving from it for the journal *Global Environment* is in preparation. See also Åberg and Veraart, “Creating, Capturing and Circulating Commodities” (note 5). Frank C. A. Veraart, J.-P. P. H. Smits, and Erik van der Vleuten, “Connected by Oil: A Framework to Analyze the Connected Sustainability Histories of the Niger and Rhine Deltas, 1950–2015,” *The Extractive Industries and Society* 7, no. 1 (2020): 50–67. Evelien de Hoop and Erik van der Vleuten, “Sustainability Knowledge Politics: Southeast Asia, Europe and the Transregional History of Palm Oil Sustainability Research,” *Global Environment* 15, no. 2 (2022): 209–45.

⁷ Derek Byerlee, Walter P. Falcon, and Rosamond L. Naylor, *The Tropical Oil Crop Revolution: Food, Feed, Fuel, and Forests* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Jonathan E. Robins, “Oil Boom: Agriculture, Chemistry, and the Rise of Global Plant Fat Industries, ca. 1850–1920,” *Journal of World History* 29, no. 3 (2018): 313–42; Valeria Giacomin, “The Emergence of an Export Cluster: Traders and Palm Oil in Early Twentieth-Century Southeast Asia,” *Enterprise and Society* 19, no. 2 (2017): 272–308.

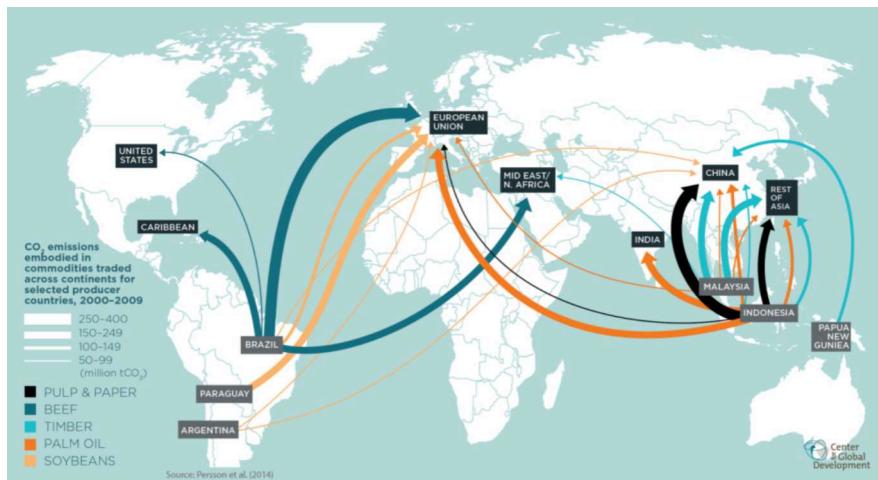


Figure 7.1: Carbon dioxide emissions associated with the production of commodities traded across continents.⁸

The challenge is how to write global plant oil histories and develop balanced narratives. Historical studies of colonial resource exploitation, trade relations, and metropolitan industries reveal extremely diverse, mostly one-sided, either clearly positive or clearly negative, often fundamentally conflicting and at the same time highly sensitive narratives. Under such conditions, the search for integrated and balanced narratives may seem a very difficult and perhaps even risky undertaking. In this chapter, I will briefly present five common types of narratives to illustrate the diversity of stories: 1) the industrial success story; 2) the heroic pioneer motive; 3) colonial exploitation and environmental degradation; 4) national economic development; and 5) sustainability.

While these types of narratives exist in various forms and elaborations, I will only illustrate them with reference to the example of global Danish vegetable oil interests and vegetable oil developments in Denmark and Malaysia. The origins of global vegetable oil chains go back to the era of trade imperialism in the second half of the nineteenth century, when innovations in oil chemistry facilitated the engineering of vegetable oils and the development of oil industries producing

⁸ Frances Seymour, “The Global Trade in Deforestation and Associated Emissions,” Center for Global Development, DG Blogpost, 22 October 2014, <https://www.cgdev.org/blog/global-trade-deforestation-and-associated-emissions>. Calculations as those represented in figure 1 are obviously very complex and based on assumptions. For a more comprehensive picture also European exports of products including these commodities would have to be considered.

new vegetable oil products such as margarine.⁹ While colonial powers such as Great Britain and the Netherlands dominated the production and trade of vegetable oils, Denmark, a comparatively small country with no colonial possessions in Southeast Asia at the time, also developed a leading position in the oil industry and in global plantation activities in South and Southeast Asian countries. In the late nineteenth century, entrepreneurs and engineers in the Danish city of Aarhus established an expanding oil industry that demanded increasing amounts of the world's vegetable oil resources. At the same time, Danish adventurers were engaged in ambitious technological projects in Siam (now Thailand), investing in the development of large tropical plantations.

Industrial success narratives: The rise of the Aarhus oil industry

Aarhus Palmekærnefabrik, founded in 1871 and renamed Aarhus Oliefabrik (AO) in 1892, focused on the production of vegetable oils, e.g. as a basis for margarine. It was an important player in a network of Aarhus-based fat and oil companies.¹⁰ In the late nineteenth century, AO established a research laboratory to experiment with a wide range of different tropical oil seeds and fruits in order to develop new products and production processes. The research laboratory helped develop refining processes to change the composition, consistency, smell, and taste of oils and fats. Its most important products became base oil products called NEUTREX and CEBES, which were used as feedstocks for the production of oil and fat consumer products such as margarine or chocolate products. Aarhus Oliefabrik processed and experimented with a wide range of different oil plants, most of which had to be imported from tropical countries, such as sesame seeds, peanuts, kopra (coconut), palm kernels, palm fruit, sheanuts, etc. To ensure a steady flow of tropical oil resources, the company began establishing trading stations in Africa and the Far East shortly after the turn of the century (e.g. in Ceylon, Singapore, Malaya, Indonesia, Cameroon, British Senegambia, Belgian Congo, and Portuguese

⁹ Robins, "Oil Boom" (note 8). Claiton Marcia da Silva and Claudio di Majo (eds.), *The Age of the Soybean. An Environmental History of Soy During the Great Acceleration* (Winwick: The White Horse Press, 2022); Giacomin, "The Emergence of an Export Cluster" (note 8); Ines Prodöhl, *Globalizing the Soybean, Fat, Feed and sometimes Food, c. 1900–1950* (Milton Park: Routledge, 2023).

¹⁰ Poul Kragelund, *Aarhus Olie, 1871–1996* (Aarhus: Self-publishing company, 1996); Jesper Strandskov, Kurt Pedersen, Peder Sørensen, *Pioneren Otto Mønsted* (Aarhus: Systime, 1998). Erik Helmer Pedersen, *Pionererne* (Copenhagen: Politikens forlag, 1986).

Guinea), but also in trading centres such as London, New York, and Sydney. From 1918 it also began to invest heavily in its own plantations in Sumatra and Malaya. In Sumatra, the company established Dansk Ostindisk Plantage Selskab, which acquired a 12,000-hectare concession for palm oil and rubber trees.¹¹

By 1911, AO had become the largest oil producer in Scandinavia and one of the largest oil companies in the world. A new large extraction and refining plant was planned at the port of Aarhus, which began producing 100 tonnes of oil a day in 1925, but with soya as a new raw material, this quickly rose to 120 tonnes a day. By the mid-1930s, Aarhus Olie's exports of oils and animal feeds accounted for ten percent of Denmark's industrial exports. In 1937, the Danish oil industry was the country's largest export industry, accounting for 22 percent of total exports to 75 countries. The oil industry was vital to Aarhus. It employed almost 1,300 people and generated about 10 percent of the income of the greater Aarhus area.¹² By the Second World War, Denmark had become the largest importer of coconut kernels and the third largest importer of palm oil kernels as the most important vegetable oil resources from British Malaya.¹³

The literature on the Danish oil industry is mostly Danish and typically constructs positive narratives about economic success made possible by skillful entrepreneurs, strong leaders, scientific and technological leadership, strong local and international financial and cooperation networks, etc. The literature is based on Danish sources. It features a national frame and a positive Danish perspective on Danish actors and industries and their development of global resources and markets. Much of the literature emphasizes Denmark's status as a small country and the Danish virtue of productive cooperation to counter its limited power in the context of global competition for resources and markets. This perspective portrays the development of the Danish vegetable oil industry as a remarkable success.

¹¹ Kragelund, *Aarhus Olie* (note 10), 17–20, 41, 51; Pedersen, *Pionererne* (note 10), 254–61.

¹² Kragelund *Aarhus Olie* (note 10), 47, 67–68.

¹³ Geoffrey Kevin Pakiam, *Smallholder Involvement in Tree Crops in Malaya, with Special Reference to Oil and Coconut Palms in Johor, 1862–1963* (PhD thesis, University of London, 2017), 325–26.

Heroic pioneer narratives: Establishment and operation of United Plantations

From the late nineteenth century, Danish “pioneers” developed a strong presence in Southeast Asia, first in Siam. Siam was the only state in the region to remain independent, but it was under strong pressure from the colonial powers surrounding it, especially France and Britain. In this situation, the King of Siam, Chulalongkorn, embarked on a comprehensive modernization policy with the help of Danish experts, administrators, investors, seamen, and others.¹⁴ One of the Danish emigrants to Siam was engineer Aage Westenholz, who arrived in Siam in 1885 at the age of 26, became a versatile businessman, and was a highly successful system builder in Bangkok’s nascent transportation, electricity, and construction industries. After the turn of the century, plantations became his main interest. In 1906, Westenholz bought his first piece of land, a few hundred acres of uncultivated tropical forest in Perak, Malaya, then a British protectorate, and formed the Jendarata Rubber Company to take advantage of the rubber boom. He soon diversified into coconut palms for oil production. In 1917, Westenholz reorganized his plantations and formed United Plantations (UP).¹⁵

In 1918, UP began to experiment with a new oil plant, the oil palm. Dutch scientists first imported and bred a variant of the African oil palm in Indonesia in the mid-nineteenth century, but Dutch and British attempts to develop commercial oil palm plantations were initially disappointing due to high costs and lack of markets.¹⁶ In 1927, UP successfully planted its first 250 acres of oil palms. Oil palms proved to be less fragile than rubber trees, ideal for the climate, and promised to be a profitable diversification from rubber at the end of the rubber boom. They soon became a major activity for the company. United Plantations built a small oil mill to process oil fruits in the 1930s, which expanded significantly after the war to become an oil refinery complex on the navigable Bernam River adjacent to UP’s plantations. While almost all palm oil was refined in Europe before 1970, UP was one of the pioneers in breaking this pattern. Westenholz and his successors, all members of his family, employed only European plantation man-

¹⁴ Tage Kaarsted, *Admiralen, Andreas de Richelieu, Forretningsmand og politiker i Siam og Danmark* (Odense: SAGA Egmont, 1991); Susan M. Martin, *The UP Saga* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2003), 17–18.

¹⁵ Martin, *UP Saga* (note 14), 22–39. Pedersen, *Pionererne* (note 10), 114–22.

¹⁶ Jonathan E. Robins, “Shallow Roots: The Early Oil Palm Industry in Southeast Asia, 1848–1940,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 51, no. 4 (2020): 538–60.

agers to run the plantations until the 1970s, while the company's board of directors and most of its investors were based in Denmark.¹⁷

The history of Westenholz and UP has been written by business historian Susan M. Martin in a very interesting and informative book. Like most of the Danish literature on global Danish endeavors,¹⁸ she develops a one-sided narrative that reflects only the perspectives and constructs portrayals of heroic pioneers. Martin describes in detail the enormous problems, challenges, and adventures that the managers had to overcome, and their benevolent treatment of the workforce, with an emphasis on setting high welfare standards within the conventions of the time and a work culture nourished by the Danish ideals of the folk high school and the cooperative movement. Her book does not reveal that UP was a colonial enterprise run by privileged colonizers, though perhaps of a special kind. Her book was commissioned by and depended on the Danish management of the company, who facilitated many interviews and provided company documents. Since Martin did not speak Danish, the company even translated many selected documents. While the book clearly surpasses older historical works in terms of detail, historical context, and information, the one-sided narrative of heroic pioneers admirably overcoming difficult conditions in a foreign tropical environment at the same time limits its value.

(Post-) colonial exploitation and environmental destruction narratives

The narratives presented so far differ markedly from more recent, critical perspectives on European colonial activities and practices and their social and environmental consequences. Historians largely agree that an era of “new imperialism” or “trade imperialism” by European colonial powers began in the mid-nineteenth century, coinciding with the emergence of modern underdeveloped economies in Asia and Africa. The European powers rapidly penetrated and conquered large parts of Asia, Africa, and Oceania and integrated these new territories into the world trade. A major incentive for imperialist policy was the exploitation of raw materials for the new industries in the West: “cotton and indigo for cloth, palm oil to grease machinery, copper and gutta-percha for electric and telegraph lines, tin for canned goods, and rubber for clothing and automobiles,” as

¹⁷ Martin, *UP Saga* (note 14), 54–71, 170, 183–85, 325.

¹⁸ Kragelund, *Aarhus Olie* and Pedersen, *Pionererne* (note 10); Kaarsted, *Admiralen* (note 14).

Daniel Headrick put it.¹⁹ The colonial exploitation of resources and labor had enormous social and environmental consequences. Corey Ross emphasized that “long-distance trade helped detach production from consumption, and consumption from its costs.” In a process of “modification and subjugation,” industrial powers “reordered nature-society arrangements across large parts of the globe.”²⁰

A major factor in this “global land grab” was the systematic creation of plantations to exploit tropical land and climate for the large-scale production of valuable resources such as sugar, coffee, coconut, rubber, and palm oil in Southeast Asia. Historians have shown that plantation building not only caused significant social and environmental damage, such as deforestation and the destruction of local forms of peasant agriculture; in addition, European plantation building established a persistent development trajectory that led to a tremendous expansion of the plantation area, driven by Western resource demands and domestic aspirations for economic development, which accelerated in the postcolonial period. Donna Haraway and others coined the term *Plantationocene* as an alternative to *Anthropocene* to emphasize the enormous historical role of these “factories in the fields” in the transformation of planet Earth, the exploitation of people and the environment, and the ruthless destruction of traditional economies and ways of life.²¹ Southeast Asia in particular has become a hotspot for industrial agriculture and has been called “one of the epicenters of the contemporary plantationocene.” It was the source of 76 percent of the world’s natural rubber, 86 percent of the world’s palm oil, and 59 percent of the world’s coconut production in 2018.²²

Land grabbing is certainly not a problem of the past. Anthropologist Anna Tsing gives a vivid picture of the destructive forces at the plantation resource frontier in Kalimantan, Indonesia: “the frontier has come as a shock and a disruption; it is with their [the local companions’, MH] help that I experience the trauma of transformation”; “hills are flooding away, streams are stuck in mud, vines swarm over fresh stumps, ants and humans are on the move. On the frontier, nature goes

¹⁹ Daniel R. Headrick, *Tentacles of Progress, Technology Transfer in the Age of Imperialism, 1850–1940* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 4–6.

²⁰ Ross, *Ecology and Power* (note 2), 4, 16.

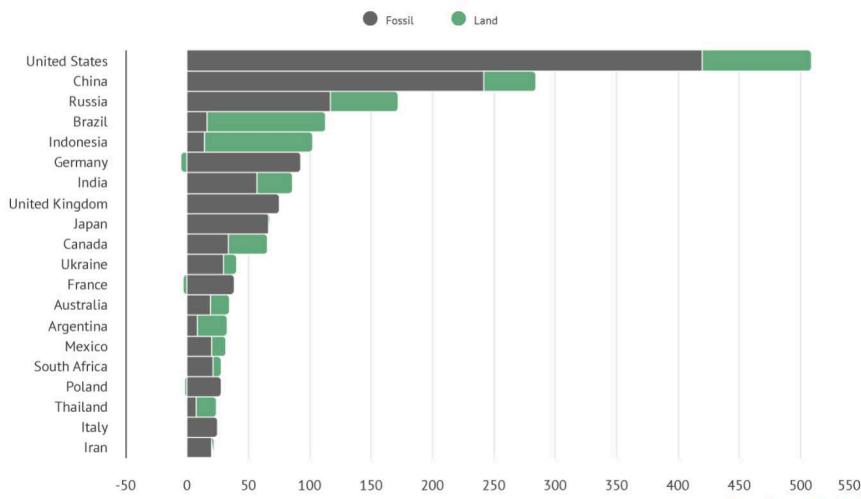
²¹ Donna Haraway, “Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin,” *Environmental Humanities*, 6, no. 1 (2015): 159–65. Noboru Ishikawa, “Into a New Epoch: Capitalist Nature in the Plantationocene,” in *Anthropogenic Tropical Forest, Human-Nature Interfaces on the Plantation Frontier*, ed. Noboru Ishikawa and R. Soda (Singapore: Springer, 2020), 589–94. The phrase “factories in the fields” was coined by Carey McWilliams, *Factories in the Field, The Story of Migratory Farm Labor in California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

²² Miles Kenney-Lazar and Noboru Ishikawa, “Mega-Plantations in Southeast Asia, Landscapes of Displacement,” *Environment and Society* 10 (2019): 63–82, here p. 63, <https://doi.org/10.3167/ares.2019100105>, accessed July 29, 2024.

wild.”²³ More recently, with the focus on climate change, the issue of tropical deforestation has gained particular attention. On the list of countries with the highest cumulative carbon dioxide emissions since 1850, Brazil and Indonesia are ranked fourth and fifth, not because of fossil fuel use as in the case of countries in the Global North but because of deforestation driven by the expansion of plantation industries (see Figure 7.2 below). Driven by Western demand and still largely controlled by Western corporations, the colonial economic model of plantation industries expanded enormously in tropical countries after independence. Malaysian economist Jomo Kwame Sundaram calls this condition “post-World War II imperialism,” which contributed to a sharp rise of global inequality especially after 1973.²⁴

The countries with the largest cumulative emissions 1850-2021

Billions of tonnes of CO₂ from fossil fuels, cement, land use and forestry



Source: Carbon Brief analysis of figures from the Global Carbon Project, CDIAC, Our World in Data, Carbon Monitor, Houghton and Nassikas (2017) and Hansis et al (2015). Chart by Carbon Brief using Highcharts.

Carbon Brief
CLEAR ON CLIMATE

Figure 7.2: Countries with the largest cumulative carbon dioxide emissions in gigatons from 1850 to 2021.²⁵

²³ Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, “Natural Resources and Capitalist Frontiers,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 38, no. 48 (Nov. 29–Dec. 5, 2003): 5100–06, here 5100.

²⁴ Jomo, *The Great Divergence* (note 2), 2 and 10.

²⁵ Simon Evans, “Historical Responsibility for Climate Change is at the Heart of Debates over Climate Justice,” *Carbon Brief Blog*, <https://www.carbonbrief.org/analysis-which-countries-are-historically-responsible-for-climate-change/> (last accessed 29 July 2024). Source of data: Carbon Brief analysis of figures from the Global Carbon Project, CDIAC, Our World in Data, Carbon Monitor, R.A. Houghton and Alexander A. Nassikas (“Global and regional fluxes of carbon from land use and land cover change 1850–2015,” *Global Biogeochemical Cycles* 31, No. 3 (2017): 456–472) and

British Malaya and later Malaysia provide an example of the profound social consequences and disruptions caused by plantation industries. Because the country did not provide the labor required by the colonial plantation industries, the labor force consisted largely of Tamil workers. The bulk of Tamil-Malaysian migration began during the British Raj, when Britain facilitated the migration of Indian laborers to work on plantations. Today, more than five percent of the population in the multiethnic state of Malaysia is of Tamil and Indian origin (with another 22 percent of Chinese origin). Pointing to the exploitation of labor, Philippine historian Maria Serena Diokno describes a disparity between “humanitarian rhetoric and coercive assimilation.”²⁶ While colonial actors justified oppression and coercion with the benefits of their “civilizing mission,” the historical literature has shown that often forced mass migration and the organization and management of plantation labor involved violence and exploitative practices.²⁷ Even today, plantation labor in Malaysia is based on labor migration, mainly from Indonesia and India, and often very poor working conditions.

Obviously, producers such as United Plantations in Malaysia and consumers of tropical oil fruits such as Aarhus Olie contributed to the exploitation of tropical resources and labor and the associated deforestation and environmental degradation, which have been neglected in the historical literature. Denmark's colonial historiography produced a strong self-image as a benevolent empire, both in relation to its own colonies, especially Greenland, and to its global trading activities. Historian Lars Jensen argues that historical research has neglected Denmark's postcolonial legacy of imperialism.²⁸ More recently, the role of private corporations with extensive production and trade networks as “agents and carriers of imperialist power” has been noted.²⁹

Eberhard Hansis et al. (“Relevance of methodological choices for accounting of land use change carbon fluxes,” *Global Biogeochemical Cycles* 29, No. 8 (2015): 1230–1246).

26 Maria Serena Diokno, “Southeast Asia, Imperial Possession and Dispossession in the Long Twentieth Century,” in *The Great Divergence, Hegemony, Uneven Development, and Global Inequality*, ed. K. S. Jomo (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005), 170–94, here 172.

27 E.g. D. J. M. Tate, *The RGA History of the Plantation Industry in the Malay Peninsula* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1996), 150–78.

28 Lars Jensen, “Denmark and its Colonies,” in *A Historical Companion to Postcolonial Literatures: Continental Europe and Its Empires*, ed. Rajeev S. Patke and Lars Jensen (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), 59. Lars Jensen, “Postcolonial Denmark, Beyond the Rot of Colonialism,” *Postcolonial Studies* 18, no. 4 (2015): 440–52.

29 Janina Priebe, “From Siam to Greenland. Danish Economic Imperialism at the Turn of the Twentieth Century,” *Journal of World History* 27, no. 4 (2016): 619–40, here 622. Johan Höglund and Linda Andersson Burnett, “Introduction: Nordic Colonialisms and Scandinavian Studies,” *Scandinavian Studies* 91, no. 1–2 (2019): 1–12.

A promotional film produced by Aarhus Oliefabrik in 1933 shows the work of coolies harvesting, processing, and transporting coconuts in Ceylon for export to Denmark, reflecting the relationship between European masters and local servants.³⁰ In the case of United Plantations in Malaysia, Susan Martin emphasizes an image of benevolent masters caring for their workers and doesn't mention any coercive practices or bondage. From its earliest days, UP employed a labor force of Tamil men and women imported from Ceylon to do the day-to-day work of harvesting, transporting, and processing, as well as specialized tasks such as building roads and controlling pests and animals.³¹ Martin does not discuss or raise the issue of subjugation and coercive practices that Tamil workers in Malaya commonly experienced.³² UP may have treated its workers better than others, but it was part of an exploitative colonial plantation system.

Development narratives: Creating a national industry

The pursuit of a civilizing mission of colonial projects is an old and familiar trope that colonial powers created and used extensively to justify their colonial endeavors. According to this apologetic rhetoric, a benevolent colonial state promoted economic and social development. Historians have shown that this rhetoric helped mask domination and violence, unequal treatment, and the exploitation of resources and labor.³³ Development narratives became a dominant rhetorical tool in post-war decolonization and post-colonial debates.³⁴

The case of Malaysia and its palm oil industry is an interesting example of the use of a development narrative. The Malayan states gained independence from

³⁰ Aarhus Oliefabrik A/S, Silent movie, 51 minutes, accessed July 29, 2024, <https://www.danmarkpaafilm.dk/film/aarhus-oliefabrik/s>.

³¹ Martin, *UP Saga* (no. 14), 3, 12, 60–61.

³² Amarjit Kaur, “Plantation Systems, Labour Regimes and the State in Malaysia, 1900–2012,” *Journal of Agrarian Change* 14, no. 2 (2014): 190–213. P. Ramasamy, “Labour Control and Labour Resistance in the Plantations of Colonial Malaya” *Journal of Peasant Studies* 19, no. 3–4 (1992): 87–105. Jonathan Robins, *Oil Palms, A Global History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021), 148.

³³ Diokno, “Southeast Asia” (note 26): 173. Jürgen Osterhammel, *Colonialism, A Theoretical Overview* (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 1997).

³⁴ Ilan Kapoor, *The Postcolonial Politics of Development* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008); Cheryl McEwan, *Postcolonialism and Development* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009); Emery M. Roe, “Development Narratives, Or Making the Best of Blueprint Development,” *World Development* 19, no. 4 (1991): 287–300.

Britain as the Federation of Malaya in 1957 and formed the unified state of Malaysia in 1963. The plantation economy was an important economic mainstay of the young country, expanding with the growing global demand for tropical products. Unlike other decolonized states, Malaysia initially did not pursue a policy of nationalizing foreign property in Malaysia but accepted foreign ownership. After violent riots by Chinese minorities against the Malay majority in 1969, the Malaysian government adopted a nationalist stance. Since the 1970s, Malaysia's New Economic Policy has aimed to reduce foreign ownership in Malaysia to 30 percent by 1990 in order to strengthen Malay ownership and development. This Malay nationalist policy must be seen as a response to the inferior position of the Malays compared to the Chinese minority, and it led to the full nationalization of the largest British plantation companies in Malaysia until the early 1980s. Other large plantation companies were forced to accept Malay ownership and management; in fact, it became standard practice for large companies to hire senior Malay politicians and administrators, creating powerful state-business patronage networks.³⁵

In addition, the Malaysian government began a systematic effort to develop smallholder plantations through the Federal Land Development Authority (FELDA), which was established in 1959. Its aim was to settle the landless poor (and generally Malay) on oil palm smallholdings throughout the country. FELDA eventually developed some 850,000 ha, including 500,000 ha of smallholdings, which had a massive impact on the country and the palm oil industry. State governments also became involved and developed their own state land schemes of 5,000–10,000 ha, partly funded by federal government grants. Between 1975 and 1990, annual crude palm oil production increased from just over one million tons to over six million tons.³⁶ Building on the economic pattern established by

³⁵ Shakila Yakob and Nicholas J. White, "The 'Unfinished Business' of Malaysia's Decolonisation: The Origins of the Guthrie 'Dawn Raid,'" *Modern Asian Studies* 44, no. 5 (2010): 919–60; Tim N. Harper, *The End of Empire and the Making of Malaya* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), Ch. 9; Rob Glew and Chander Velu, "Malaysianisation and the Barlow Boustead Estates Agency," *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, accessed July 29, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.17863/CAM.52308>; Mariati Norhashim and Kamarulzaman Ab. Aziz, "Smart Partnership or Cronyism? A Malaysian Perspective," *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy* 25, no. 8 (2005): 31–48.

³⁶ See Shakila Yakob's contribution in this special issue. Shakila Yacob and Khadijah Md Khalid, "Adapt or Divest? The New Economic Policy and Foreign Businesses in Malaysia (1970–2000)," *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 40, no. 3 (2012): 459–82; Henry S. Barlow, "The Malaysian Plantation Industry: A Brief History to the mid 1980s," 2018, accessed May 31, 2023, www.arabis.org/index.php/articles/articles/plantation-history/the-malaysian-plantation-industry-a-brief-history-to-the-mid-1980s. Johan Saravanamuttu, "The Political Economy of Migration and Flexible Labour Regimes: The Case of the Oil Palm Industry in Malaysia," in *The Palm Oil Con-*

colonial Britain, Malaysia systematically expanded palm oil production according to its own national goals, becoming the world's largest palm oil producer until 2006, when it was surpassed by Indonesia (Figure 7.3).³⁷ The palm oil industry is one of the most important industries in these countries. It is today supported by a wide range of influential institutions and infrastructure, such as research institutes, government agencies, and lobbying associations.³⁸ Today, much of the country's land is devoted to palm oil plantations.³⁹

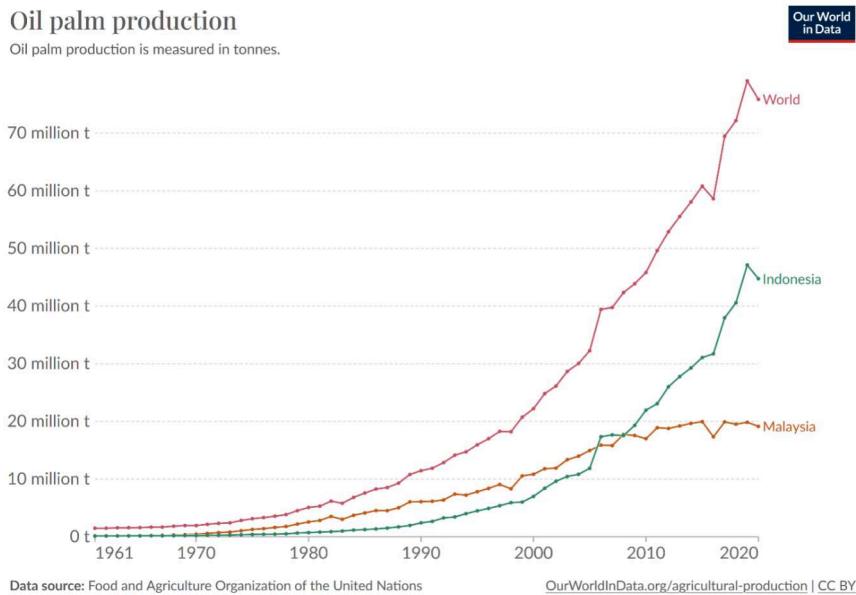


Figure 7.3: Palm oil production 1961 to 2020 in tons (source: Our world in data).

troversy in Southeast Asia: A Transnational Perspective, ed. Oliver Pye and Jayati Bhattacharya (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2012), 120–39.

³⁷ See e.g. Hannah Ritchie, “Palm Oil,” Our World In Data, accessed October 26, 2023, <https://ourworldindata.org/palm-oil>.

³⁸ E.g. Malaysian Palm Oil Board, Malaysian Palm Oil Council, Malaysian Palm Oil Certification Council, Malaysian Palm Oil Association, The Palm Oil Refiners Association of Malaysia.

³⁹ Albert ten Kate, Barbara Kuepper, and Matt Piotrowski, “Oil Palm Expansion in Peninsular Malaysia is Guided by Non-Transparency,” Chain Reaction Research Report, May 7, 2021, accessed July 29, 2024, <https://chainreactionresearch.com/report/oil-palm-expansion-in-peninsular-malaysia-is-guided-by-non-transparency/>.

The Scandinavian managers of United Plantations and its board of directors in Copenhagen have managed to keep the company and its plantations in Danish hands through difficult times, such as the Japanese occupation of British Malaya in World War II, and after national independence and subsequent nationalization policies. One of UP's leading Danish managers in Malaysia, Børge Bek-Nielsen, who joined the company and moved to Malaysia in 1951, recognized the coming political changes early on and prepared for them to avoid expropriation of the company. From the early 1970s, he worked to diversify UP's ownership in accordance with the Malaysian government's requirements. Not being a British company, hiring senior Malaysian managers, networking with Malaysian institutions and decision-makers, aligning with Malaysian requirements and standards, and buying into and supporting the Malaysian national economic development narrative helped the company avoid eventual nationalization to this day. Interviews in Malaysia highlighted the company's progressive standards and excellent standing and reputation in the country.⁴⁰

Sustainability narratives: Responding to environmental pressures

On November 21, 2008, the first shipment of 500 tons of certified sustainable palm oil (CSPO) arrived in Europe at the port of Rotterdam. It was produced by United Plantations (UP) in Malaysia and imported by the UK branch of Aarhus-Karlhamn (AAK), a merger of the former Aarhus Oliefabrik and Karlshamn AB in 2005. The news was proudly announced in a press release by the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO), which was founded in Malaysia in 2004.⁴¹ UP and AAK have been members of the RSPO since its inception and have been among the supportive forces behind its mission. The RSPO was the unlikely result of an initiative by the NGO World Wildlife Fund (WWF). In 2001, WWF approached Western companies with a strong interest in palm oil to organize a private initiative for developing sustainable palm oil. WWF had developed the concept of bringing stakeholders with opposite interests together to jointly negotiate improved environmental

⁴⁰ Interview by the author with a former plantation manager and expert, Kuala Lumpur, June 6, 2023. Interview by the author with an RSPO senior manager, Kuala Lumpur, June 15, 2023. Interview by the author with a senior manager of the Malaysian Palm Oil Board, Kajang, Malaysia, June 13, 2023.

⁴¹ "Sustainable Palm Oil Landed in Rotterdam," RSPO Email-Newsletter (November 27, 2008), published online March 8, 2012, accessed July 24, 2024, <https://rspo.org/first-shipment-of-cspo-unloaded-in-rotterdam/>.

standards in the early 1990s with the Forest Stewardship Council, established in 1993.⁴² The RSPO was the third such initiative (and ten more had been established around the world by 2012, all under the leadership of WWF).⁴³

Although oil palms produce by far the highest yield of oil per hectare (more than ten times that of soybeans and still more than twice that of coconuts), palm oil has had a legendary bad reputation in most Western countries, because the rapid expansion of oil palm plantations by mostly international plantation companies in Indonesia and Malaysia has caused massive tropical deforestation, biodiversity loss, and local social and cultural conflicts.⁴⁴ WWF was able to persuade downstream companies such as palm oil processor AAK, consumer goods manufacturer Unilever, and retailers Marks and Spencer and Sainsbury's, among many others, to join the roundtable because they were feeling the pressure of palm oil's bad reputation in their Western markets. Unilever (which had also been heavily involved in the previously established WWF roundtables) and AAK played a leading role from the outset. It proved more difficult to convince the major palm oil growers and producers in Malaysia and Indonesia, which was eventually achieved with the help of the supportive head of the Malaysian Palm Oil Industry Association, Mavath R. Chandran.⁴⁵ In 2004, the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil was established as a private association.

The idea of the Roundtable was to bring together all stakeholders, palm oil growers and downstream processing and manufacturing companies, palm oil investors, and environmental and social NGOs to negotiate standards and rules for sustainable palm oil production within a set of defined roundtable processes. The

⁴² Denis Ruysschaert and Denis Salles, "The Strategies and Effectiveness of Conservation NGOs in the Global Voluntary Standards: The Case of the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm-Oil," *Conservation & Society* 14, no. 2 (2016): 73–85. Byerlee, Falcon, and Naylor, *The Tropical Oil Crop Revolution* (note 8), 228–234. Robins, *Oil Palms* (note 32), 255–57.

⁴³ James Brassett, Ben Richardson, and William Smith, "Private Experiments in Global Governance: Primary Commodity Roundtables and the Politics of Deliberation," *International Theory* 4, no. 3 (2012): 367–99.

⁴⁴ Oliver Pye and Jayati Bhattacharya, eds., *The Palm Oil Controversy in Southeast Asia: A Transnational Perspective* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2012). Byerlee, Falcon and Naylor, *Oil Crop Revolution* (note 8), especially ch. 9.

⁴⁵ Interview by the author with a former plantation manager and expert, Kuala Lumpur, June 6, 2023. Online interview by the author with an economist and palm oil expert, June 19, 2023. Interview of Mavath R. Chandran by Valeria Giacomini, Paris, June 25, 2018, transcript, Harvard Business School, Creating Emerging Markets, Interview Collection, July 24, 2024, <https://www.hbs.edu/creating-emerging-markets/interviews/Pages/profile.aspx?profile=mchandran>. For a more detailed account of the RSPO history Matthias Heymann, "Meanings of Sustainability: The Invention of Sustainable Palm Oil," special issue "Global Fat Resources: Connecting Themes, Approaches and Narratives, ca. 1850–2022," *Global Environment*, in preparation.

RSPO has had an elaborate structure consisting of the General Assembly as the general voting body for RSPO decisions, the Board of Governors which provides strategic and operational direction, and a Secretariat. The Board of Governors was designed to be a very stable institution. From the outset, the consumer goods company Unilever held the position of President, the WWF the position of Vice President, and the processor AAK-UK the position of Treasurer. In addition to these bodies, the RSPO has established Standing Committees and a growing number of Working Groups with tasks such as providing knowledge, supporting planning tasks, drafting decisions, etc.⁴⁶

Through extensive rounds of roundtable negotiations, the RSPO developed sustainability criteria and related indicators based on inclusive participation, consensus building, and transparency throughout the negotiation and decision-making process. The result of this process was a 50-page set of guidelines approved by the General Assembly in 2007, *Principles and Criteria for Sustainable Palm Oil Production*.⁴⁷ It contained eight principles, 39 criteria, and 119 indicators, which set the standards for the certification of sustainable palm oil production. The certification process was carried out by accredited third-party certification bodies.⁴⁸ With its catalog of criteria as the basis for sustainability certification, the RSPO established a private transnational governance mechanism and defined meanings and narratives of palm oil sustainability.

This first catalog of criteria and principles focused on environmental standards and commitments. A key criterion was the prior assessment of land to identify forest areas of high conservation value (HCV), a concept developed by the RSPO to precisely define primary tropical forests to be protected. As of November 2005, no new plantations were allowed on land classified as primary forest, which meant that oil palm plantation expansions had to take place on degraded or already cultivated land (e.g. by replacing other crops). Other criteria included assessment and documentation of environmental impacts, documentation of management practices, no soil degradation and erosion, responsible use of

⁴⁶ Ruyschaert and Salles, “The Strategies and Effectiveness of Conservation” (note 42), 74–76.

⁴⁷ RSPO, *RSPO Principles and Criteria for Sustainable Palm Oil Production, Including Indices and Guidelines* (Kuala Lumpur: RSPO, 2007), July 24, 2024, <https://www.rspo.org/wp-content/uploads/e4-rspo-principles-criteria-document-english.pdf>.

⁴⁸ Accreditation to become a certification body is provided by the Assurance Service International (ASI), a leading accreditation institution for sustainability standards that was founded in 2006. This organization currently lists all 33 companies that had been accredited for RSPO certification since 2006, of which nine have been withdrawn. Assurance Service International, Website “Find a CAB,” accessed July 29, 2024, <https://www.asi-assurance.org/s/find-a-cab>, click for Program: RSPO.

agrochemicals, legal right to use land, no planting in cases of significant land conflicts, and resolution of labor disputes through an agreed process.⁴⁹ Forest conservation has been a high priority for WWF. In 2008, the RSPO General Assembly endorsed WWF's New Planting Procedures proposal, which requires producers to conserve primary forests whether or not they are seeking certification.⁵⁰

The RSPO and the palm industry hoped that their new sustainability process and narrative would counteract or at least quell the bad press and intense criticism of palm oil. However, the opposite occurred, as NGOs began to look more closely and critically at the palm oil industry, suspecting greenwashing and scrutinizing the RSPO's criteria, procedures, and level of compliance (or non-compliance). The sustainability criteria defined by the RSPO represented a compromise supported by the stakeholders involved, a kind of self-regulation that hoped to gain global credibility through the involvement of environmental NGOs such as the WWF. Not surprisingly, this compromise was not universally accepted.

Criticisms included insufficient sustainability criteria, the exclusion of small-holders, and inadequate monitoring of sustainability practices. One expert criticized the “commodification of sustainability,” while others complained that RSPO practices led to the certification of deforestation because past deforestation was excluded from the criteria catalog, thereby legalizing ex post drastically unsustainable practices prior to 2005.⁵¹ United Plantations, the pioneering plantation company that shipped the first batches of certified sustainable palm oil (CSPO) to Europe, immediately faced harsh criticism even before its palm oil arrived in Rotterdam, as Greenpeace accused UP of “deforestation, deep peat conversion, land disputes and illegal practices” in Indonesia (while its CSPO came from older Malaysian plantations).⁵² The company faced a period of sustained suspicion and pressure, and eventually became much more defensive, limiting contact with journalists and historians.⁵³

⁴⁹ Vengeta Rao, “Principles and Criteria of the RSPO, General Overview of the Implementation Process,” Lecture at the First Latin American Meeting of the RSPO, Cartagena, October 16–17, 2008, accessed July 24, 2024, <https://publicaciones.fedepalma.org/index.php/palmas/article/download/1401/1401>.

⁵⁰ Ruyschaert and Salles, “The Strategies and Effectiveness of Conservation” (note 42), 78.

⁵¹ E.g. Pye and Bhattacharya, *The Palm Oil Controversy* (note 44). Robins, *Oil Palms* (note 32), 256.

⁵² Greenpeace, *United Plantations Certified Despite Gross Violations of RSPO Standards* (Amsterdam: Greenpeace Netherlands, 2008), accessed July 25, 2024, <https://www.greenpeace.org/usa/research/united-plantations-certified-d/>.

⁵³ Personal communication by Shakila Yakob, May 22, 2023. Emails to the author by Martin Bek-Nielsen, Executive Director (Finance & Marketing), United Plantations, April 18, 2023 and May 11, 2023.

The RSPO's new narrative of sustainability sparked counter-narratives of unsustainability. It did not solve the palm oil industry's reputation problems, but according to most experts, it improved the practices and environmental and social standards of large plantation companies. Paradoxically, a strong driver of continued progress has been the fact that the RSPO has generated very strong publicity, which raised the profile of palm oil industry practices enormously. Rather than reducing pressure on the industry, the RSPO's efforts increased suspicions and pressure on the industry, forcing the major industrial players to adapt to better standards. The RSPO has also itself responded to this constant pressure by adapting its structures and procedures and continually expanding and revising its principles and criteria. It published new criteria catalogs in 2013 and 2018, with the latest available version (revised in 2020) comprising 137 pages, compared to 53 pages in the 2007 version.⁵⁴

Discussion and outlook

The tropical plantation business significantly transformed both colonial spaces in the Global South and metropolitan spaces in the Global North. The exploitation of new tropical resources sparked innovation and new consumption habits in the industrialized world while, at the same time, resource extraction in tropical countries generated large profits and caused deep social and environmental transformations. Available historical research on Aarhus Oliefabrik and United Plantations and their global activities is based on business history and Danish (metropolitan and colonial) sources and perspectives. These accounts produce positive narratives of heroic pioneers and industrial success.

More recently, colonial, global, and environmental historians, looking at long-neglected historical themes and asking new questions, have produced radically alternative narratives of the colonial exploitation of resources and labor and the environmental destruction that plantation systems and vegetable oil production and processing entailed (to which United Plantations and Aarhus Olie contributed). This strand of historiography has expanded our knowledge in very important ways by illuminating the causal dynamics of violence, injustice, and global inequality for people and environments, and their persistence and legacies in

⁵⁴ RSPO, *RSPO Principles and Criteria for Sustainable Palm Oil Production 2018*, revised version (Kuala Lumpur: RSPO, 2020), accessed July 24, 2024, [https://rspo.org/wp-content/uploads/Draft1_-INA_NI_-_RSPO_PC_2018_270819_English_\(CLEAN\).pdf](https://rspo.org/wp-content/uploads/Draft1_-INA_NI_-_RSPO_PC_2018_270819_English_(CLEAN).pdf).

the contemporary world. These narratives tend to be highly critical of colonial violence, exploitation, and destruction.

A first observation is that, as is typical of developmental history in general,⁵⁵ we see in these common narrative types a rather radical divide between positive and negative meanings and significance, between clear attributions and judgments of good and bad. This divide is even more challenging because it is linked to moral values and taboos. An older tradition of historiography, steeped in perceptions of Western superiority, was mostly uninterested in, unable to, and perhaps not even allowed to examine colonial efforts in terms other than as a positive development (“civilizing mission”). Recent historiography, on the other hand, makes it difficult to refer to colonial practices other than in postcolonial negative narratives of violence, exploitation, and injustice. Is there a middle way to integrate positive and negative narratives beyond falling back on outdated colonial and anti-environmental narratives—or risking the accusation of doing so?

A second observation is that all these narratives, as well as new narratives of sustainability and unsustainability, are derived from Western researchers, Western historiography, and an overwhelming prevalence of Western sources and thinking. There are good reasons to describe all the narratives I have presented about palm oil plantations, processing, and production as biased and “neo-colonial,” including paternalistic and hierarchical notions of Western thinking about development and connotations of backwardness of tropical countries and the need for economic or ecological modernization (from industrialization in the twentieth century to energy transition in the twenty-first century). Is there a way out of one-sided Western narratives and storylines, whether self-affirming, nationalistic, and positive, or post-colonial, critical, and negative?

My modest answer to both questions is—in line with an old slogan of the Tensions of Europe network—that we need new stories that emerge from “cosmopolitan scholarship.”⁵⁶ We know surprisingly little about the local social and environmental consequences of United Plantations’ activities in Malaysia, and even less about local actors’ perceptions and perspectives on Danish colonial activities and impacts. Integrating development narratives could, in my view, involve two different strategies: First, it requires exploring a variety of actors and their voices with different perspectives on development. Let’s not just follow the “pioneers” but a network of actors including the migrant workers, the local traders, the

⁵⁵ Corinna R. Unger, *International Development, A Postwar History* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018).

⁵⁶ Arne Kaijser, “Tensions of Europe – an Example of Cosmopolitan Scholarship,” Tensions of Europe Blog Making Europe, accessed July 26, 2024, <https://www.makingeurope.eu/blog/tensions-of-europe-an-example-of-cosmopolitan-scholarship>.

local researchers, etc. These different perspectives can help to bring out more complex positive and negative accounts to be integrated into one story narrative. The biggest challenge, however, is the lack of historical sources available in tropical countries, compared to the rich materials of Western colonial archives.⁵⁷

Second, we need to engage with historians from the Global South to join efforts in writing global histories. While the overwhelming preponderance of Western sources is a major obstacle to truly global histories, the staggering predominance of Western historians in writing histories of the Global South is an even greater obstacle. This striking imbalance will not be easy to redress and will take time, perhaps generations. Raising awareness of this imbalance and its consequences and initiating collaborative efforts between Northern and Southern historians—as this volume does—are essential and deserve more attention.⁵⁸ Historians are interested in detail, difference, and diversity. New, more, and different stories and narratives off the beaten path promise more gains in historical insight and deeper knowledge of global entanglements than following the well-paved roads of purely Western historiographies with their fashions, blinders, and idiosyncrasies.

⁵⁷ A marvelous example is David van Reybrouck, *Revolusi: Indonesia and the Birth of the Modern World* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2024). Van Reybrouck systematically collected the voices of local Indonesian witnesses of the past among others by visiting homes for the elderly and making many interviews with contemporary witnesses.

⁵⁸ This is also a major interest and focus of the Tensions of Europe Research Group Environment, Technology and Resources with its projects “Global Resources and Sustainability of European Modernization 1820–2020” (GREASE, 2018–2022) and “Towards Sustainability of Global Resources, Fair Trade and Global Justice? Experiences, Challenges and Narratives of Transformation” (GloRes, 2024–2025), <https://www.tensionsofeurope.eu/technology-environment-and-resources/>. See also Erik van der Vleuten, Jethron Ayumbah Akallah, Animesh Chatterjee, Matthias Heymann, Evelien de Hoop, Prakash Kumar, Jonas van der Straeten, “Roundtable Global Histories of Technology in Worlds of Environmental Change,” *Technology and Culture*, forthcoming.

Shakila Yacob

Ambivalent development: FELDA and the politics of smallholder welfare

Introduction

In the late 1950s, the Malaysian government embarked on ambitious land reforms and development initiatives to combat rural poverty and address the marginalization of indigenous smallholders—a lingering legacy of British colonial rule.¹ This effort marked a pivotal moment in Malaysia's post-colonial development, with the state playing a decisive role in shaping socio-economic outcomes. Malaysia's approach, which combined state-led intervention with private investment, enabled the pursuit of wealth redistribution, global competitiveness, and economic justice.² Unlike the models observed in Eastern Europe or Sub-Saharan Africa, this strategy represented a counter-narrative to Western-centric frameworks, highlighting the complexity and duality of post-colonial development.³ These complexities raise critical questions: Do state-sponsored land resettlement initiatives genuinely uplift marginalized communities and foster socio-economic equity, or do they risk cultivating dependency on government support, consolidating political power, and undermining local autonomy? Scholars have long theorized development through one-size-fits-all models or linear stages of economic progression toward industrialization.⁴ However, such theories often fail to account for the nuances and context-specific realities of diverse societies. Malaysia, for instance, does not align with established narratives of East Asian economic success, such as those of Japan, Korea, or Taiwan. The Malaysian state cannot be neatly charac-

¹ The Federation of Malaya gained independence in 1957 and formed Malaysia with Singapore, Sarawak, and Sabah in 1963, but Singapore separated in 1965.

² James Pletcher, "Regulation with Growth: The Political Economy of Palm Oil in Malaysia," *World Development* 19 no. 6 (1991): 325; Kelly Wong Kai Seng, Mad Nasir Shamsudin, and Amna Awad Abdel Hameed, "The Economics of Malaysian Palm Oil Production, Marketing, and Utilization," in *Palm Oil* (AOCS Press, 2012), 211–33; Sani Shehu, Mohd Afandi Salleh, and Abdullahi Ayoade Ahmad, "The Sustainable Palm Oil Policies in Malaysia," *The Journal of Management Theory and Practice* (JMTP) (2020): 56–60.

³ Mushtaq H. Khan, "Governance and Growth Challenges for Africa," in *Good Growth and Governance in Africa: Rethinking Development Strategies, Initiative for Policy Dialogue*, ed. Akbar Noman et al. (Oxford University Press, 2012), 114–39.

⁴ Richard Peet and Elaine Hartwick, *Theories of Development: Contentions, Arguments, Alternatives* (Guilford Publications, 2015).

terized as a developmental state, reflecting instead a distinct trajectory shaped by its historical and socio-economic conditions.⁵

In this context, the Federal Land Development Authority (FELDA), established in 1956 under the Ministry of Land and Regional Development, emerged as a key institution in Malaysia's strategy for inclusive growth. FELDA offered an alternative to both corporate capitalism and socialist collectivism, focusing on land development to integrate marginalized communities into the broader economy. This approach advanced Malaysia's unique development trajectory—one that diverged from other Southeast Asian economies and proved essential to the nation's economic success. Yet, the politics of smallholder welfare within FELDA reveal the ambivalent nature of this development model: while enhancing community welfare, it simultaneously entrenched dependency on the state, highlighting the tensions between economic justice, political consolidation, and local autonomy.

Established to alleviate rural poverty, FELDA has grown into a globally recognized model for poverty reduction, earning praise from the World Bank as “one of the most successful land settlement organizations.”⁶ Its evolution took a transformative turn in 2007 with the creation of FELDA Global Ventures (FGV), which positioned FELDA as a major agribusiness player. By 2023, FELDA controlled over 438,867 hectares of land in Malaysia and Indonesia, accounting for 3% of global and 14% of Malaysia's crude palm oil production.⁷ This growth has been instrumental in Malaysia's emergence as one of the world's leading palm oil suppliers, contributing 24% of global palm oil production in 2022 and 18.6% of global oils and fats exports.⁸ In 2023, palm oil continued to lead Malaysia's agriculture sector, contributing 3.7% to the nation's GDP and forming a substantial part of the agriculture sector's total 7.8% share of GDP.⁹ Through its strategic initiatives, FELDA has not only transformed rural livelihoods but also fortified Malaysia's dominant role in the global palm oil industry.

5 Jordan Kyle, “Perspectives on the Role of the State in Economic Development: Taking Stock of the “Developmental State” After 35 years,” vol. 1597, *International Food Policy Research Institute* (2017).

6 *The Jengka Triangle Projects in Malaysia, Impact Evaluation Report, Operations Evaluation Department, World Bank* (Washington, 1987), viii.

7 FGV Holdings Sustainability Report (Kuala Lumpur, 2022/23).

8 Foreign Agricultural Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture. Palm Oil 2022 World Production. International Production Assessment Division (IPAD), accessed August 31, 2024, <https://ipad.fas.usda.gov/cropexplorer/cropview/commodityView.aspx?cropid=4243000>.

9 Amanda Siddharta, “Share of Agricultural Sector to the GDP in Malaysia 2023, by Segment,” *Statista*, December 10, 2024, accessed December 17, 2024, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1338541/malaysia-share-of-agriculture-to-gdp-by-segment/>.

In British Malaya, traditional Malay villages operated within a subsistence agriculture system, creating stable, self-sufficient communities that were relatively insulated from external economic pressures. However, this insulation also entrenched the economic marginalization of rural Malays, who remained disconnected from the modern, expatriate-driven economy. British colonial policies, shaped by stereotypes, deliberately segregated Malays into specific economic roles, primarily subsistence food production. Meanwhile, Chinese migrant workers dominated the tin mining sector, and Indian migrants were concentrated in rubber plantations. Unlike the dual development patterns observed in other developed regions, where subsistence agriculture coexisted with emerging industrial sectors, Malaya's subsistence economy remained trapped, which further marginalized rural Malays.¹⁰

Established under the Land (Group Settlement Areas) Act of 1960, FELDA aimed to address these disparities by transforming landless rural dwellers into landowners. While the policy framework permitted up to 30 percent of settlers in certain schemes to be non-Malays,¹¹ its implementation reflected the socio-political context of post-independence Malaysia, particularly the emphasis on uplifting the Malay community.¹² During the early post-independence period, national attention was focused on external threats such as communist insurgency and regional instability following the formation of Malaysia in 1963 and Singapore's expulsion in 1965. This focus on national security concerns left many rural Malays underserved and in poverty, with FELDA stepping in to address these socio-economic disparities and integrate rural development into national policy. With the introduction of the New Economic Policy (NEP) in 1971, FELDA became central to the government's objectives of poverty reduction and socio-economic restructuring.¹³ By 1982, 96 percent of FELDA settlers were Malays, a demographic out-

¹⁰ Martin Rudner, "Agricultural Policy and Peasant Social Transformation in Late Colonial Malaya," *Issues in Malaysian Development, Southeast Asian Publications Series* 3 (1979): 58.

¹¹ Lim Teck Ghee and R. F. Dorall, "Contract Farming in Malaysia," in *Contract Farming in Southeast Asia: Three Country Studies*, ed. David Glover and T. G. Lim (Kuala Lumpur: Universiti Malaya, 1992); Lim Kit Siang, Speech by the Opposition Leader in Dewan Rakyat on the estimates of the Ministry of Land and Regional Development, December 1, 1982.

¹² FELDA opened its first settlement in Bilut Valley, Pahang, in 1958, covering 2,631 hectares for rubber cultivation with 616 settlers, including Malays (67%) and other ethnic groups (33%). FELDA White Paper, Ministry of Economic Affairs, Putrajaya (2019), 5, accessed August 31, 2024, <https://www.ekonomi.gov.my/sites/default/files/2020-08/Kertas%20Putih%20-%20Ke%20Arah%20Kelestanian%20Lembaga%20Kemajuan%20Tanah%20Persekutuan.pdf>.

¹³ Just Faaland, John Richard Parkinson, and Rais B. Saniman, *Growth and Ethnic Inequality: Malaysia's New Economic Policy (NEP)* (Chr. Michelsen Institute, 1990); Ishak Shari, "Economic

come that aligned with the NEP's prioritization of rural Malay empowerment.¹⁴ This shift illustrated how FELDA's land resettlement initiatives were aimed not only at economic upliftment but also at consolidating political support among rural Malays, ultimately reinforcing their dependency on state support while reducing disparities between rural and urban populations.

Academic studies have extensively examined the colonial challenges faced by smallholders in the agricultural sector during the colonial era, particularly in the cultivation of oil palm, rubber, and coconuts in Malaysia. These difficulties stem from the expansion of monocropping and the commercialization of such crops that defined colonial agricultural policies. Research on post-colonial rural development programs in Malaysia, particularly those targeting the rural Malay community, highlights FELDA's role in addressing the socio-economic marginalization of these populations.¹⁵ By aligning with the principles of inclusive development—providing equitable opportunities for poor and marginalized communities—FELDA has integrated rural smallholders into the national development agenda.¹⁶

FELDA's success has come with its share of challenges. Recent studies on its evolution point to generational shifts, an aging settler population, recruitment difficulties, and political interventions as persistent issues.¹⁷ These factors reveal the

Growth and Income Inequality in Malaysia, 1971–95,” *Journal of the Asia Pacific Economy* 5, no. 1–2 (2000): 112–24, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13547860008540786>.

¹⁴ Niels Fold, “Oiling the Palms: Restructuring of Settlement Schemes in Malaysia and the New International Trade Regulations,” *World Development* 28, no. 3 (2000): 473–86, 483.

¹⁵ Tengku Shamsul Bahrin and R.F. Dorall, “Whither Spontaneous Rural Settlement in South-east Asia? Experiences, Issues, and Policy Options for the Future,” in P. K. Voon and T. S. Bahrin, “The View from Within. Geographical Essays on Malaysia and Southeast Asia,” *Malaysian Journal of Tropical Geography* (1992): 442–64; Tengku Shamsul Bahrin and P. D. A. Perera, *FELDA: 21 years of land development* (Kuala Lumpur: Ministry for Land and Regional Development, 1977); Tengku Shamsul Bahrin and Lim Boon Thong, *FELDA: Three Decades of Evolution* (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya, 1988), 62.

¹⁶ Mohd Zufri Mamat et al., “An Attempt at Implementing a Holistic Inclusive Development Model: Insights from Malaysia's Land Settlement Scheme,” *Asia Pacific Viewpoint* 57, no. 1 (2016): 106–20.

¹⁷ Aliyu Salisu Barau and Ismail Said, “From Goodwill to Good Deals: FELDA Land Resettlement Scheme and the Ascendancy of the Landless Poor in Malaysia,” *Land Use Policy* 54 (2016): 423–31; Syahaneem Mohamad Zainalabidin et al., “Emerging Rurality in Malaysia: The Adaptation of Felda Model,” *Oil Palm Industry Economic Journal*, 23 no. 2 (2023): 3; Khor Yu Leng, “The Political Tussle Over Felda Land Schemes-Umno Strengthens Its Malay Rural Fortress in 13th General Election,” *Kajian Malaysia: Journal of Malaysian Studies* 32 (2014): 89–121; Geoffrey K. Pakiam, “The Making and Breaking of Malaysia's FELDA Vote Bank,” in *The Defeat of Barisan Nasional: Missed Signs or Late Surge?*, ed. F. E. Hutchinson and L. Hwok-Aun (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2019), 209–34, <https://doi.org/10.1355/9789814843904-015>

contradictory nature of FELDA's development, where efforts to empower rural communities and drive economic growth are offset by high operational costs, intergenerational complexities, and the need to shift from large-scale land resettlements toward more sustainable community-based "in-situ" rural development.¹⁸ Settlers' vulnerability to volatile export markets and concerns over FELDA's financial management also expose structural weaknesses, underscoring the ambivalence of development, where progress often introduces new inequalities and hurdles for rural communities.¹⁹

Leadership, often an overlooked factor in studies of decolonization, played a crucial role in shaping FELDA's ambivalent legacy. Visionary leaders initially advanced rural development, empowering marginalized communities to thrive in agriculture and contribute to national goals.²⁰ However, when political appointees took control, corruption and mismanagement scandals undermined FELDA's mission, eroding public trust.²¹ This shift highlights the dual nature of state-led development, where political influence can both empower communities and foster dependency, illustrating the complexities of postcolonial land resettlement initiatives. Thus, this chapter, using the FELDA case and its associated thesis, directly responds to the call for integrated histories by illustrating how state-sponsored land resettlement can embody both empowerment and dependency, success and challenge, and how these contradictory elements must be understood as part of a unified, ongoing historical process.

Section 1 provides the historical context of FELDA's formation, tracing its roots back to British colonial rule, which created a commodity-based agricultural economy that marginalized indigenous smallholders and led to environmental degradation. Section 2 details FELDA's expansion following independence, focusing on its strategic approach to land use, agricultural initiatives, and a community-based model that aimed to foster long-term livelihoods for settlers through responsible farming and equitable economic benefits. This commitment to rural empowerment and poverty alleviation was central to FELDA's vision. Section 3 explores government interventions and regulatory frameworks that shaped FELDA's

¹⁸ Ozay Mehmet, "Evaluating Alternative Land Schemes in Malaysia: FELDA and FELCRA," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 3, no. 4 (1982): 340–60.

¹⁹ Mehmet, "Land Schemes in Malaysia," 346.

²⁰ Nicholas White, *British Business in Post-Colonial Malaysia, 1957–70: Neo-colonialism or Disengagement?* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 139, 215–16.

²¹ Khor Yu Leng, "The FELDA Quarrel and Its Ramifications," *ISEAS Perspective*, no. 51 (2017): 6, accessed September 27, 2024, https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/ISEAS_Perspective_2017_51.pdf; Amin Iskandar, "Group Urges Najib to Sack Isa from FGV," *The Malaysian Insight*, June 8, 2017, accessed August 26, 2024, <https://www.themalaysianinsight.com/s/4602>.

sustainability efforts, with the RSPO and MSPO certifications playing key roles in promoting responsible agricultural practices. However, as noted in Section 4, one of the greatest challenges to FELDA's long-term viability is engaging new generations in palm oil agribusiness, given the aging workforce and the migration of youth away from agriculture.

The most contradictory aspect of FELDA's development, as discussed in Section 5, is its political intervention. While originally designed to empower rural Malays, FELDA gradually became a tool for consolidating political power, serving as a vote bank for the ruling party. This culminated in the 2012 IPO of FELDA Global Ventures (FGV), which marked a shift toward intertwining political and economic objectives. While FELDA's mission remained largely intact until 2012—an achievement noteworthy in a nation increasingly oriented toward privatization and large-scale projects,²² the IPO marked a significant shift, as political interests increasingly intertwined with economic objectives.²³ The ambivalence of FELDA's development underscores the complexity of state-led land resettlement initiatives—while they can generate economic growth and alleviate poverty, they also risk fostering dependency and political control, often undermining the original goals of rural empowerment and autonomy.

Colonization, decolonization, and state intervention

Since the late nineteenth century, a liberal investment regime favoring British-owned plantations systematically marginalized indigenous populations, especially the Malay majority.²⁴ This laissez-faire policy spurred rapid GDP growth from 1870 to 1929, with the rubber industry transforming Malaya into a “cash cow” for Bri-

²² Khor Yu Leng, “The Political Tussle Over Felda,”

²³ Since Independence, the Barisan Nasional (National Front) coalition has maintained majority control over Malaysian politics, except during the 1969 elections. However, since early 2000s, this dominance has declined, resulting in increasingly unpredictable voting behavior that transcends ethnic lines.

²⁴ Shakila Yacob, “Model of Welfare Capitalism? The United States Rubber Company in Southeast Asia, 1910–1942,” *Enterprise & Society* 8, no. 1 (2007): 11; Lim Teck Ghee, *Origins of a Colonial Economy: Land and Agriculture in Perak, 1874–1879* (Penerbit Universiti Sains Malaysia, 1976), 13, 40; Lynn Hollen Lees, *Planting Empire, Cultivating Subjects: British Malaya, 1786–1941* (Cambridge University Press, 2017), 43; Ann Laura Stoler, *Capitalism and Confrontation in Sumatra's plantation belt, 1870–1979* (University of Michigan Press, 1995) 16.

tish investors.²⁵ By the early twentieth century, Malaya's economy had become heavily dependent on tin and rubber exports, controlled by colonial enterprises. British administrators reaped substantial profits, making British Malaya a highly lucrative asset for the British government and investors.²⁶ However, this commercialization focus, strongly backed by British bureaucrats supporting rubber corporations, led to widespread deforestation and significant environmental transformation. Smallholders were largely excluded from this economic boom, facing discriminatory practices in both land allocation and economic opportunity.²⁷

When rubber prices fell in 1921 due to U.S. import restrictions, officials in the Federated Malay States encouraged diversification into oil palm by offering incentives like pioneer status, discounted rents, and subsidies.²⁸ However, these incentives did not extend to indigenous rubber smallholders, who were further disadvantaged by the Stevenson Restriction Scheme (1922–1928) and the International Rubber Regulation Agreement (1934–1942)²⁹—these agreements limited their production capabilities and economic prospects by restricting rubber exports. In the long run, these restrictions were “a calculated device for undermining the long-run competitive position of peasant smallholdings.”³⁰ British estate interests feared that indigenous smallholders producing rubber at lower costs could threaten estate profitability, leading them to lobby colonial authorities for protective policies and persistently advocate for moving peasants to less competitive and less profitable crops.³¹

A ban on new planting blocked peasant entry into the market, and even after it was lifted in 1947, restrictive regulations and discriminatory policies—such as regressive export taxes, exclusion from key resources, and the refusal to allocate additional land—rendered most of colonial Malaya's smallholder rubber farms

25 Klas Rönnbäck, Oskar Broberg, and Stefania Galli, “A Colonial Cash Cow: The Return on Investments in British Malaya, 1889–1969,” *Cliometrica* 16, no. 1 (2022): 149–73, 152–53.

26 Rönnbäck et al. “A colonial cash cow,” 166–67.

27 Martin Rudner, “Malaysian Development in Retrospect and Prospect,” in *Malaysian Development: A Retrospective*, ed. M. Rudner (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1994), 390–400.

28 Lim Chong Yah, *The Economic Development of Modern Malaya* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1969), Appendix 3.1, 323.

29 Lim, “Malayan Peasant,” 110–11.

30 Ooi Jin-Bee, *Land, People and Economy in Malaya* (London: Longmans, 1963), 197; Lim Teck Ghee, *Peasants and Their Agricultural Economy in Colonial Malaya, 1874–1941* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1977); J. H. Drabble, *Rubber in Malaya, 1876–1922: The Genesis of the Industry* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1973), 73–78, 100–102; Harcharan Singh Khera, *The Oil Palm Industry of Malaysia* (Kuala Lumpur: Universiti Malaya Press, 1976), 141; Rudner, “State and Peasant Innovation,” 157.

31 Rudner, “Malaysian Development,”

obsolete.³² Meanwhile, the British government continued to profit, with 83% of Malaya's US\$400 million export earnings in 1951 going to Britain, though colonial spending rarely benefited the local population.³³ The situation worsened when the Emergency (1948–1960) was declared to counter Communist insurgency, further disadvantaging smallholders and turning large British plantations into insurgent targets. Economic rehabilitation efforts, aimed at revitalizing key industries and diversifying the economy to reduce dependency on volatile international markets, encountered significant obstacles.³⁴ Faced with rising costs, casualties, and socio-economic strain, the British administration recognized that addressing rural poverty and gaining public support were essential to countering the insurgency. This policy shift was particularly timely, as since the late nineteenth century, indigenous populations—especially the Malay majority—had been systematically marginalized by a liberal investment regime³⁵ that heavily favored British-owned plantations.³⁶

In response, the First Malayan Plan (1956–1960) prioritized rural and agricultural development with substantial financial investments. The Second Malayan Plan (1961–1965) further supported agriculture by creating institutions for infrastructure and various agricultural programs. During the 1960s, Malaysia saw substantial growth in the palm oil industry as rubber prices declined.³⁷ By 1966–67, rubber prices hit a 17-year low, with each cent decrease per pound costing the Malaysian government about US\$22 million in annual foreign exchange earnings.³⁸ In 1966, the U.S. decision to release an additional 50,000 tons of rubber from its strategic stockpile led to a US\$133 million (M\$400 million) loss for Malaysia, exacerbating a 7% decline in producer incomes.³⁹ Sir John Barlow of Barlow Planta-

32 Rudner, "State and Peasant Innovation," 158.

33 K. S. Jomo, *A Question of Class: The State, and Uneven Development in Malaya* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1987), 147.

34 Rönnbäck et al., "Colonial cash cow."

35 James C. Jackson, *Planters and Speculators: Chinese and European Agricultural Enterprise in Malaya, 1786–1921* (Kuala Lumpur and Singapore: University of Malaya Press, 1968), 235, 237; Lim, *Origins of a colonial economy*, 13, 40; Lees, "Planting Empire," 43. Stoler, *Capitalism and confrontation*, 16.

36 Jonathan, Robins, "Shallow Roots: The Early Oil Palm Industry in Southeast Asia, 1848–1940," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 51, no. 4 (2020): 538–60, 542.

37 Khera, *Oil Palm Industry of Malaysia*, 356.

38 For a detailed explanation on the release of rubber and tin stockpiles by the British and the US governments and its impact on the Malaysian industry and economy, see White, *British Business*, 130–33.

39 James W. Gould, *The United States and Malaysia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969), 149.

tions highlighted the severity of Malaya's challenges to Deputy Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak, remarking, "there seems little sense in the US spending millions in Vietnam and at the same time destroying Southeast Asia."⁴⁰ The revenue shortfall not only raised security concerns over communist infiltration, but also affected both smallholders and large firms and threatened the financing of the First Malaysian Plan (1966–1970).⁴¹

In post-independence Malaysia, state-sponsored land resettlement initiatives, particularly those spearheaded by FELDA, aimed to uplift marginalized rural Malays by addressing historical injustices and promoting economic development. These initiatives sought to empower smallholders through community-based programs that focused on sustainable livelihoods.⁴² As Rudner observes, the removal of legal and institutional barriers and the introduction of supportive policies allowed the rubber smallholding sector to play a crucial role in advancing rural development.⁴³ Similarly, the growth of the palm oil sector aligned with Malaysia's broader goals of economic empowerment and poverty alleviation, contributing to political stability and increasing income opportunities. However, these achievements should be assessed critically within the broader context of colonial legacies.

FELDA, rural development, and poverty alleviation

FELDA, Malaysia's largest government agency for land development and settlement, was established a year before independence under the Land Development Ordinance No. 20, with an initial allocation of RM10 million (USD 3.3 million). By 1980, it had developed 167 land schemes, covering over 260,000 hectares and resettling around 51,747 families.⁴⁴ From 1956 to 1990, FELDA operated the longest-running land resettlement program encompassing 470,998 hectares of settler smallholdings and 340,142 hectares of commercial plantations across 422 schemes.⁴⁵ The Group Settlement Act (GSA) of 1960 allowed FELDA to manage

⁴⁰ White, *British Business*, 132–34.

⁴¹ Following the formation of Malaysia in 1963, the Malayan Plans were replaced by the Malaysian Plans.

⁴² Mohd Zufri Mamat et al., "Inclusive Development Model"; Keith Sutton, "Malaysia's FELDA Land Settlement Model in Time and Space," *Geoforum* 20, no. 3 (1989): 339–54.

⁴³ Rudner, "Malaysian Development."

⁴⁴ Alex Yui-Huen Kwan, "Rural Development in Malaysia-Issues and Problems Confronting MADA, FELDA and RISDA," *Asian Journal of Social Science* 8 no. 1 (1980): 72.

⁴⁵ Khor, "Political Tussle Over Felda."

land use within its schemes, even after settlers received legal titles. Under the GSA, settlers acquired land through a deferred payment plan, with FELDA initially covering costs before the settlers' repaid expenses for land, development, and other services.

FELDA invested an average of RM47,420 (USD 13,515) per family. After completing payments—typically over 15 years through monthly deductions—settlers received legal titles to their land, usually consisting of four hectares for farming and 0.2 hectares for housing.⁴⁶ Settlers were required to repay all costs incurred in developing their land into a plantation before they could be registered as legal owners. Until then, they were considered “occupiers in expectation of title” and had to abide by the rules and regulations outlined in FELDA’s Settlers Agreement.⁴⁷ Each scheme typically covered 2,000 hectares and accommodated around 400 families, primarily cultivating rubber or oil palm.⁴⁸ FELDA provided basic amenities such as food credit, healthcare, education, and some utilities, with larger schemes offering water and electricity.⁴⁹

FELDA interviewed and selected settlers (primarily poor Malay peasants) based on age, marital status, and health, primarily targeting rural Malays aged 21 to 50 who were married and physically fit. Each settler received four hectares of land to cultivate rubber or oil palm within planned villages equipped with essential infrastructure.⁵⁰ The scheme followed a three-phase plan: initial cooperative ownership and training, individual land cultivation, and finally, the transfer of land titles with restrictions on selling without FELDA’s permission.⁵¹ This initiative increased settlers’ incomes by 50 to 74 % after 10 to 12 years.⁵² FELDA’s extensive efforts highlight its pivotal role in Malaysia’s agricultural and rural development. The organization expanded from single-village initiatives to large multi-scheme complexes, exemplified by the Sahabat complex in eastern Sabah—a col-

46 Ariff Simeh and Tengku Mohd Ariff Tengku Ahmad, “The Case Study on the Malaysian Palm oil,” in Regional Workshop on commodity export diversification and poverty reduction in South and South-East Asia, Bangkok (2001), 3–5.

47 Halim Salleh, “State Capitalism in Malaysian Agriculture,” *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 21, no. 3 (1991): 327–43, 328.

48 Bahrin and Perera, *FELDA*; Lee and Bahrin, *Felda’s Fifty Years*.

49 Salleh, “State Capitalism,” 327–28.

50 Salleh, “State Capitalism,” 327–28.

51 Noreen Nor Abdul Aziz, Wan Azlin Aziah Wan Hassan, and Nuradilah Saud, “The Effects of Urbanisation Towards Social and Cultural Changes Among Malaysian Settlers in the Federal Land Development Schemes (FELDA), Johor Darul Takzim,” *Procedia—Social and Behavioral Sciences* 68 (2012): 910–20.

52 Tunku Shamsul and Lee Boon Thong, *FELDA: Three Decades of Evolution* (Kuala Lumpur: FELDA, 1988).

lection of 54 schemes that played a pivotal role in FELDA's 1990s transition from land settlement to capitalist agribusiness model, establishing FELDA as one of Malaysia's largest palm oil producers.⁵³

The eradication of poverty came to be emphasized at an early stage. On 1 July 1956, the tagline for FELDA was "No Need to Be Poor."⁵⁴ "The Best Land for the Best Farmers" was the main objective of the scheme as "the purpose is the creation of wealth – for the nation and the farmer – the best lands and the best farmers must be chosen. Land settlement is not slum clearance; it is not unemployment relief."⁵⁵ FELDA's objectives were "to promote and assist the investigation, formulation and carrying out of projects for the development and settlement of land in the Federation."⁵⁶

From 1957 until 1960, FELDA was responsible for providing funds to various state agencies and land boards for the land resettlement programs and the land development schemes. It was not until 1960 that FELDA took over direct responsibility for developing settlements. Its authority encompassed the recruitment and placement of settlers, land clearing and planting, credit facilities, total responsibility for the selection of settlers, land clearance, planting and marketing. Tun Abdul Razak, the Deputy Prime Minister and the driving force behind the settlement program, recommended that the Land Acquisition Act of 1960 be used to guide the state governments in developing the socio-economic status of the rural Malays through land development.⁵⁷ Lands were allocated by either the federal or state governments.⁵⁸

FELDA represents an agrarian model where state intervention is key to national development, particularly during decolonization. It highlights the role of state leadership in promoting a multifunctional approach that balances economic growth, social equity, and environmental sustainability, driven by empathy for rural communities. FELDA's remarkable success can be attributed to the early leadership under Abdul Razak (who was appointed Malaysia's second prime minister in 1970) who prioritized rural development with his catchphrases "land for the landless" and "jobs for the jobless." His association with the Fabian Society and the British Labour Party influenced his socialist planning approach and

⁵³ Keith Sutton, "Agribusiness on a Grand scale—FELDA's Sahabat Complex in East Malaysia," *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* 22, no. 1 (2001): 90–105, 95.

⁵⁴ No Need to Be Poor, A Policy Statement, Federal Land Development Authority, Kuala Lumpur (1956).

⁵⁵ No Need to Be Poor.

⁵⁶ No Need to Be Poor.

⁵⁷ Simeh and Ahmad, "Malaysian palm oil," 3–5.

⁵⁸ Moll, *The Economics of Oil Palm*, 144.

focus on welfare. Another crucial figure was Taib Andak, appointed as FELDA chairman in October 1958 and who served until 1971. A law graduate from the Middle Temple, England, Taib Andak's leadership during a period of intense government intervention in agriculture was instrumental.⁵⁹ His efforts, combined with Abdul Razak's enthusiasm for rural development,⁶⁰ facilitated the careful implementation of FELDA schemes. Raja Muhammad Alias, another key figure, served with FELDA for 35 years, starting as deputy chairman from 1966 to 1969, then as director general until 1979, and finally as chairman from 1979 to 2001. Drawing on their civil service backgrounds, their combined efforts played a pivotal role in shaping FELDA's development and ensuring the success of its land reform system. Their strategic structural changes fostered self-reliant communities among FELDA settlers. However, the appointment of political appointees, including Isa Samad as Chairman of FELDA and associated companies like FELDA Investment Cooperative (FIC) and FELDA Global Ventures (FGV), sparked opposition due to concerns over political interference. Samad's leadership of approximately 20 subsidiaries raised significant conflicts of interest and governance misconduct issues, potentially compromising the integrity of organizational practices and ethics. Although not all political appointees engage in misconduct, these issues, rooted in political appointments, underscore the dual nature of state-sponsored land resettlement initiatives—while empowering marginalized communities, they also foster dependency and consolidate political power, complicating their developmental legacy.

Malaysia's state intervention in the palm oil industry, centered on FELDA, aimed to eradicate poverty and enhance social development by prioritizing oil palm cultivation in new settlements, with a focus on land ownership and small farmer organization.⁶¹ In 1966, Malaysia was the world's leading exporter of palm oil, and by 1971, it was the top world producer. During this time, the agricultural sector of the country was already contributing one-third of the country's GDP, "more than one half of the employment and almost 60% of the foreign exchange earnings; the latter was mostly based on rubber and palm oil products, valued at about US\$1.1 billion or 40% of the country's exports in 1977."⁶² Since its inception, FELDA has expanded from its first settlement in 1958 to a network of integrated schemes across Malaysia, central to Tun Abdul Razak's Rural Devel-

⁵⁹ Kalsom Taib, *Taib Andak: In A Class of His Own* (Kuala Lumpur: MPH, 2009), 94.

⁶⁰ Lee Boon Thong and Tengku Shamsul Bahrin, *Felda's Fifty Years: Land Pioneers to Investors* (Kuala Lumpur: Federal Land Development Authority, 2006), 227.

⁶¹ Pletcher, "Regulation with Growth," 627.

⁶² Malaysia Felda VI Land Settlement Project, Staff Appraisal Report April 27, 1978, World Bank, 1, <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/803961468049810552/pdf/multi-page.pdf>, accessed April 17, 2018.

opment Scheme (RED) aimed at rural poverty alleviation. FELDA's resettlement program enabled the rural poor to become smallholder farmers, primarily growing oil palm, by offering land in Johor, Pahang, and Negeri Sembilan, which collectively represented 80% of the FELDA settler areas. Table 1 indicates that oil palm settlers generally enjoyed higher average monthly incomes compared to rubber settlers.⁶³ However, in 1986, incomes for oil palm settlers declined, illustrating the volatility of the palm oil market. Additionally, settlers diversified their income sources with non-farm activities during this period—FELDA settlers participating in oil palm resettlement programs earned approximately five times more than average paddy farmers and 1.6 times more than rubber smallholders.⁶⁴ Table 2 illustrates the success of these schemes in alleviating poverty levels, comparing oil palm with rubber and coconut smallholders.

Table 8.1: Monthly income of settlers in FELDA schemes (MYR/USD), 1980–1988.

Year	Rubber	Oil Palm
1980	472 (USD217)	709 (USD326)
1981	492 (USD214)	643 (USD280)
1982	402 (USD172)	624 (USD267)
1983	482 (USD208)	765 (USD330)
1984	505 (USD216)	1231 (USD526)
1985	421 (USD170)	889 (USD358)
1986	405 (USD157)	376 (USD146)
1987	530 (USD211)	522 (USD208)
1988	721 (USD276)	871(USD334)

Source: Lee and Bahrin, FELDA's Fifty Years.

Note: Income after monthly deductions.

The establishment of the FELDA Trading Corporation in 1972 and the FELDA Investment Cooperative (FIC) in 1980 was framed as an opportunity for settlers to save and invest in FELDA-linked corporations.⁶⁵ However, while these initiatives aimed to protect settlers from the volatility of commodity prices like rubber

⁶³ Salleh, "State Capitalism," 335; Simeh and Ahmad (2001), 6.

⁶⁴ Pletcher, "Regulation with Growth," 330.

⁶⁵ Salleh, "State Capitalism," 335.

Table 8.2: Poverty rate in the agricultural sector, 1970–1990.

Year/sector	1970	1975	1980	1984	1990
Rubber smallholders	64.7	59.0	40.0	43.4	24.1
Oil palm smallholders	30.3	9.1	8.2	NA	NA
Coconut smallholders	52.8	50.9	47.1	46.9	27.1
Paddy farmers	88.1	77.0	73.0	57.7	39.0
Other agriculture	91.8	78.0	64.3	34.2	NA
Fishermen	73.2	63.0	52.0	27.7	27.7
Estate workers	40.1	47.0	38.0	19.7	19.7
Total in Agriculture	68.3	63.0	49.3	23.8	21.1

Source: Malaysia, Malaysia Plans. Retrieved from Simeh and Ahmad (2001), 6.

Note: Poverty was likely measured as the percentage of the population below a defined poverty line, based on income levels in the agricultural sector or rural areas.

and palm oil, they largely shifted the financial burden onto the settlers themselves. By 1983, \$10.64 million was collected from settlers and FELDA personnel to buy a 20.58% stake in six FELDA corporations.⁶⁶ The initiative prioritized FELDA's corporate interests, tying settlers' savings to corporate success with little control or transparency. Instead of addressing income instability, it exposed settlers to risks and deepened their dependence on FELDA, leading to growing dissatisfaction.⁶⁷

From 1956 to 1990, FELDA made significant strides in transforming Malaysian agriculture, resettling over 114,400 households on 500,000 ha and introducing oil palm as a key smallholder crop.⁶⁸ The FELDA Act of 1956, revised to Act 474 in 1991 and amended in 2006, changed focus from new settlements to agribusiness.⁶⁹ The organization shifted from land development to agribusiness, funding training and credit for settlers to establish small businesses, and offering them 51% ownership through the FIC.⁷⁰ Despite privatization and the creation of FGV in 2007, settlers

⁶⁶ Salleh, "State capitalism," 335–37.

⁶⁷ Rob Cramb and John McCarthy, *The Oil Palm Complex. Smallholders, Agribusiness and the State in Indonesia and Malaysia* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2017), 54; Salleh, "State Capitalism," 341–42.

⁶⁸ Fatin Rasyiqah Mustaza, "The Evolution of FELDA," *The Edge Malaysia*, July 17, 2015.

⁶⁹ Barau and Ismail Said, "From Goodwill to Good Deals," 425.

⁷⁰ FELDA Annual Report, Kuala Lumpur, 1983.

continued to hold 51% ownership through FIC, ensuring economic benefits and government oversight.⁷¹ Yet, the focus on corporate growth rather than rural welfare fueled discontent. While FELDA repaid its loans early and invested in infrastructure and amenities, the underlying issue of income instability remained unresolved, reflecting a broader tension between public intervention and corporate gain.⁷² This ambivalent development illustrates the complexities of balancing economic justice and corporate priorities within the smallholder welfare framework.

FELDA, sustainability, and certifications

Malaysia's palm oil sector exemplifies the complexities of development, balancing the challenges of addressing colonial legacies with fostering equitable growth and managing social and environmental responsibilities. True development encompasses not only economic expansion but also the fair distribution of resources and broad societal benefit.⁷³ FELDA integrated smallholders into the sector, offering federal loans and grants that boosted their earnings and helped address historical discrimination. The government's removal of legal barriers and continued support allowed smallholders to thrive, while regulatory standards enabled the sector to compete globally and adopt sustainable practices.⁷⁴ A key feature of Malaysia's palm oil industry is the strategic public-private collaboration (see Table 3), with research initiatives enhancing yields, product quality, and innovation, thereby supporting smallholder productivity and sustaining Malaysia's global market edge. However, FELDA's emphasis on corporate interests has complicated efforts to achieve sustainability and equity, revealing the inherent tension between profit-driven motives and long-term welfare. This tension reflects the ambivalence of state-sponsored land resettlement initiatives, where the positive impacts of economic inclusion and rural development are often undermined by dependency on government efforts and interests, highlighting the contradictory nature of such development in post-colonial contexts.

⁷¹ Keith Sutton, "Malaysia's FELDA Land Settlement Model in Time and Space," *Geoforum* 20, no. 3 (1989): 339–54.

⁷² Emily Chow and Reuters, "Discontent in Malay Heartland may Spell Trouble for Najib," *Malaysia Kini*, January 12, 2017 accessed August 20, 2024, <https://m.malaysiakini.com/news/368993>

⁷³ Ganesh Rauniyar and Ravi Kanbur, "Inclusive Growth and Inclusive Development: A Review and Synthesis of Asian Development Bank Literature," *Journal of the Asia Pacific Economy* 15, no. 4 (2010): 455–69.

⁷⁴ Rudner, "State and Peasant Innovation."

Table 8.3: Public-private partnerships in the Malaysian palm oil agribusiness sector.

Year	Institution	Functions
Public Sector		
1976	Palm Oil Registration and Licensing Authority (PORLA)	Oversee licensing and market monitoring in the palm oil industry, ensuring regulatory compliance and orderly market operations
1979	Palm Oil Research Institute of Malaysia (PORIM)	Focuses on R&D to drive innovation and enhance the efficiency, quality, and sustainability of palm oil production
1980	Kuala Lumpur Commodities Exchange (KLCE)	Provides price discovery and risk management, helping traders and producers manage price volatility and hedge against market risks
1990	Malaysian Palm Oil Council (MPOC)	Promotes palm oil products globally and addresses market challenges, including public relations, market access, and trade barriers
2000	Malaysian Palm Oil Board (MPOB)	Formed by merging PORLA and PORIM, enhances productivity, sustainability, and integrates regulatory, research, and development efforts in the palm oil sector
Semi-Public/Private Sector		
1990	Malaysian Palm Oil Council (MPOC)	Enhances the global image of palm oil by promoting its technological, economic, and environmental benefits through public relations, marketing, and addressing market challenges (semi-public)
1999	Malaysian Palm Oil Association (MPOA)	Formed by merging the Rubber Growers Association, Malaysian Oil Palm Growers Council, and United Planting Association of Malaysia, it balances sector interests and advocates for unified industry development (private)

Source: Malaysian Palm Oil Council (MPOC).

FELDA joined the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) on 18 October 2004. Its commercial arm, FGV, became one of the first agricultural companies to obtain RSPO mill certification in 2010. It also organized a smallholder group for RSPO Fresh Fruit Bunch (FFB) Certification, making FELDA the first smallholders' agency globally to achieve this certification. This allowed FELDA to sell palm oil at a premium, directly benefiting settlers.⁷⁵ By the end of 2010, FELDA secured RSPO

75 FELDA Annual Report (Kuala Lumpur, 2005).

certification for 11 oil palm plantation schemes covering 22,268 ha.⁷⁶ By 2016, FELDA Global Ventures (FGV) had achieved RSPO certification for approximately 40,000 smallholders within the FELDA scheme. That same year, FGV transitioned to its own membership in the RSPO, underscoring its commitment to sustainable and responsible palm oil production.⁷⁷ At that time, 73.25% of its plantation estates, including those cultivated by smallholders, achieved certification.⁷⁸ As the first smallholder agency globally to achieve RSPO certification, FELDA capitalized on selling premium-priced palm oil, benefiting settlers directly.⁷⁹ Its organized structure enabled financing and compliance with certification requirements, unlike independent smallholders who lacked resources and awareness.⁸⁰ However, FELDA faced difficulties in raising awareness and persuading settlers to adopt certifications due to the financial burden settlers had to bear.⁸¹ Despite this, certification significantly improved settlers' understanding of sustainable practices, such as Integrated Pest Management, which reduced chemical use, environmental damage, and costs.⁸²

In collaboration with multiple stakeholders, FGV developed the Malaysian Sustainable Palm Oil (MSPO) Certification Scheme, which was launched in 2013, became voluntary in 2015, and mandatory by the end of 2019. FELDA actively participates in the MSPO Technical Committee for Smallholders, working closely with the Malaysian Palm Oil Board and the Malaysian Palm Oil Certification Council to promote sustainable palm oil production.⁸³ The RSPO and MSPO represent distinct certification frameworks, each addressing specific needs—RSPO with a global focus on environmental and social sustainability, and MSPO as a national standard aimed at promoting sustainable palm oil production within Malaysia.⁸⁴ The MSPO supports smallholders by addressing their specific challenges and help-

⁷⁶ FELDA Annual Report (Kuala Lumpur, 2013).

⁷⁷ Standards and Certifications, FGVH, Sustainability Overview (2024), <https://www.fgvholdings.com/sustainability/standards-and-certifications/>.

⁷⁸ FGV Holdings Berhad, Annual Report (Kuala Lumpur, 2022).

⁷⁹ FELDA Annual Report (Kuala Lumpur, 2005).

⁸⁰ Serina Rahman, "Malaysian Independent Oil Palm Smallholders and their Struggle to Survive," *ISEAS Perspective* 116 (2020): 1–16, 4–5.

⁸¹ Interview with Mohammad Zulhilmi bin Azmi, Senior Assistant Director, Sustainability Department, FELDA, August 5, 2024.

⁸² FELDA Annual Report (Kuala Lumpur, 2005); FELDA Annual Report (Kuala Lumpur, 2010).

⁸³ Ooi Tee Ching, "Felda: All Plantations to be MSPO-certified by December Next Year," *Business Times*, December 6, 2018.

⁸⁴ Norhana Abdul Majid et al., "Sustainable Palm Oil Certification Scheme Frameworks and Impacts: A Systematic Literature Review," *Sustainability* 13, no. 6 (2021): 3263, <https://doi.org/10.3390/su13063263>.

ing them maintain competitiveness in markets like India and China, where recognition of the certification is growing.⁸⁵ It built on implementing Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) in Malaysia's palm oil industry—encompassing land preparation, fertilization, and pest control—and has not only enhanced productivity but also contributed to environmental protection. GAP compliance includes compulsory, mandatory, and encouraged practices.⁸⁶ By 2013, GAP adoption raised settlers' incomes to RM2,500–RM3,500 per hectare, significantly improving their economic well-being.

However, the MSPO has faced criticism due to its lax standards and enforcement challenges. Its industry-led approach has raised concerns about its objectivity and effectiveness, especially in contrast to the NGO-driven RSPO, which upholds more rigorous global sustainability standards.⁸⁷ Since adopting the MSPO certification in 2015, FELDA has supported 112,638 settlers through 100% MSPO-certified mills and 45% RSPO-certified mills.⁸⁸ The integration of sustainable practices and certification aims to improve settlers' knowledge and offer pathways for certification. In doing so, FELDA attempts to address the economic viability of smallholders in a competitive global market. This approach highlights the role of education and certification in promoting sustainable agricultural practices, while aiming to support smallholder livelihoods amidst ongoing challenges in the sector.

Lifespan of FELDA and generational shifts

More recently, FELDA has faced significant challenges due to rural depopulation. The migration of second and third-generation settlers, an aging workforce, and the exodus of young people worsen labor shortages and economic pressures in its plantations.⁸⁹ This trend is not unique to FELDA; globally, younger generations increasingly hesitate to take over family farms. They face limited access to land, inadequate income and working conditions, low market bargaining power, admin-

⁸⁵ Jenny Ng, "Strategic Marketing of Malaysian Palm Oil to China in a Soft Market," *The Edge Malaysia*, July 30, 2024.

⁸⁶ Mohd Suib et al., "The Influence of Good Agricultural Practice (GAP) on the Productivity and Well-Being of Malaysian Sustainable Palm Oil (MSPO)-Certified Independent Smallholders in Malaysia," *Agriculture* 13, no. 5 (2023): 990.

⁸⁷ Email interview with Assistant Manager – Sustainability & Promotions, Malaysian Palm Oil Council (MPOC), July 17, 2024; Rahman, "Malaysian Independent Oil Palm Smallholders," 7.

⁸⁸ FELDA Annual Integrated Report (2022), 38.

⁸⁹ Khor, "Political Tussle," 111.

istrative burdens, and the negative impacts of climate change.⁹⁰ High settlement costs complicate matters further, making it hard for settlers to maintain their agricultural activities and contributing to regional economic disparities. The migration of second-generation settlers indicates a labor surplus within FELDA schemes, yet the rising employment of low-cost, often undocumented Indonesian labor suggests a potential labor shortage.⁹¹ This paradox reflects settler dissatisfaction and resistance to FELDA's policies and paternalistic governance.⁹² Critics argue that FELDA operated as a cheap labor system, exploiting settlers, and some likened Malaysian settlement projects to centrally controlled labor camps, citing strict regulations imposed on workers.⁹³ This dynamic highlights the ongoing struggle to balance development with equity in the postcolonial era, where attempts to rectify historical injustices can perpetuate new forms of dependency and inequality.

Due to urbanization, Malaysia's rural population has sharply declined—from approximately 73% in 1960 to 21% in 2023, with projections indicating a further decrease to 20% by 2030. This trend raises significant concerns regarding the social and economic development of rural areas.⁹⁴ For FELDA, this demographic shift poses several challenges. The second generation of settlers often works on land plots that cannot be subdivided, as only one child can inherit each plot—a situation that is likely a cause of the demographic shift, which pushes younger generations to seek opportunities elsewhere due to limited land access. Additionally, some settlers face unemployment, and FELDA has struggled to engage them in agricultural work, threatening the sustainability of its programs. Younger generations increasingly pursue urban job opportunities, especially in manufacturing and services. FELDA's socio-economic programs, while intended to improve education for settlers' children, have inadvertently promoted rural-to-urban migration.⁹⁵ As educational attainment increases, many children of settlers leave for

⁹⁰ Áron József Borda, Balázs Sárvári, and Jeremiás Máté Balogh, "Generation Change in Agriculture: A Systematic Review of the Literature," *Economies* 11, no. 5 (2023): 129.

⁹¹ Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid, "Diverse Approaches to Rural Development in Malaysia: The FELDA and Darul Arqam Land Settlement Regimes," *Humanomics* 16, no. 1 (2000): 51–73, 56.

⁹² Abdul Hamid, "Diverse Approaches," 56.

⁹³ R. De Koninck and McTaggart, W.D., "Land Settlement Processes in Southeast Asia: Historical Foundations, Discontinuities and Problems," *Asian Profile* 15 (1987).

⁹⁴ World Bank Group 2024 accessed August 17, 2024, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.RUR.TOTL.ZS?locations=MY>.

⁹⁵ Nor Aini Idris, "Mobiliti sosial di kalangan generasi kedua Felda," *Akademika* 64, no. 1 (2004): 83–95; Nor Azlili Hassan et al., "Social Mobility Among the Malaysian Land Development Settlers," *Akademika* 93 no. 1 (2023): 403–14.

urban areas in search of higher-paying jobs.⁹⁶ By 2006, 13,061 settlers' children had become professionals, including doctors, engineers, and accountants.⁹⁷

By the Sixth Malaysia Plan (1990–95), 70% of FELDA plantations had transitioned from rubber to oil palm empowering scheme beneficiaries.⁹⁸ To address the aging settler population, FELDA established FELDA Technoplant Company Limited in 2005 to manage farms, promote sustainable practices, and maintain stakeholder relations.⁹⁹ Technoplant leases settlers' farms and employs legal Indonesian workers, providing settlers with approximately US\$710 monthly to pursue alternative livelihoods and enhance their economic stability.¹⁰⁰

Due to the aging pioneer generation and declining interest in agriculture among the second generation, about 80% of settlers chose to have FELDA or its subsidiaries manage their landholdings.¹⁰¹ This shift transformed landowners into managers reliant on foreign labor, a general trend reflected in Malaysia's palm oil sector, where 77% of the 428,000 workers were foreign nationals as of 2017.¹⁰² However, FELDA reduced its reliance on foreign labor from 50% to 30% by 2021 through automation, mechanization, and increased local recruitment, particularly in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁰³

The upward mobility of educated youth, while fostering personal advancement, depletes the agricultural workforce, undermining FELDA's efforts to uplift rural communities. This shift mirrors a broader trend where agriculture is increasingly relegated in favor of manufacturing, services, and technology, further compounded by the global industrialization of agriculture post-Green Revolution. To address labor shortages and enhance economic resilience, FELDA has promoted rural entrepreneurship and modern agricultural practices, reflecting the ambivalence of development that both uplifts communities and challenges traditional practices and dependencies. However, the shift towards digital or precision

⁹⁶ Syahaneem Mohamad Zainalabidin et al., "Emerging Rurality," 3.

⁹⁷ Lee Boon Thong and Tengku Shamsul Bahrin, "FELDA's Fifty Years."

⁹⁸ Sutton, "Agribusiness on a grand scale."

⁹⁹ Bahijah Md Hashim et al, "Socio-economic Issues Among FELDA Settlers in Perlis," *Asian Culture and History* 1, no. 2 (2009): 113.

¹⁰⁰ Lesley Potter, "Managing Oil Palm Landscapes: A Seven-country Survey of the Modern Palm Oil Industry in Southeast Asia, Latin America and West Africa," 122 (CIFOR, 2015); Lim, "Felda Scheme."

¹⁰¹ Potter, "Managing oil palm landscapes," 34.

¹⁰² "77% of plantation workers are foreigners," *Borneo Post Online*, August 6, 2017, accessed August 15, 2024, <http://www.theborneopost.com/2017/08/06/77-of-plantation-workers-are-foreigners/>.

¹⁰³ "FELDA Able to Cope with Foreign Labour Through Various Measures," *Bernama*, February 17, 2022.

agriculture introduces new challenges, continuing what Raj Patel terms the “long Green Revolution,” where industrialized agriculture is reinvented rather than fundamentally transformed, often perpetuating the same issues.¹⁰⁴

The politics of smallholder welfare

The politics surrounding FELDA’s development have long been marked by a tension between state-led initiatives aimed at supporting smallholder welfare and the growing influence of market-driven forces. This complex dynamic reached a turning point with the listing of FELDA’s commercial arm, FGV, on the Malaysian Stock Exchange, which highlighted the shifting priorities of the agency and its impact on rural communities.

The culmination of this political entanglement occurred in June 2012 with the Initial Public Offering (IPO) of FGV on the Malaysian Stock Exchange, marking a significant shift from its original mission. Although the IPO raised USD 3.1 billion and distributed RM 15,000 (USD 4,760) to each settler family, FGV has since faced substantial financial challenges, losing about 60% of its market value. The total direct allocation to eligible FELDA settlers was 91.2 million shares, or 2.5% of FGV’s enlarged share capital. While the resulting RM 2,400 (USD 760) loss per settler is relatively small compared to the substantial loans of RM 100,000 (USD 31,735) or more many smallholders incur for replanting, it underscores the financial risks settlers face in maintaining sustainable livelihoods.¹⁰⁵ Despite state protections, smallholders were pressured into becoming investors and shareholders, leaving them vulnerable to global economic fluctuations. By July 2020, FGV’s stock price had plummeted 72%, from RM4.55 (USD 1.29) in 2012 to RM1.29 (USD 0.36), primarily due to falling crude palm oil prices, and as of August 2024, it stands at RM1.14 (USD 0.32). The corporatization strategy failed to accommodate these price fluctuations and resulted in investments outside the core palm oil business, rather than diversifying revenue for FELDA settlers.

The listing of FGV sparked debate over the long-term welfare of smallholders, highlighting the political manipulation of FELDA’s resources. This shift—from prioritizing smallholder welfare to embracing profit-driven capitalism—underscores the ambivalence in FELDA’s developmental path. Despite its inclusive intent, FELDA’s implementation has faced criticism for perceived ethnic preferences and po-

¹⁰⁴ Raj Patel, “The Long Green Revolution,” *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 40, no. 1 (2012): 1–63, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2012.719224>.

¹⁰⁵ Khor Yu Leng, “The Felda Quarrel.”

litical influences, particularly in the recruitment of political appointees. This has transformed its schemes into tools of political patronage for the ruling Malay party, prioritizing benefits among Malays and establishing an “unquestioned priority”¹⁰⁶ that creates a vote bank for the coalition.¹⁰⁷

Concluding remarks

Since its establishment in 1956, FELDA has been pivotal in empowering smallholders and driving the growth of Malaysia’s palm oil industry. State interventions were central to this success, fostering rural development and enhancing the industry’s global competitiveness. However, FELDA’s trajectory is also deeply intertwined with Malaysia’s colonial legacies, where post-independence land settlement schemes sought to address rural poverty but often reflected the structural inequalities inherited from the colonial era. The governance of FELDA, particularly in the early 2000s, became marred by allegations of malpractice, breaches of trust, and corruption scandals, tarnishing its reputation. These challenges underscore the pitfalls of state intervention, including inefficiency, rent-seeking, and cronyism, which critics argue undermine long-term sustainability and equitable development. Such negative externalities stand in stark contrast to the initial aspirations of empowerment and equity, demonstrating how well-intentioned policies can be compromised over time.

The evolution of FELDA illustrates the complex dynamics between rural development and political intervention, revealing contradictions in global development models that aim to empower but often stray from their original objectives. FELDA’s history demonstrates how well-intentioned policies can become compromised, prompting important reflections on the role of state institutions in development management and the risks of politicizing community-based initiatives. This complex narrative serves as a reminder of the need for balanced agricultural policies that prioritize sustainable practices and community empowerment while guarding against political appropriation. Compounded by a generational shift that sees fewer youth committed to agricultural livelihoods, these challenges test the sustainability of FELDA’s vision and raise concerns about the long-term viability of its mission.

These intertwined “good” and “bad” histories emphasize the value of integrated perspectives in understanding development processes. By examining the posi-

¹⁰⁶ Cramb and McCarthy, “Introduction,” in *Oil Palm Complex*, 12.

¹⁰⁷ Salleh, “State capitalism”; Lim and Dorall, “Contract farming.”

tive and negative dimensions of state interventions as parts of a unified historical narrative, we can better understand the blurred lines between benefit and harm. Such an approach calls for further exploration of governance frameworks to mitigate inefficiency and corruption, while emphasizing transparency and accountability in development strategies. FELDA's history offers critical reflections on the broader implications of state-led initiatives, demonstrating how their impacts and meanings evolve over time and challenging simplistic narratives of success or failure in development discourse.

Felix Amoh-Siaw

Peacekeeping dilemmas and contested realities: The unraveling of MINUSMA amidst a perception crisis

Introduction

In 2012, a rebel-jihadist coalition defeated the Malian army in the north, leading the military to stage a coup against the government, unhappy with its response to the crisis. As the coalition advanced towards the capital, the Malian government sought help from the international community. The United Nations Security Council responded by approving the African-led International Support Mission in Mali (AFISMA), whose goal was to support state-building efforts, help the Malian army regain lost territories, and restore and maintain state authority throughout the country.¹

Despite the deployment of AFISMA, the security situation did not improve as the rebel-jihadist coalition intensified its assault. In January 2013, the French launched Operation Serval in response to a request from the Malian government to halt the advance of rebel-jihadists toward the capital.² By April, the Security Council, through Resolution 2100, transformed AFISMA into the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), referred to here as “the mission.” The aim of MINUSMA was to stabilize the country, re-establish state authority, support the transition to democracy, protect civilians and human rights, and assist Malian authorities in bringing war crime perpetrators to justice.³ It is worth pointing out that the mission’s objective was distinct from counterterrorism, which the French Operation Serval specifically addressed.

At the time of deployment, the mission comprised 12,640 approved military and police personnel and was also tasked to absorb the personnel from AFISMA.⁴ By June 2019, the mission had about 13,679 military and police personnel with an

¹ UNSC, “Resolution 2085,” December 20, 2012, <http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/doc/2085>.

² Sergei Boeke and Bart Schuurman, “Operation ‘Serval’: A Strategic Analysis of the French Intervention in Mali, 2013–2014,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 38, no. 6 (September 19, 2015): 801–25.

³ Security Council, “Resolution 2100 (2013)” (United Nations, April 25, 2013).

⁴ Pierre Buyoya, “The Recurrent Security Crisis in Mali and the Role of the African Union,” *PRISM* 5, no. 2 (2015): 60–71.

annual budget of \$1.1 billion, making it one of the most costly UN peacekeeping mission at the time, second only to the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MUNUSCO).⁵

In August 2013, the mission oversaw a national election that restored constitutional governance, paving the way for Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta's presidency, which lasted until his coup in August 2020. Despite MINUSMA's efforts to reestablish governance, local protests emerged regarding its activities, intensifying in 2020 after the military junta ousted the civilian government. By May 2023, due to rising insecurity and misconceptions about MINUSMA's goals, the mission encountered heightened scrutiny. In Bamako, protests erupted against MINUSMA, labeling it a failed mission and "an evil force that needs to leave [their] land."⁶ Demonstrators likened MINUSMA to a neocolonial tool of France. As protests escalated in Bamako, the Malian envoy to the UN called for the immediate withdrawal of MINUSMA, citing a "crisis of confidence" stemming from worsening security.⁷

On June 30, 2023, the United Nations Security Council unanimously voted to end MINUSMA's decade-long operation in Mali, with the decision taking effect immediately. Western diplomats had voiced concerns about the potential risks to security and human rights after the mission's withdrawal, but the decision stood.⁸ The mission was put into "withdrawal mode," and by December 2023, all its activities had unceremoniously ceased.⁹

How did this crisis of confidence emerge between Malians and MINUSMA? How did a mission once welcomed by Malians become an evil force and a neocolonial tool within a decade? This chapter explores the crisis of confidence, referred to as the crisis of perception. It examines the complex, contradictory narratives surrounding MINUSMA's actions in Mali. The chapter argues that the crisis of perception arose from MINUSMA's perceived and actual ties to France, stemming from the 2013 French Operation Serval. While MINUSMA's actions sometimes raised concerns, its perceived collaboration with French forces worsened issues,

⁵ Luisa Blanchfield, Alexis Arieff, and Lauren Ploch Blanchard, "U.N. Peacekeeping Operations in Africa" (Congressional Research Service, 2019), <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/row/R45930.pdf>.

⁶ Aljazeera, "Mali Protesters Demand Exit of UN Peacekeeping Mission," Al Jazeera, May 26, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/5/26/mali-protesters-demand-exit-of-un-peacekeepers>.

⁷ Aljazeera, "Mali Asks UN to Withdraw Its Peacekeeping Mission 'without Delay' | United Nations News | Al Jazeera," 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/6/16/mali-asks-un-to-withdraw-its-peacekeeping-mission-without-delay>.

⁸ Edith M. Lederer, "UN Votes to End Its Peacekeeping Mission in Mali as Demanded by the Country's Military Junta," AP News, June 30, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/mali-un-peacekeeping-mission-end-operations-b1d91eb33ec2971711900bbaec785ad1>.

⁹ UN News, "Last UN Peacekeepers Poised for Complete Withdrawal from Mali," *UN News*, December 31, 2023, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/12/1145207>.

leading to views of complicity. Consequently, if the French were viewed as neocolonialists, MINUSMA encountered similar perceptions and was ultimately rejected and terminated.

Although negative perceptions of MINUSMA were often justified, they sometimes lacked depth. Such views overlooked the mission's political, military, and economic contributions, as well as the challenging environment in which it operated. France's postcolonial influence in Mali was significant, and after more than a decade of French and MINUSMA efforts yielding minimal security improvements, it is understandable that critics referenced neocolonialism. Nonetheless, as the discussion will demonstrate, this should not be taken as a blanket justification to dismiss every aspect of MINUSMA's operations. Instead, it should be viewed as part of a complex and contradictory narrative of a peacekeeping mission.

The chapter draws on primary and secondary sources to examine how MINUSMA's operations and interactions with groups influenced public perceptions of it, ultimately leading to the termination of its operations in winter 2023. I also conducted fieldwork in Mali, making two trips in 2023 and 2024. During my initial three-week visit in 2023, I encountered locals who were reluctant to discuss the ongoing MINUSMA operation. This coincided with the end of France's Operation Barkhane,¹⁰ a time marked by heightened tensions, public protests against French involvement, and symbolic acts like the burning of French flags in Bamako. The tense atmosphere made people hesitant to speak openly about political issues, limiting the scope of my interviews and the depth of insight into local perspectives during this critical period.

On my second visit to Bamako in 2024, I spent a month conducting 48 interviews with a diverse group of people from different regions, including Kayes, Koulikoro, Timbuktu, Gao, Kidal, Segou, Sikasso, and Mopti, even though they now live in Bamako. The people I interviewed came from various backgrounds, such as ordinary residents, internally displaced persons, civil society members, experts from academia and other fields, and local leaders. In this chapter, I refer to them collectively as "local population," and their insights are woven into the narrative as either standalone points or supporting evidence from secondary sources, helping to build the chapter's main arguments.

This chapter has four sections. It begins with an overview of the Malian conflict, covering past rebellions and jihadist activities, as well as the different strate-

¹⁰ Barkhane was a French-led counterterrorism mission that replaced Operation Serval in 2014. Unlike the latter, the former's mandate was to fight violent extremism in the Sahelian regions of Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger. The mission officially ended in November 2022.

gies used after independence. The next section examines the role of French forces and the mixed impact of Operation Serval in 2013, including how it shaped later views of MINUSMA. The following section evaluates MINUSMA's accomplishments and the challenges it faced in Mali's complex social and political environment. The conclusion highlights the need for nuanced analyses over simple explanations in understanding the perception crisis that surrounded the mission.

Background to the Malian crisis and the rounds of intervention

Mali, once a French West African colony, gained independence in September 1960 from French Sudan, which included Senegal. In contrast to Senegal, Mali adopted socialist domestic and foreign policies after independence, under its first President Modibo Keita, reflecting anti-French and anti-neoliberal sentiments.¹¹ Although the country did not exit the *Francophonie*, it declined to participate in the *Union monétaire uest-africaine (U.M.O.A.)*—the unified monetary system for former French colonies in West Africa—and opted to create the *Malian franc* for domestic use.¹²

By 1967, Mali's strategies proved insufficient for addressing an escalating economic crisis, leading the country to once again seek French economic protection and intervention.¹³ This dependency persisted until 2022, when the military junta in power began to shift to anti-French foreign policies.

The north of Mali is occupied by the nomadic groups of Tuaregs and Arabs, who constitute just 1.7 percent of the country's total population.¹⁴ However, the region is also home to other ethnic groups such as the Songhay, Bellah, Fulani, and Berabiche. In fact, the land claimed by the Tuareg rebels as Azawad is believed to be dominated by ethnic groups other than the Tuaregs.¹⁵ In the precolonial and postcolonial periods, the Tuaregs have usually lived under a form of political organization that can best be described as a “horizontal fragmentation”—different autonomous clans, tribes, and factions across the Sahel with no central adminis-

¹¹ David Leith Crum, “Mali and the U.M.O.A.: A Case-Study of Economic Integration,” *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 22, no. 3 (1984): 469–86, 469–73.

¹² Crum, “Mali and the U.M.O.A.,” 471.

¹³ Crum, “Mali and the U.M.O.A.,” 473–74.

¹⁴ Kalilou Sidibé, “Criminal Networks and Conflict-Resolution Mechanisms in Northern Mali,” *IDS Bulletin* 43, no. 4 (2012): 74–88, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1759-5436.2012.00336.x>.

¹⁵ Kassim Kone, “A Southern View on the Tuareg Rebellions in Mali,” *African Studies Review* 60, no. 1 (April 2017): 53–75, <https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2017.10>.

trative authority. As European colonialism took hold of the African continent, Tuareg autonomy, free movement, and military proficiency within Mali and the Sahel were increasingly undermined.¹⁶ During colonialism, there is evidence that the French favored the light-skinned Tuaregs over other ethnic groups by exempting them from involuntary servitude and military conscription, yet the Tuaregs relentlessly rebelled against the colonial administration, causing the French to use military force to quell several Tuareg rebellions. In fact, the abolition of slavery in French-Sudan by the French early in the 1900s further heightened tensions between the French and the Tuaregs as the “Tuareg nobility regarded... [this] plan as an act of the devil brought to them by the French infidels and contrary to the teachings of the Koran.”¹⁷

The postcolonial Malian state continued to witness rebellions from the Tuaregs, and sometimes the Arabs in the north: in 1962, 1990, 2006, and 2012.¹⁸ In every instance of rebellion and insurrection, the groups involved consistently cited “political and economic marginalization” as their primary grievance and subsequently demanded autonomy or independence from the central government in Bamako.¹⁹

Historically, residents of southern Mali have harbored skepticism and distrust towards Tuaregs, who are often bundled together with northerners, viewing them as rebels and jihadists responsible for the current humanitarian and economic crises in Mali.²⁰ Consequently, southerners have tended to favor military solutions over negotiated agreements, which they see as merely temporary fixes that foment future uprisings. Northerners, perceiving themselves as marginalized, exploited, and disregarded by the majority population in the south, have repeatedly sought either autonomy, independence, or economic development—often demanding a combination of these.²¹ This stance helps explain their persistent calls for greater self-governance. Conversely, the central government’s typical response to northern rebellions has been first to deploy military interventions and,

¹⁶ Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan, “The ‘Tuareg Question’ in Mali Today,” *Cahiers Du Mapinduzi* 3, January 1, 2013.

¹⁷ Kassim Kone, “A Southern View on the Tuareg Rebellions in Mali,” *African Studies Review* 60, no. 1 (April 2017): 61.

¹⁸ Mathieu Bere, “Armed Rebellion, Violent Extremism, and the Challenges of International Intervention in Mali,” *African Conflict and Peacebuilding Review* 7, no. 2 (2017): 60–84.

¹⁹ Bere, “Armed Rebellion,” 62.

²⁰ Kone, “A Southern View on the Tuareg Rebellions in Mali,” 56.

²¹ Arthur Boutellis and Marie-Joëlle Zahar, “The Shadow of Past Peace Agreements (1960s–2012),” *A Process in Search of Peace* (International Peace Institute, 2017).

upon their failure, to resort to negotiations or political settlements, which are often not followed through.

While some peace agreements or similar agreements have been signed with the north over the years, the state has always favored the use of military violence. This situation has produced some form of deep-seated hatred, distrust, disrespect, and misunderstandings between the government and northerners, as well as between southerners and northerners—it is also a confirmation of a fragile social cohesion at the heart of the Malian state. The infiltration and military successes of the terrorists in 2013 further complicated the crisis and stretched the Malian state and its international partners beyond their limits. From the moment the jihadists advanced, both the state and the international community faced the dual challenge of addressing decades of Tuareg rebellions in the north while simultaneously combating terrorism, which often intersects with dire socio-economic realities and political uprisings—goals that remain elusive to this day.

At the onset of the Arab Spring in the early 2010s, the unstable situation worsened with the fall of Muammar Gaddafi's government in Libya. This led Libyan fighters to cross borders from Algeria and Niger into Mali, armed with heavy weaponry and sparking another uprising. In March 2012, the Tuareg-led rebel coalition National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) allied with Ansar Dine, a jihadist group established by a former MNLA leader, to assault the Malian army in the north. Subsequently, the MNLA declared the independence of a significant portion of northern territory as "Azawad,"²² named after a piece of desert in the Sahara. Unlike prior uprisings, this marked the first time such bold demands were made, and the group wielded advanced weaponry previously unseen among rebels or non-state actors in the region.

The Tuareg-led MNLA's control over northern Mali was brief, as the jihadist groups—Ansar al Dine, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), and Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO)—swiftly pursued their interests and recaptured key cities like Timbuktu and Gao.²³ The jihadists' success in displacing the secular MNLA stemmed from their superior financial resources and military capabilities, which outperformed the initial rebel forces in strategy and execution. Ansar Dine effectively ousted the MNLA, dismantling their stronghold in northern Mali. This shift marked the rise and consolidation of jihadist and terrorist influence in the region, worsening an already complex conflict.

²² Ahmed S. Hashim, "The War in Mali: Islamists, Tuaregs and French Intervention," *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 5, no. 2 (2013): 2–8.

²³ Arthur Boutellis and Marie-Joëlle Zahar, "The Fourth Wave of Rebellion (2012–2014)," *A Process in Search of Peace* (International Peace Institute, 2017), 9–10.

By March 2012, many Malians grew dissatisfied with the government's management of the rebel and jihadist conflict. Demonstrators launched protests across Bamako to express their frustration over the security situation, prompting the army to stage a coup against President Amadou Toumani Touré (known locally as ATT).²⁴ Within hours of the takeover, rebels captured several northern cities and towns, advancing toward Bamako. This escalation heightened tensions among southerners, who began attacking the homes and properties of Tuaregs, Arabs, and others resembling them in the capital.²⁵ This violence reflected the south's enduring frustration with the north's prolonged conflicts with the state.²⁶

After transferring power to a civilian transitional government, Malian authorities sought French military assistance against jihadist rebel threats. In response, France initiated Operation Serval to halt the jihadists' advance toward Bamako and reclaim lost territories. This operation successfully pushed back the jihadists, forcing many into the Ifoghas mountains in the northern Kidal region.²⁷ Concurrently, the MNLA, having lost ground to jihadist forces, allied with the French to restore its political and military significance.²⁸ By April 2013, the United Nations established MINUSMA to stabilize Mali, restore state authority, support democratic transitions, protect civilians, and regain control over the north. Within two years, MINUSMA facilitated the 2015 Algiers Accords, negotiated through Algerian mediation, which remained in force until the Malian transitional government ended it in January 2024 following MINUSMA's unexpected withdrawal.²⁹

The French involvement: A precursor to suspicions around MINUSMA

The swift conclusion of the MINUSMA was largely influenced by France's enduring involvement in Mali after independence in 1960. Unlike other colonial powers, France maintained "control over areas of 'high' policy such as foreign affairs,

²⁴ Hashim, "The War in Mali," 5.

²⁵ Aljazeera, "Tuareg Rebellion Sparks Crisis in Mali | News | Al Jazeera," accessed July 16, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2012/2/18/tuareg-rebellion-sparks-crisis-in-mali>.

²⁶ Kone, "A Southern View on the Tuareg Rebellions in Mali," 56.

²⁷ Boeke and Schuurman, "Operation 'Serval,'" 818.

²⁸ Segoulene Allemadou, "Le MNLA, Un Nouvel Allié Pour l'armée Française?," France 24, January 23, 2013, <https://www.france24.com/fr/20130123-mnla-armee-francaise-mali-negociations-bamako-rebelles-touaregs-islamistes-ansar-dine>.

²⁹ Ilaria Allegrozzi, "Mali's Peace Deal Ends | Human Rights Watch," January 26, 2024, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/01/26/malis-peace-deal-ends>.

monetary policy, defence, higher education, and language policy, while conceding political autonomy to Africans in other areas.”³⁰ This influence is, for example, manifested in Mali’s use of the *Communauté Financière Africaine* (CFA) Franc—a currency pegged to the euro—and France’s position as Mali’s “penholder” at the Security Council. Mali’s education system and official language also reflect the French model, highlighting ongoing cultural and policy-driven subordination to France. Thus, in economics, foreign policy, and culture, the Malian state and people remained in a state of continuous subordination to France.

This condition has led to a phenomenon in which Malians, including their leaders, increasingly felt as though the country still belonged to the French, rendering them subjects rather than citizens. An important event in 1967 sparked such feelings when Modibo Keita, facing economic stagnation and rising inflation, sought French assistance after attempting to free the country from the former colonizers’ influence. Many Malians expressed discontent with the French responses and demands, viewing their intervention as a blow to national pride, dignity, and sovereignty, despite the economic benefits that the French claimed.³¹ In 1968, after Keita was overthrown in a military coup by Moussa Traoré, suspicions arose regarding possible French political interference, although this rumor was not convincingly substantiated.

French involvement in Malian affairs persisted through the 1990s and intensified after 2012, prompted by the Tuareg rebellion and jihadist incursions in the north, which led France to launch a military operation at the request of Malian authorities. During Operation Serval, many Malians expressed gratitude for the French intervention, recognizing its critical role in preventing state collapse.³² A local resident in Bamako recalled that some Malians named their children after then-French President François Hollande to honor the French army’s support during this crisis.³³ In many West African cultures, this reflects deep respect and gratitude. As the French operation succeeded in the north, Hollande visited Bamako and Timbuktu, receiving a hero’s welcome. Residents hailed him as Mali’s savior, chanting his name and shouting, “Vive la France,” in recognition of the French in-

³⁰ Tony Chafer, *The End of Empire in French West Africa: France’s Successful Decolonization* (Berg Publishers, 2002), 186.

³¹ Crum, “Mali and the U.M.O.A,” 480–1.

³² Aljazeera, “Malians Welcome French Intervention | Features | Al Jazeera,” accessed July 2, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2013/1/15/maliens-welcome-french-intervention>.

³³ A local teacher, Interview in Bamako, February 10, 2023.

tervention.³⁴ In his address, then-interim president Diocounda Traoré expressed appreciation, stating that the operation demonstrated “how much France is determined to go all the way side by side with Mali.”³⁵

Critics contend that France’s involvement in Mali was part of the US and its Western allies’ War on Terror, suggesting that Operation Serval prioritized Western interests over those of Mali.³⁶ Operation Serval also triggered incidents that heightened Malian perceptions of French neocolonialism, significantly impacting diplomatic relations between the two nations. Although primarily French-led, it included military personnel from Sahelian countries like Chad and Niger, who fought alongside local guides from the Armed Forces of Mali (FAMa). As French forces advanced into northern Mali, they opted to utilize mostly Chadian soldiers and Tuaregs from the Malian Army to liberate mainly Tuareg towns, prohibiting non-Tuareg FAMa members from participating. This strategic choice aimed to avoid provoking local Tuaregs, who might view the forces as invaders rather than liberators. Consequently, in crucial areas like Kidal, the French, under Operation Serval, liberated the city from jihadists with a coalition of Chadian soldiers and FAMa Tuaregs, primarily led by Colonel Hadj Ag Gamou. Gamou, a Tuareg officer, had previously mounted fierce resistance against the MNLA-jihadist coalition in 2012 but retreated to Niger after their takeover.³⁷ A longtime ally of ousted president Amadou Toumani Touré, Colonel Gamou, was believed to be the only Tuareg officer loyal to the central government in Bamako at that time.

Since this incident, many Malians, particularly in the South, struggle to differentiate jihadist groups from MNLA rebels, mistakenly labeling all Tuaregs and Arabs as terrorists. A Tuareg college student from Timbuktu, now in Bamako, shared his frustration about the stereotype among southerners that “all people from the north are terrorists.”³⁸ Not all Tuaregs align with terrorists or rebels.³⁹ Also, many who collaborate do so due to economic desperation or fear of death. Many southerners overlook these complexities. The French seem aware of this dynamic and thus obscured their ties with the MNLA to prevent misinterpretations

³⁴ Sengupta, “Cheers for François Hollande, Hero of Mali,” *The Independent*, February 3, 2013, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/africa/cheers-for-francois-hollande-hero-of-mali-8478502.html>.

³⁵ BBC News, “Mali Conflict: Timbuktu Hails French President Hollande,” *BBC News*, February 2, 2013, sec. Africa, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-21304079>.

³⁶ Kone, “A Southern View on the Tuareg Rebellions in Mali,” 55.

³⁷ Stéphane Spet, “Operation Serval. Analyzing the French Strategy against Jihadists in Mali,” *ASPJ Africa & Francophonie*, 2015, 71.

³⁸ Tuareg student, Fieldwork in Bamako, face-to-face, February 7, 2023.

³⁹ Kone, “A Southern View on the Tuareg Rebellions in Mali.”

among the southern population, “who might interpret such action as treason.” As Spet, a commander during Operation Serval, had noted, the decision to engage the MNLA, alongside support from Colonel Gamu and his men, significantly contributed to the operation’s “success” by fostering trust with the local population at the jihadists’ expense.⁴⁰

To grasp the choices made, one must first examine the political and military goals of Operation Serval. The primary aim was to assist the Malian government in halting jihadist advances toward Bamako. After achieving this in the initial weeks, the mission transformed into a counter-offensive to reclaim territory from the jihadists.⁴¹ Although the second objective was not initially planned, it became essential for maintaining the country’s territorial integrity and protecting civilians. Many Malians, including those from the south, supported this strategy. However, they were largely unaware that the French also courted a less harmful adversary, the MNLA, to combat the more dangerous jihadists.

Thus, when faced with the MNLA, the French confronted two challenging options: 1) combat the mainly Tuareg MNLA, which had jihadist ties, risking local northern Tuareg suspicion of the French; or 2) accept the MNLA’s assistance to leverage local knowledge and trust but provoke suspicion among the largely unaffected southern population. The French opted for the second choice. As Lieutenant Colonel Spet noted:

Far from nation building, France simply wanted to restore the status quo...Between the coups of 1992 and 2012, Mali was close to a constitutional democracy in which presidents of the Malian Republic as well as mayors and representatives were democratically elected. That key element, combined with an economy that could be fostered by international support and the lack of grounds for insurgency (except in the Tuareg area), explains France’s choice not to interfere in Malian internal affairs.⁴²

It appears the French judged the cause of the MNLA as a just one that required a political solution; unlike the jihadists, they were not enemies of the state. However, France decided that it was better to avoid interfering in Mali’s other affairs.

After decades of continuous interference, this decision appeared as an abrupt change that raised suspicions. The French cooperation with the MNLA appeared to many Malians as either aimed at dividing the country or imposing on them a favored group that most perceived as terrorists, although strong evidence for such

⁴⁰ Spet, “Operation Serval. Analyzing the French Strategy against Jihadists in Mali,” 71.

⁴¹ Boeke and Schuurman, “Operation ‘Serval,’” 802.

⁴² Spet, “Operation Serval. Analyzing the French Strategy against Jihadists in Mali,” 71.

claims is lacking.⁴³ Simultaneously, however, the French pressured Malian authorities to hold elections to legitimize the government, leading to Ibrahim Boubacar Keita's election in 2013.⁴⁴ If France's assertion of non-interference held any validity, this pressure undermined it. On one hand, France claimed to avoid meddling in Malian politics; on the other, it actively shaped the political landscape by urging elections and influencing who participated in liberating jihadist-controlled cities. Malians, particularly in the south, recognized these contradictions, which—especially after they later uncovered the alliance with the MNLA during Operation Serval—reinforced suspicions of neocolonialism and enabled nationalist politicians to further anti-colonial sentiments.

Problematizing MINUSMA's achievements in a challenging environment

Meanwhile, MINUSMA made significant impacts on multiple fronts. While its initiatives were characterized by ambitious and wide-ranging goals, the primary focus of its activities encompassed military support alongside significant engagements in civil and political affairs, humanitarian assistance, and the development of economic and infrastructural projects.⁴⁵ This comprehensive approach underlined the strategic commitment to address both immediate and systemic challenges within the operational context. Although there may be some overlaps, this section will focus on three main areas of peace and security, civilian protection, and economic and social development. Within each of these achievements, there emerged controversies and polemics that shaped local perceptions.

a) Political maneuverings

About three months after its establishment, MINUSMA oversaw the 2013 runoff voting that elected Ibrahim Keita. These elections partially restored democracy and affirmed the leaders' legitimacy, positioning the nation better to tackle the in-

⁴³ Interviews with local residents and experts, Bamako residents and express their concerns over the the French in Mali, face-to-face, 2024.

⁴⁴ Spet, "Operation Serval. Analyzing the French Strategy against Jihadists in Mali," 71.

⁴⁵ MINUSMA undertook several activities that encompassed military, human rights, gender, justice and correction, electoral assistance, protection of children, civil affairs, political affairs, protection of civilians, mine action, stabilization and recovery, environment and culture. MINUSMA, "MINUSMA Activities," September 1, 2014, <https://minusma.unmissions.org/en/activities>.

surgecy crisis.⁴⁶ However, just a year after the elections, and as French troops began to withdraw and transfer security operations to MINUSMA and the Malian government, failed negotiations reignited rebellions by separatist groups like the MNLA, worsening national insecurity. The rebels captured major towns in the Kidal region, prompting new negotiations with the Malian government that started in September 2014.⁴⁷ MINUSMA played a crucial role in this process, leading to the 2015 Algiers Agreement, which was signed in Bamako.⁴⁸ Beyond funding, MINUSMA engaged in confidence-building efforts and facilitated the release of some opposition prisoners held by the government.⁴⁹ Although groups like the Coordination of Azawad Movements (CMA) initially refused to sign due to unmet demands for autonomy or federalism in the north, the agreement ultimately contributed to stabilizing the country.⁵⁰

At times, the mission utilized various strategic “informal” mechanisms to engage warring parties that were neither invited to nor participated in the formal peace process in 2015. In 2017, Mahamat Saleh Annadif, then head of MINUSMA, initiated the Anefis Process 2, an arrangement among armed groups in northern Mali aimed at facilitating the movement of people and goods, both legal and illegal, following the 2015 peace agreement.⁵¹ It represented “a bottom-up process of addressing power-sharing and intercommunal rivalries.”⁵² As the security situation in central Mali worsened after 2015, MINUSMA actively facilitated and oversaw numerous local peace processes among warring parties. The relative peace in central Mali around 2020 can be linked to approximately 50 peace deals brokered by or through MINUSMA between 2016 and 2019.⁵³ These informal arrangements addressed a significant security gap overlooked by the 2015 Algiers peace process,

⁴⁶ Isaline Bergamaschi, “MINUSMA: Initial Steps, Achievements and Challenges” (2013).

⁴⁷ Crisis Group, “Mali: An Imposed Peace?,” May 22, 2015, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/mali/mali-imposed-peace>.

⁴⁸ Jaïr van der Lijn, “The UN Peace Operation in Mali: A Troubled Yet Needed Mission,” *IPI Global Observatory* (blog), November 26, 2019, <https://theglobalobservatory.org/2019/11/un-peace-operation-mali-troubled-yet-needed-mission/>.

⁴⁹ UN Peacekeeping, “Statement by Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations Hervé Ladsous to the Security Council: Delays in Implementing Mali Peace Agreement Could Risk Hard-Won Trust among Signatories,” United Nations Peacekeeping, accessed April 10, 2024, <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/statement-under-secretary-general-peacekeeping-operations-herve-ladsous-to-security-council-delays>.

⁵⁰ Crisis Group, “Mali,” 1, 2.

⁵¹ An earlier process, *Anefis Process 1* was started by armed groups that were sidelined during the Algiers Peace process.

⁵² Arthur Boutellis, “MINUSMA and the Political Economy of Mali’s Crises,” in *The Political Economy of Civil War and UN Peacekeeping Operations* (New York: Routledge, 2023), 266.

⁵³ Boutellis, 267.

which primarily focused on the north but contributed little to conflict reduction and civilian protection within the mission's broader mandate.⁵⁴

However, this relative peace came at a price of accepting semi-criminal activity and weakening state legitimacy. From the start, these informal peace processes faced criticism. Raising suspicions among Malians about their true intentions. The Anefis process involved MINUSMA and armed groups entrenched in organized crime and trafficking in northern Mali, which may have solidified armed groups' control over trade routes by institutionalizing a "division of the trafficking pie."⁵⁵ Many of these groups were linked to jihadists, further complicating MINUSMA's role in the peace efforts. In the southern regions, MINUSMA's role was increasingly viewed as a concession that inadvertently bolstered the power of "criminals and jihadists," thus perpetuating insecurity.

b) Negotiating the civilian protection mandate

Another area of MINUSMA's significant contribution lies in civilian protection and security. Many interviewees acknowledged that, despite later criticisms, the mission initially played a crucial role in safeguarding civilians, as outlined in its mandate. UN military and police forces regularly patrolled villages, allowing residents to live without fear. Notably, in areas such as Timbuktu, Gao, Kidal, and Mopti, military and police presence was evident. Research on peacekeeping elsewhere has shown that its visibility can reduce violence by deterring potential attackers, including rebels, terrorists, government forces, and other violent non-state actors.⁵⁶ However, the actual sense of safety among residents remained debatable, as the presence of MINUSMA forces sometimes attracted possible extremist attacks on the forces, putting the population in harm's way.

Although the security situation in central Mali deteriorated following the signing of the Algiers accord, it improved significantly in the north. According to the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED), an independent global non-profit organization that collects data on violent conflict around the world, violence in northern Mali significantly declined within months of the 2015 peace agreement, though pockets of violence persisted nationwide.⁵⁷ Since MINUSMA played a cru-

⁵⁴ Crisis Group, "Mali," i, 4.

⁵⁵ Boutellis, "MINUSMA and the Political Economy of Mali's Crises," 266.

⁵⁶ See: Lisa Hultman, Jacob Kathman, and Megan Shannon, "United Nations Peacekeeping and Civilian Protection in Civil War," *American Journal of Political Science* 57, no. 4 (2013): 875–91.

⁵⁷ Matt Fleugel-Carew, "Mali—July 2015 Update," ACLED (blog), July 10, 2015, <https://acleddata.com/2015/07/10/mali-july-2015-update/>.

cial role in the Algiers process, it can be argued that these initiatives were effective. Despite the presence of French military operations, their sheer nature as counterterrorism operations undermined civilian protection, especially under operational conditions where the lines between terrorists and civilians were blurred, as was evidenced in a 2021 French attack at a wedding in the village of Bounti, central Mali.⁵⁸ Thus, although MINUSMA benefited from the support of other foreign missions, its role in protecting civilians remained vital.

In the Gao region in northeast Mali, a stronghold of the rebel-jihadist coalition, the mission expanded its operations to safeguard residents but achieved mixed results. During focus-group interviews, one Gao resident stated that MINUSMA trucks deterred jihadists from the city and nearby villages. Although this view may not be universal, it highlights MINUSMA's role in civilian protection. Conversely, a Mopti resident in the discussion argued that MINUSMA's presence led to increased attacks in their community.⁵⁹ In some areas, jihadists targeted MINUSMA personnel on patrol to instill fear in both UN staff and locals. As the most dangerous peacekeeping operation in UN history, the mission was targeted by extremists with Explosive Improvised Devices (EIDs) throughout its operations. Between 2013 and 2022, "548 improvised explosive device attacks... targeted MINUSMA, killing 103 and wounding 638 uniformed personnel."⁶⁰ In some of these attacks, civilian casualties (including children) were recorded, accentuating the assertion that the mission's presence attracted, rather than deterred, attacks on civilians.⁶¹ Unfortunately, as a non-counterterrorism mission, MINUSMA lacked sufficient resources to effectively counteract these assaults.

These contradictory perspectives on the mission's impact on local security highlight the mixed outcomes and views regarding MINUSMA and its peacekeeping efforts. In central Mali, MINUSMA's peace agreements with armed groups from 2019 to 2021 were part of its renewed mandate to "facilitate the implementation of a comprehensive politically-led Malian strategy to protect civilians, reduce intercommunal violence, and re-establish State authority, State presence

⁵⁸ Emmanuel Freudenthal et al., "The New Humanitarian | France's Anti-Jihadist War in Mali: The Untold Civilian Toll," June 16, 2021, <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/investigations/2021/6/16/uncovering-the-civilian-toll-of-france-anti-jihadist-war-in-Mali>.

⁵⁹ Two young men and women between the ages of 20 and 27, Youth focus group, face-to-face, February 11, 2024.

⁶⁰ UN Secretary-General, "Internal Review of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali:: Report of the Secretary-General," January 16, 2023, 27, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4000836>.

⁶¹ Agence France-Presse, "Children Killed in Attack on UN Mali Base," *The Guardian*, March 9, 2015, sec. World news, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/09/children-killed-in-attack-on-un-mali-base>.

and basic social services in Central Mali.”⁶² However, while conflicts briefly declined, many still felt unsafe as some areas continued to experience attacks, which raised doubts about the mission’s negotiations with armed groups. These concerns deepened suspicions about the mission, reminiscent of the French strategic actions during Operation Serval. The mission thus found itself in a position where, to borrow the words of the Nigerian academic Nsongurua Udombana, its “neutrality [became] a sin.”⁶³

c) Economic boom for the few, disadvantage to many

In the north and center of the country, where the UN mission was most active, many locals benefited from the substantial funds injected into the economy by UN personnel. MINUSMA staff hired local residents as cooks, security personnel, and wardens. These workers typically received salaries exceeding the minimum offered by local employers or state authorities, which created an incentive for many locals to work for the mission or its foreign staff. Consequently, this development led to an emerging employment culture where many preferred the mission over positions in the Malian government, which paid considerably lower salaries than those of UN employees.⁶⁴

In central Mali, peacekeepers were deployed to protect local hubs like wells and marketplaces.⁶⁵ This response revitalized the communities and stimulated economic growth. Throughout the country, MINUSMA’s presence led to the emergence of many upscale restaurants and pubs, generating new income opportunities for young Malians. The full extent of this impact became very noticeable during my visit to Bamako in February 2024, just months after the mission’s conclusion, when I observed a significant decline in the number of restaurants and clubs compared to my initial visit in 2023. The contrast was striking, underscoring the profound impact of MINUSMA’s departure on the city’s social and economic landscape.

⁶² Boutellis, “MINUSMA and the Political Economy of Mali’s Crises,” 263.

⁶³ Nsongurua J. Udombana, “When Neutrality Is a Sin: The Darfur Crisis and the Crisis of Humanitarian Intervention in Sudan,” *Human Rights Quarterly* 27, no. 4 (2005): 1149–99.

⁶⁴ Fieldwork in Mali, 2023–2024. This information emerged out of formal interviews and conversations with local residents, former MINUSMA workers, and expats.

⁶⁵ Arthur Boutellis, Delphine Mechoulan, and Marie-Joëlle Zahar, “Parallel Tracks or Connected Pieces?: UN Peace Operations, Local Mediation, and Peace Processes,” *International Peace Institute* (blog), December 10, 2020, 9, <https://www.ipinst.org/2020/12/parallel-tracks-or-connected-pieces-un-peace-operations-local-mediation-and-peace-processes>.

Through this financial input, MINUSMA played a crucial economic role, benefiting many Malians directly and indirectly. Although it directly employed a few locals, the project's indirect job creation and funding of local NGOs stimulated an economic boom in Mali that might not have occurred otherwise. Before the 2012 conflict, Mali enjoyed a vibrant tourism industry, significantly aiding residents in tourist-heavy areas. However, as the conflict intensified, rebels and jihadists seized many regions, making them unwelcome for tourists and harming the local economy.⁶⁶ Without overstating the mission's economic significance, it is reasonable to assert that MINUSMA compensated for a substantial portion of the revenue lost due to the decline in tourism following the violence in 2012.

On the other hand, many residents perceived unintended consequences from the surge in economic activities. MINUSMA personnel, with significantly greater purchasing power than the average Malian, populated the streets of Bamako and other major towns. Their presence triggered inflation in food and housing prices.⁶⁷ The mission directly employed only a few locals, widening income disparities and overshadowing the indirect economic benefits. Goods that once had reasonable prices became prohibitively expensive and scarce for average citizens; the best housing was reserved for MINUSMA workers, who paid double or triple the announced price.⁶⁸ A local politician noted how eggs became scarce and costly as farms prioritized supplying MINUSMA, which offered higher prices than local buyers.⁶⁹ Consequently, MINUSMA epitomized an unequal Malian society that economically favored foreigners.

A closer examination of the facts provides a more nuanced explanation. Available data shows that the average inflation rate in Mali held steady at 2.10 percent from 1998 to 2024, with a notable spike to 13.90 percent in August 2022.⁷⁰ While inflation occurred during MINUSMA's tenure, it remained relatively low compared to many other African countries. The 2022 spike can be attributed to two primary factors: the Russia-Ukraine war, which disrupted supply chains and impacted several African economies, and the severe economic sanctions imposed on Mali by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) following the military twin coup d'états in 2020 and 2021. Thus, attributing inflation directly to MINUSMA's operations was not entirely accurate on paper, even though perceptions

⁶⁶ Jaimie Bleck and Kristin Michelitch, "The 2012 Crisis in Mali: Ongoing Empirical State Failure," *African Affairs* 114, no. 457 (October 1, 2015): 598–623, <https://doi.org/10.1093/afraf/adv038>.

⁶⁷ Fieldwork in Mali in spring 2023 and winter 2024, Fieldwork in Mali.

⁶⁸ Fieldwork in Mali in spring 2023 and winter 2024.

⁶⁹ Interview with a local politician, face-to-face, February 21, 2024.

⁷⁰ Trading Economics, "Mali Inflation Rate," accessed April 13, 2025, <https://tradingeconomics.com/mali/inflation-cpi>.

suggested otherwise. Interestingly, inflation continued to rise in 2024 despite MINUSMA's withdrawal in winter 2023, indicating deeper causes beyond the mission's presence. One reason for these perceptions may be that MINUSMA was physically present in the country, while supply chain issues seemed distant from everyday life. Given MINUSMA staff's distinct lifestyle, it is not surprising that it faced blame for the rising cost of living.

MINUSMA in decline: How controversies informed local perceptions

The political failures of MINUSMA are evident at both internal and external levels. Internally, the mission's dealings sometimes sparked suspicion from the government, rebels, and citizens in general. The tense exchange between Hervé Ladsous, then-UN undersecretary for Peacekeeping operations, and former Malian President Ibrahim Boubakar Keita (IBK) was clear during the signing of the 2015 Peace Agreement in Bamako—they disagreed on whether to allow ongoing negotiations after the signatory process or to close the doors to parties who had failed to sign on.⁷¹ Shortly after the agreement was finalized, its implementation was significantly hindered by financial constraints and the ambitious yet inadequately formulated nature of the deal. The marked disinterest of all parties involved in adhering to their commitments further complicated implementation.⁷² It seems that MINUSMA's leadership anticipated these challenges, but despite being one of the most expensive peacekeeping missions in history, it was still hamstrung by financial and logistical deficiencies. These deficiencies were exacerbated by the fact that none of the actors involved fully anticipated the consequences of ending the Algiers process sooner than expected. In his statement to the Security Council, Hervé Ladsous lamented the lack of fulfillment of financial and logistical pledges by member states, which could negatively impact the peace process and the lives of Malians.⁷³ This highlights the failure of the mission's leadership to foresee financial and logistical challenges, further eroding the little confidence that was building among the warring parties. A plan existed to get parties to

⁷¹ Crisis Group, "Mali," 3.

⁷² Crisis Group, "Mali's Algiers Peace Agreement, Five Years On: An Uneasy Calm," June 24, 2020, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/sahel/mali/l'accord-dalger-cinq-ans-apres-un-calme-precaire-dont-il-ne-faut-pas-se-satisfaire>.

⁷³ UN Peacekeeping, "Statement by Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations Hervé Ladsous to the Security Council."

agree on the modalities of peace and security, but the means for actualizing these measures were lacking, as were the motivations on the part of the various factions.

Furthermore, although the Algiers agreement was an important accomplishment and helped stabilize the country, it was also fraught with many deficiencies. One significant shortcoming of the Peace Agreement was its excessive focus on security and democratic principles, neglecting essential social services and employment—elements vital to the daily lives of Malians, which have often been ignored, thereby worsening disenchantment and instability.⁷⁴ However, this failure cannot be attributed to MINUSMA, as the state is responsible for providing social services and employment, just as it is for security. Considering MINUSMA's limited resources, its responsibilities were primarily focused on the latter rather than the former. The mission's mandate emphasized its role in "supporting the transitional authorities" in fulfilling their responsibilities, which clearly included security, social services, employment, and protecting liberties. MINUSMA's involvement was intended to be secondary to that of the state.

However, this raises a crucial question: if MINUSMA's role was indeed subordinate to the Malian state, why did it prevent the Malian army from entering the Kidal region as a security measure until November 2023, when MINUSMA was expelled? This was a controversial decision that many Malians, including those I interviewed, felt was inimical to the territorial sovereignty of the state. They raised this issue when I noted that MINUSMA was meant to support the Malian government, and revealed their belief that the transitional government was constrained by so-called neutral international bodies, which claimed to uphold territorial integrity but served French interests by harboring rebels and terrorists in Kidal.⁷⁵ But as noted earlier, this controversy dates back to the political and military dynamics of Operation Serval in 2013. Despite MINUSMA's efforts, many southern Malians became skeptical when they learned of the collaboration between the MNLA and French forces during Operation Serval.

Interviews with former MINUSMA civilian workers reveal that the Mission prevented Malian authorities from entering Kidal during the mediation of the 2015 Peace Agreement. The Bamako government was asked to avoid this regional rebellion stronghold to prevent a direct military confrontation, which could lead to substantial Tuareg civilian casualties, while the Blue Helmets acted as a buffer between both parties.⁷⁶ This arrangement was outlined in the Algiers Agreement

⁷⁴ Crisis Group, "Mali," 4.

⁷⁵ Interviews with local residents, experts, and Bamako residents where concerns were expressed over the the French in Mali.

⁷⁶ Interviews with former MINUSMA workers in Bamako, face-to-face, February 8, 2024.

to ensure adherence to the ceasefire and protect local populations' interests and security on opposing sides.⁷⁷ Malian armed forces (FAMA) and other security forces could only enter Kidal under the supervision of MINUSMA or international partners, with similar stipulations applying to rebel forces in other regions of Mali. Unfortunately, the public remained largely unaware of these arrangements, leading to growing concerns about FAMA's restrictions in Kidal. Further, Asimi Goïta's transitional government, which came to power in 2021, exploited the public's lack of understanding, turning it into a significant source of discontent. Survey evidence from the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, a German-based non-profit organization that conducts annual surveys on public perceptions in Mali (Malimeter), shows that approximately 60 percent of Malians are unaware of the content of the 2015 Algiers Agreement, and around 24 percent have minimal knowledge of it.⁷⁸

Considering the centrality of the peace agreement to the existence of MINUSMA, it is shocking, even dumbfounding, that these details were not fully made available to the public through education and sensitization. As one of the UN's largest peacekeeping operations, MINUSMA lacked the necessary skills and strategies for effective communication with the communities it served. Mali's infrastructure deficits meant that radio was often the most accessible medium for disseminating information. Apparently aware of this situation, at least to some extent, MINUSMA established its own radio station, La Radio Mikado FM, to facilitate communication with the communities it served. However, MINUSMA's efforts through La Radio Mikado FM remained geographically limited, primarily serving northern and central communities but leaving most of the southern population reliant on other, mostly less reliable information sources. According to the radio's official Facebook page, it stopped airing on November 30, 2023. Although MINUSMA supported some local radio stations to broaden its reach as part of Quick Impact Projects (QIPs) that aimed at building confidence in the peace process, these efforts did not extend to the south until much later in the mission.⁷⁹ For the most part, MINUSMA's communication operated predominantly through its website and social media, and all in French—a language not widely understood across Mali,

⁷⁷ Algiers Accord, "Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in Mali Resulting from the Algiers Process," February 19, 2015, https://www.un.org/en/pdfs/EN-ML_150620_Accord-pour-la-paix-et-la-reconciliation-au-Mali_Issu-du-Processus-d'Alger.pdf.

⁷⁸ Christian Klatt, "Mali-Mètre 2024 – Enquête d'opinion" (Bamako: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, March 2024), <https://mali.fes.de/e/mali-metre-2024>.

⁷⁹ MINUSMA, "Community Radios Build Bridge to Peace in Central Mali," MINUSMA, January 14, 2019, <https://minusma.unmissions.org/en/community-radios-build-bridge-peace-central-mali>.

thus limiting its reach and effectiveness in conveying information about its mandate and activities to the broader population.

In an environment fraught with anxiety and desperation for improved security, the mission's significant operational challenges were exacerbated by inadequate communication strategies. The ineffectiveness in public outreach was highlighted by the widespread misinformation about MINUSMA's role and objectives as the mission neared its conclusion. This failure to reach the broader Malian population was acknowledged by former MINUSMA civilian staff during discussions in Bamako.⁸⁰

When discussing the role of peacekeeping missions with a UN expert on Mali and the Sahel at the UN Headquarters in New York, the expert emphasized that "educating local populations is not a primary responsibility of peacekeeping missions."⁸¹ This clarification highlights the mission's focus on maintaining peace and security rather than directly engaging in educational activities for local communities, even though the two are not mutually exclusive. MINUSMA's mandate "includes cross-cutting issues that encompass all aspects of its mandate, such as engaging in communication with the Malian population to publicize its mandate, its role, and to emphasize the role and responsibilities of the Malian authorities regarding the protection of civilians and the implementation of the Agreement."⁸² While these responsibilities did not encompass the general education of Malians, the mission was charged with effectively publicizing and communicating its mandate to the population it served. Despite initiatives that aligned with this goal, further efforts were required to fully get the mission's message to the population.

MINUSMA failed to fully recognize and invest in the essential role of widespread communication throughout the country. Significant resources were allocated to human rights enforcement and pressuring transitional authorities to conduct elections. However, a minor yet crucial goal—disseminating accurate information—was underestimated, inadvertently facilitating the spread of misleading narratives.

A few days after MINUSMA's departure, FAMa, with support from the semi-private Russian paramilitary group Wagner, quickly retook Kidal from the new rebel coalition, called Permanent Strategic Framework for Peace, Security and De-

⁸⁰ Interviews with former MINUSMA workers in Bamako, interview.

⁸¹ A UN Diplomat and expert on Mali and the Sahel, Interview at the UN Headquarters in New York, October 2024.

⁸² MINUSMA, "Mandate," MINUSMA, September 7, 2015, <https://minusma.unmissions.org/en/mmandate-0>.

velopment (CSP-PSD), encountering minimal resistance.⁸³ To many Malians, this signified two things: 1) it was the pinnacle of their realization of territorial sovereignty under the transitional government led by Assimi Goita; and 2) it served as a confirmation that external forces such as MINUSMA and France were shielding terrorists responsible for insecurity throughout the country from facing justice. Although my interviews predominantly took place in the south (Bamako), this view is held by many across the country, including those in the north and center, where MINUSMA was more visible. In fact, in the recent “Malimeter,” many northern territories where MINUSMA generally received more favorable public opinions than the south saw a significant erosion of public trust, mainly attributable to the retaking of Kidal by the Malian authorities.⁸⁴ This event gave new life to the transitional government but proved a nail in the coffin for Western-led interventions such as MINUSMA.

These developments accentuate the kind of tensions that could arise with peacekeeping missions. Had MINUSMA allowed Malian forces to enter Kidal, it could have escalated into a bloodbath between the government and the rebels, and Tuareg civilians could have faced severe repercussions from Malian forces due to their initial support for the jihadist-rebel coalition that initiated the conflict in 2012. And yet MINUSMA’s restraints on the national army played right into the hands of the transitional authorities and the population, who interpreted the action as an act of territorial transgression; neither side seems reconcilable. When the Malian army, with the help of Russian forces, retook Kidal after the departure of France and MINUSMA, the rebel coalition in Kidal at the time, *Le Cadre stratégique permanent* (CSP), claimed it had withdrawn “for strategic reasons.”⁸⁵ The so-called withdrawal “for strategic reasons” might explain why there was no bloodbath as had been speculated by MINUSMA, despite casualties on both sides and some civilian fatalities. But to many Malians, the army’s feat in reclaiming Kidal reaffirmed their trust in the transitional authorities safeguarding the country’s territorial integrity.

Had there been relative peace and security across the country, MINUSMA’s blockade of government forces from entering Kidal would not have attracted the kind of attention and negative perceptions from the population. However,

⁸³ News Wires, “Mali Junta Seizes Strategic Northern Stronghold of Kidal,” France 24, November 14, 2023, <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20231114-mali-junta-seizes-strategic-northern-stronghold-of-kidal>.

⁸⁴ Klatt, “Mali-Mètre 2024 – Enquête d’opinion,” 4, 46.

⁸⁵ ADF, “Malian Military, Rebel Groups, Extremists Vie for Control of Kidal,” *Africa Defense Forum* (blog), December 5, 2023, <https://adf-magazine.com/2023/12/malian-military-rebel-groups-extremists-vie-for-control-of-kidal/>.

the security situation across the country did not fully stabilize during the period of the mission's operation. Between 2015 and the end of the mission in winter 2023, there were several reported cases of attacks in the country. As many interviewees pointed out, insecurity and attacks prior to the arrival of MINUSMA were restricted to the north of the country. But since 2018, many regions across the center and south of the country have become hotspots for various attacks as insecurity engulfed the whole country and made life intolerable for many civilians. This created an atmosphere conducive to Malians questioning the value of MINUSMA and foreign forces, despite the mission not being a counterterrorism one.

Conclusion

Since the arrival of French and MINUSMA forces, Malian nationalists and elite loyalists have accused them of imperialism and neocolonialism. After the 2021 military coup, these accusations intensified and spread to broader segments of society. Although the exact link between the military's rule and the rise of misinformation remains unclear, it likely played a role.

After over a century of French imperialism and colonialism in Mali, followed by decades of economic and military intervention, it's understandable that Malians harbor distrust towards the French. However, examining neocolonialism on a case-by-case basis is vital to avoid oversimplifying the colonial experience. In 2013, the French intervened in Mali at the request of the Malian authorities; it was not imposed on the country. Notably, Mali's Francophone neighbors, including Niger's President Mahamadou Issoufou, Senegal's President Macky Sall, and Guinea's President Alpha Condé, supported the French intervention.⁸⁶ The joyful celebrations in Bamako upon the arrival of French forces reflect the excitement and backing many Malians felt at that moment. However, this enthusiasm should not be seen as a blank check for French actions; agreements with the MNLA were made without consulting Malian authorities, raising valid concerns about the French presence and, subsequently, MINUSMA.

As the penholder for Mali on security issues at the Security Council, France significantly influenced resolutions on MINUSMA, often conflicting with Malians' perceptions and preferences. Like many UN agencies, MINUSMA heavily relied on funding from Western nations, including France, which fostered perceptions of the mission as a neocolonial tool serving French interests. Such perspectives

⁸⁶ Susanna D. Wing, "Mali: Politics of a Crisis," *African Affairs* 112, no. 448 (2013): 476–85, <https://doi.org/10.1093/afraf/adt037>.

are understandable, especially amid growing insecurity during the mission's operations and MINUSMA's failure to effectively communicate its mandate to the local population.

Nonetheless, considering other key facts about the mission is vital. MINUSMA's forces came from five continents, with seven of the top ten contributing countries from Africa.⁸⁷ Accusing these nations of neocolonialism is challenging, given their similar colonial histories with Mali. When the conflict in Mali began in 2013, there was a consensus among the Security Council, including African representatives and the Permanent Five, to intervene.⁸⁸ By June 2023, when the Security Council voted to end MINUSMA's mandate, France had only 34 police personnel and staff officers, with no military personnel working for MINUSMA.⁸⁹ This indicates that French influence on MINUSMA was primarily in New York, rather than on the ground in Mali. Thus, viewing MINUSMA's actions in Mali solely through the lens of French neocolonialism, without acknowledging these facts, is overly simplistic.

This does not imply that the French and MINUSMA acted flawlessly in Mali or that serious issues were absent. Local perceptions were often justified, as there were numerous instances of decisions about Mali by the French and by MINUSMA without sufficient consultation of the local government. At the same time, MINUSMA's experiences also suggest that a peacekeeping mission can serve multiple and conflicting interests, from international concerns and aims to local demands, from humanitarian efforts to rendering some stability across the country, despite being contested.

In Mali's intricate conflict landscape, where armed groups operated across vast terrains and external actors pursued conflicting interests, it proved challenging to distinguish allies from adversaries. This story shows that a substantial effort, such as MINUSMA, can be viewed in very positive ways and attract considerable approval, as it can be perceived in very negative ways and regarded as an expensive failure, even neocolonial. The full story, however, the attempt to dive deeper into the details of its history and the diversity of actors, interests, and perceptions, suggests that both positive and negative narratives are simplifications. The positive and the negative aspects of MINUSMA cannot be easily separated; they are best understood as a connected whole rather than in isolation.

⁸⁷ United Nations Peacekeeping, "MINUSMA Fact Sheet," United Nations Peacekeeping, accessed October 7, 2024, <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/mission/minusma>.

⁸⁸ Bere, "Armed Rebellion, Violent Extremism, and the Challenges of International Intervention in Mali."

⁸⁹ UN Peacekeeping, "Troop and Police Contributors," United Nations Peacekeeping, accessed October 7, 2024, <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/troop-and-police-contributors>.

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Contesting tales and traditions: Two case studies of development ideals in Brazil (1940 – 1950)

In his inaugural address in January 1949, Harry Truman announced the Point Four Program, which aimed to extend economic assistance to countries in Latin America, Africa, and Asia. This initiative was framed against the backdrop of the Cold War and the prevailing American belief at the time that the Western world possessed the technological means to overcome the challenges plaguing the poorest regions of the world. Truman's speech has been considered by scholars (in the field that would later become known as development anthropology) as the starting point of the notion of development and its counterpart, underdevelopment.¹ This period was marked by an intense process of control and "Westernization" imposed on the peripheral countries involved, driven by the authoritarian and hegemonic nature of the process.² During this time, the belief in the technological progress of scientific institutions gave rise to a discourse that strived to be hegemonic, setting the standards for "development" and "underdevelopment" based on the criteria established by wealthy countries. Development—along with related terms such as modernization and progress—became a concept deeply intertwined with the geopolitical struggles of the Cold War, particularly

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¹ Arturo Escobar, *La invención del tercer mundo: Construcción e desconstrucción del desarrollo*. (Barcelona, Grupo Editorial Norma, 1998). There are other perspectives that believe that this process began between the wars. See: Chrisity Thornton, "Mexico has the Theories: Latin America and the Interwar Origins of Development," in *The Development Century – A Global History*, ed. Stephen Macekura and Erez Manela (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

² Rômulo de Paula Andrade, "Contribuições para um debate: a antropologia do desenvolvimento e a valorização econômica da Amazônia (1951–1955)," *Cadernos do Desenvolvimento*, 10, no. 16 (2015): 53–72.

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through the creation of its opposite, “underdevelopment.”³ Beyond its political and economic rhetoric, the notion of development also catalyzed actions aimed at addressing historical demands such as health, sanitation, and poverty in regions considered peripheral. Western powers thus posed a challenge to poorer regions by demanding development. In response, these nations reconfigured and adapted the concept to suit their own needs.⁴

In line with this reasoning, development and its counterpart, underdevelopment, became topics of constant international and local debate throughout the 1950s and 1960s, significantly influencing the direction and decisions regarding the “economic recovery” of peripheral regions within national borders, as well as fuelling debates on “regional development.”⁵ Scholars associated with “Post-Development Studies,” including Arturo Escobar, eventually labelled this period the Age of Development. From a historiographical standpoint, however, this approach overlooks a significant debate regarding the notion of development (and modernization or progress) that predates the emergence of these terms as key tools for social and political mobilization during the Cold War and, subsequently, for U.S. global hegemony. For instance, intellectual discussions in Brazil integrated global issues on the imperative of development and explored Brazil’s potential alignment with the “modern peoples” of Europe—a concept introduced by Sérgio Buarque de Holanda in 1936.⁶ Since the early twentieth century, Latin American political elites sought to either transplant or adapt European civilizational and modernizing principles to their continent.⁷ From the late nineteenth century through the early decades of the twentieth century, Latin American economic, political, and intellectual elites faced a daunting task: challenging the legacy of the Portuguese and Spanish Empires, which these groups perceived as symbols of an ambivalent tradition that had once been central to Western modernization. More specifically, the conquest of the territories and peoples of the Americas, the onset of colonization, and the establishment of agricultural-extractive systems in the sixteenth century through the allocation of vast tracts of land for sugarcane plantations, relying on indigenous slave labour, led to the creation of a specific socioeconomic and environmental model, replicated in Dutch and Portuguese colo-

³ Wolfgang Sachs. “Introduction,” in *The Development Dictionary – A Guide to Knowledge as Power*, ed. Wolfgang Sachs (New York: Zed Books, 1999).

⁴ Joseph L. Love, *A Construção do Terceiro Mundo: teorias do subdesenvolvimento na Romênia e no Brasil* (Rio de Janeiro: Editora Paz e Terra, 1998).

⁵ Andrade, “Valorização Econômica da Amazônia,” 55.

⁶ Sérgio Buarque de Holanda, *Raízes do Brasil* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1995).

⁷ Stuart McCook, *States of Nature. Science, Agriculture and Environment in the Spanish Caribbean, 1760–1940* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002).

nies in Africa and Asia. Contemporary scholars have recognized that the modernity of the Global North—symbolized by industrialization, urbanization, and technological progress—was only made possible by way of this plantation model developed in European colonies in the Global South: “exterminate local people and plants; prepare now empty, unclaimed land; and bring in exotic and isolated labour and crops for production. This landscape model of scalability became an inspiration for later industrialization and modernization.”⁸

In the centuries following the Iberian imperial and colonial endeavors, particularly with the advent of the Brazilian Republic in 1889, a certain intellectual and political tradition advocated the need for a national transformation in Brazil: this perspective contended that Brazil was founded on a problematic legacy (slavery, large estates and plantations), whereas the central government followed what it considered to be “European civilisational values.”⁹ Beyond its continental dimensions, Brazil was perceived as a nation with limited internal integration. The model described above that had once brought prosperity and wealth to Europeans, as well as to sugar plantation owners, merchants, and those close to the monarchy, had largely remained confined to the Atlantic coast. Intellectuals of the time argued that vast inland areas of the country contained inhospitable environments that needed to be conquered and sanitized, so that the ailing rural populations could be rescued and assigned a new mission: to achieve progress. As an example, sanitarian Belisário Penna, one of the most influential advocates of national politics of medicine—rather than regional initiatives—explained his progress ideal in a speech in 1918: “The progress, prestige and strength of a nation can be measured by the hygienic education of its people.” Describing the São Francisco Valley, Penna contrasts “the majesty of an ever-new nature, with the exuberance of an ever-green flora, with the variety of one of the richest fauna,” with “a population of wasted, anaemic and cachectic people, men without productive energy, in a condition of almost vital incapacity that will pain your feelings of altruism.”¹⁰ “Fortunately,” concluded Penna shortly afterwards, “it seems that this truth has penetrated the national spirit, and that the time will soon come for

⁸ Anna Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 39.

⁹ Nisia Trindade Lima, “Public Health and Social Ideas in Modern Brazil,” *American Journal of Public Health* 97, no. 7 (2007): 1172.

¹⁰ Belisário Penna, “Saneamento Rural” (Conferência realizada pelo Dr. Belisário Penna, em Belo Horizonte, a 1º de maio de 1918, na sede da Sociedade Mineira de Agricultura. Belo Horizonte, 1º de maio de 1918), 12–13.

joint action, official and private, federal, state and municipal, in favour of the health of our people and the depollution of the land and waters.”¹¹

Thus, designating Truman’s inaugural address as the pivotal moment marking the foundational point for the global impact of the development ideal seems arbitrary, given the longstanding intellectual and material exchanges among groups striving for economic transformation in Brazil and other Latin American nations. The “Post-Development Studies” perspective has pioneered an important critical agenda aimed at supporting and, ideally, renegotiating the relationship between peripheral populations and the decision-making centers of capitalism. This article, in contrast, seeks to historically reassess how economic and intellectual elites from Brazil shaped the agendas upon which the ideologies of development and modernization were later built. Empirically, we will examine two case studies: the first investigates how Brazilian intellectuals such as Sérgio Buarque de Holanda, Antônio Cândido, Florestan Fernandes, or German ethnologist Emilio Willems argued in the 1940s and 1950s for social integration programs to be implemented by the Brazilian state as a way to promote social change for the groups labelled as “traditional” or “backward.” In a historical context which increasingly questioned the racism marginalizing these populations socially and economically, both Brazilian and foreign intellectuals suggested technical strategies to improve agricultural practices and integrate these populations into the dominant model of a productive national economy. The second case study examines the Superintendência de Valorização Econômica da Amazônia (SPVEA), a pioneering regional development agency in Brazil that was strongly influenced by the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA). The SPVEA operated between 1953 and 1966, beginning during the democratic period and ending its activities at the start of Brazil’s military dictatorship. In this context, international ideas and collaborations that sought to improve living conditions in the Amazon aligned with intellectual debates and government projects of that time, particularly from the 1940s onward, as part of the Getúlio Vargas dictatorship of the so-called *Estado Novo*. The revolution of 1930 had brought Getúlio Vargas to power, who carried out a coup d’état in 1937 and, with the support of the military, remained in power until 1945. Writings from this period aimed to dispel widespread popular myths in many peripheral regions of Brazil, which were deemed harmful to a productive economy, by advocating for effective government intervention. The myths in question, particularly in discussions about modernizing the Amazon, referred to local folklore, where figures such as Curupira—a mythical guardian of the Amazon rainforest—were believed to obstruct human efforts to control nature. However, for development

¹¹ Penna, “Saneamento Rural,” 1918, 13–14.

to take place in the Amazon, it would be necessary to change the local populations, transforming them into experts. This chapter aims to demonstrate, based on two case studies, the gap between the debates in Brazilian social thought about the possibilities of development and their practical application. If, on the one hand, there was a great intellectual effort to build a positive perspective on the participation of the rural population in the nation-building project, on the other, these people were excluded from decision-making processes and development practices. As we will demonstrate, the SPVEA promoted a series of courses aimed at changing the habits and culture of the local population that would work in the agency.

These cases demonstrate that developments perceived as clearly positive or negative in a specific time and place can be reinterpreted differently in later periods or other geographical contexts. We show how development ideas have been shaped both by local and foreign experts and dressed in enthusiastic positive narratives to accomplish economic development, nation building, and meet community demands in a more global geopolitical approach. In other words, intellectuals and state programmes in Brazil proposed development projects, taking into account their notion of “local reality.” This situation, in turn, would take into account both an anti-racist perspective—including the rural populations in these projects, who had historically been considered as abandoned by the state—and a socially inclusive approach, where the transformation of these rural populations, hitherto considered to be “ignorant” of technical knowledge, would have their lives transformed by the expertise introduced through the SPVEA courses. In short, the comparative study of these cases offers a broader view of how Brazilian intellectuals imagined plans for social change in an anti-racist way and tried to influence state policies; in contrast, the study of the SPVEA offers a concrete example of the paradoxes faced in the post-WWII context, with the acceleration of processes of economic and social transformation. To a certain extent, the SPVEA experience took into account elements of anti-racism by including Sertanejo populations in its courses; in contrast, this inclusion took place in a way that placed them in a subordinate position both in the hierarchical structure of the SPVEA and in the disregard of their previous knowledge. In other words, the Sertanejos would be accepted into these projects as long as they adopted technical practices demanded by foreign technicians or experts from urbanized regions of Brazil. By contrast, this approach is at odds with the premises adopted today, where Brazilian public policies understand that the knowledge of local populations must not

only be valued but also taught to new generations for the sustainability of the forest.¹²

The urgency of development in a “backward” country

In Brazil, particularly after the end of Getúlio Vargas Estado Novo dictatorship (1937–1945), the country’s bureaucratic elites actively adapted and implemented development and planning ideas from both the West and the Soviet Union (USSR), with a particular focus on regions that had been historically neglected by federal administrations, recognizing in these areas a “rational” exploitation potential, as described at the time. During this period, the Brazilian government established scientific institutions and colonization projects to explore the development potential of regions historically viewed as neglected and empty. The dissemination of development and planning ideas led to the creation of regional development agencies such as the Commission for the Economic Development of the Amazon (1946), the São Francisco Valley Commission (1948), and the Superintendency for the Development of the Northeast (1959).¹³ They were not the first such endeavors—early regional development initiatives and projects were already underway during first Vargas administration (1930–1945). Notable examples include the creation of the Doce River Valley Company in the 1940s and projects focused on harnessing the São Francisco River, which led to the creation of the specific Commission in 1948. This intervention model, supported by the legal framework of the 1946 Constitution, attempted to elevate the so-called “backward” and impoverished regions to the development level of the country’s more prosperous areas, thereby creating a more balanced national development strategy. The target re-

¹² As an example, a 2021 report points to the need to maintain traditional lifestyles: “Protecting this vast natural and cultural heritage is equivalent to protecting these people’s livelihood.” As opposed to turning local inhabitants into national workers (like in the 1950s), public policies are now considering the possibility of maintaining their knowledge and ways of life—indigenous communities, quilombolas, river communities, and family farmers, among others. See Amazonia 2030, “Public Policies for the Protection of the Amazon Forest What Works and How to Improve” (report), Climate Policy Initiative & PUC (Rio, 2021). On the other hand, this would be a third potential narrative; in this work; we will focus on the first two: that rural populations were backward and irrecoverable or that, although they were ‘backward’, their deficiencies could still be remedied.

¹³ Maria Celina D’raújo, “Amazônia e desenvolvimento à luz das políticas governamentais: a experiência dos anos 50,” *Revista Brasileira de Ciências Sociais*, 7, no. 19 (1992).

gions for these efforts included the Northeast, due to its recurring droughts; the Amazon, with its long history of challenges; and the São Francisco Valley, because of its potential for economic development.¹⁴

According to Ioris, any comprehensive analysis of Brazil's historical development efforts between the first and second halves of the twentieth century must necessarily consider other global experiences, along with their receptions and adaptations.¹⁵ Kiran Patel argues that the origins of development projects can be traced back to global responses to the Great Depression of 1929–32, which should be seen not just as an economic event but as a symptom of a broader crisis in Western modernity, leading to a critical repositioning of the U.S. on the global stage.¹⁶ Regional planning and development initiatives worldwide, both before and after World War II, emerged from the appropriation and expansion of ideas linked to the New Deal—the broad economic restructuring program following the American crisis. The New Deal influenced a range of development projects in countries at various stages of economic development. In the next section, we present the first case study, an analysis of intellectual history. Here we explore the signs and aspirations for social transformation that arose from various interpretations of historical conditions, aiming to prescribe a future that ultimately did not fully materialize.

Interpretations of the colonial past: “The Brazilian rural problem”

While Brazilian agrarian studies often emphasize the dominance of colonial latifundia as the primary barrier to rural development, we revisit an alternative tradition of authors who approached the “rural world” from a different perspective, addressing technical, technological, cultural, social, and land-related issues. This tradition included intellectuals such as Sérgio Buarque de Holanda, Carlos Borges Schmidt, the German anthropologist Emílio Willems, Antônio Cândido, and Flo-

¹⁴ The São Francisco Valley spans the region along the São Francisco River, encompassing the states of Minas Gerais, Pernambuco, Bahia, Sergipe, and Alagoas. From 1953 onward, the Brazilian Amazon, for the purposes of economic planning and implementing the plan established that year, comprised the states of Pará and Amazonas, the federal territories of Acre, Amapá, Guaporé, and Rio Branco, as well as parts of the state of Mato Grosso north of the sixteenth parallel, Goiás north of the thirteenth parallel, and Maranhão west of the forty-fourth meridian.

¹⁵ Rafael R. Ioris, *Qual desenvolvimento? Os debates, sentidos e lições da era desenvolvimentista* (São Paulo: Editora aço, 2017).

¹⁶ Kiran Klaus Patel, *The New Deal: a global history* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).

restan Fernandes.¹⁷ Their analyses resonated with the perspectives of nineteenth and early twentieth-century physicians and public health agents working in Brazil's hinterlands. From José Francisco de Sigaud to sanitarians such as Belisário Pena and Arthur Neiva, hygienist medical thought explored a broad range of topics, including family, gender, sexuality, climate, nature, and the cultural, social, and economic contrasts within Brazil. They were also concerned with nation-building, the diverse racial composition of the population, and the country's modernization, all in an attempt to diagnose the "viability of civilization."¹⁸ These studies countered pessimistic views about Brazilian society, suggesting that populations in Brazil's hinterlands could play a contributive role in the nation's transition toward modernization. Consequently, this intellectual tradition embraced and supported public policies that sought to unify a nation fraught with profound contrasts.¹⁹

Thus, the aforementioned authors revisited this argument in the 1940s and 1950s and applied their theses to a Brazil that had changed dramatically since the nineteenth century or the Old Republic (1889–1930). By then, the country was advancing its industry and engaging with international modernization policies during and after World War II. Set against an intellectual backdrop that echoed Monteiro Lobato's depiction of the *Jeca Tatú*²⁰—a character symbolizing an outdated and impoverished rural resident who initially resisted pre-WWII scientific advancements—these authors were more optimistic about the abandoned rural population than many of their contemporaries: "In short, the proposal is to include, rather than exclude, the rustic populations, integrating them into

17 The texts gathered here were written between 1944 and 1954, a period that spans from the end of the Second World War to the imminent rollout of a national rural extension system, which extended the North American model of agricultural modernization across Brazil. Although the first edition of *Raízes do Brasil* dates from 1936, we reference the "note to Chapter 2: Persistence of Predatory Farming," included in the book's second edition from 1947. We also include a text by Florestan Fernandes, initially published in the press in 1946 and later featured in the first edition of *Mudanças Sociais no Brasil* in 1960. Willems' and Schmidt's texts were first published in 1944 and 1946, respectively, while Cândido's research, developed between 1948 and 1954, appeared in book form only a decade later. This text serves as a dialogue between the tradition of Sérgio Buarque de Holanda, Florestan Fernandes, and Emílio Willems, and later analyzes that focus on the agrarian issue and gained prominence in subsequent years.

18 Lima, "Public Health and Social Ideas," 1168.

19 Lima, "Public Health and Social Ideas," 1172.

20 Influential writer and editor, Monteiro Lobato embodied the poor and abandoned rural populations in a deleterious tone through his character *Jeca Tatú*. Over the following decades, the image of *Jeca Tatú* was disseminated by state and federal governments as the model of traditional agriculture and rural dwellers to be overcome by agricultural development policies. See José Bento Monteiro Lobato, *Ideias de Jeca Tatú*. (São Paulo: Brasiliense, 1964).

the inevitable process of urbanization,” rather than simply offering a harsh critique of their way of life.²¹

The debate about the rural environment in the 1940s and 1950s drew from a wide range of literature, including reports by physicians and health agents, essays, and academic studies, which featured various social types, such as *Caipiras*, *Caboclos*, and *Sertanejos* in Brazilian Portuguese, peasants, rednecks, and rustics, depending on the author. Agricultural practices were described as itinerant, extensive, or predatory; the territories were referred to as either the countryside or the rural environment; and the techniques were often labelled as routine and primitive. In short, the rural landscape had different interpretations yet was consistently steeped in tradition. For instance, the German ethnologist Emílio Willems used the term *Caipiras* in his analyses initially to describe the descendants of “the interethnic contact between Portuguese settlers and Indigenous peoples.” According to Willems, *Caboclo* later became a cultural designation, signifying a way of life known as “the *Caipira* lifestyle.”²² In relating Willems’ text to University of São Paulo literary critic Antônio Cândido’s influential book *Parceiros do Rio Bonito*,²³ we find that both authors associate *Caboclo* and *Caipira* cultures to a “nomadic or semi-nomadic existence, closely associated with the process of conquering the hinterlands,” since these populations were fundamental to the possession of the *Sertões* (wilderness) by the Portuguese in their dispute for territory against the Spanish. Unlike the Portuguese conquistadors who were in search of mining treasure and didn’t settle far from the Brazilian coast, their descendants adopted a semi-nomadic life in the forests of the mainland, based on small-scale farming and relocating when environmental resources became scarce.²⁴

The intellectuals of the 1940s described the rural environment and its inhabitants with an optimistic view about the transformation process from backward *Caboclos*, *Caipiras*, and *Sertanejos* to modern farmers. If the cultural change of these rural populations could be successful according to these intellectuals, in contrast, in regard to the techniques used in the rural environment, particularly in

²¹ Luiz Carlos Jackson, “A tradição esquecida. Estudo sobre a sociologia de Antônio Cândido,” *Revista Brasileira de Ciências Sociais*, 16, no. 47 (2001): 127–184.

²² Emílio Willems, *O Problema Rural Brasileiro do Ponto de Vista Antropológico* (São Paulo: Secretaria da Agricultura, Indústria e Comércio do Estado de São Paulo, 1944).

²³ Antônio Cândido published *Parceiros do Rio Bonito* in 1964. This book examines the processes of obtaining the means of life for the São Paulo caipira. Through travellers’ accounts and testimonies from the elderly, the author has accessed the “ancient times” to recreate traditional caipira society.

²⁴ Nísia Trindade Lima, *Um Sertão chamado Brasil. Intelectuais e representação geográfica da 209 identidade nacional*. (Rio de Janeiro: Reva: IUPERJ/UCAM, 2007), 174–78.

agriculture, the intellectuals were concerned with whether Sertanejos, Caboclos, and Caipiras truly possessed a “natural aptitude” for agricultural work. What constraints did the environment and financial resources impose on agricultural efforts? Or, as historian of colonial Brazil Sérgio Buarque de Holanda provocatively suggested, does the term “agriculture” even accurately describe what was practiced in Brazil at the time? Holanda argued that since Brazil’s production was largely semi-capitalist and oriented toward external markets, little or nothing could be said about agriculture in the conventional sense: “European techniques merely served to make the rudimentary methods used by the indigenous peoples in their plantings even more devastating.”²⁵ In *Raízes do Brasil*, Holanda describes Portuguese agricultural practices in Brazil as driven by the principle of devastation rather than cultivation and soil restoration. He argues that “devastate” is a more accurate term, especially in the early stages, because the allure of adventure and wealth was far more appealing to Iberian Europeans than the daily labor of ploughing, turning, and establishing roots in the land. Holanda frames this devastation—characterized by monoculture, slave labour, and large estates—not as a relic of the past but as a contemporary issue, closely associated with large-scale “mining agriculture” (a metaphor to explain how agriculture in Brazil resembled a mining process, because it only devastates the land and doesn’t replenish its nutrients). “Indeed, the exploitative nature of largescale farming, as it was and still is practiced in Brazil, applies to mining almost as much as to agriculture,” writes Holanda, because “without slave labour and ample land – land that could be wasted and ruined rather than carefully preserved – such farming would not have succeeded”.²⁶

Aligning with Holanda’s awareness that this “mining agriculture” in Brazil had devastated the extensive plantations of the past, University of São Paulo and influential Marxist sociologist Florestan Fernandes argued that twentieth-century agricultural practices in the arid outback would lead to the depletion of natural resources. In discussing the Rockefeller Foundation reports about the Tocantins River Valley in the 1940s, Fernandes censured the Rockefeller report, considering it as simplified ethnocentric claims of an alleged “extermination” caused by *Sertanejos* through “simple gathering” and “extractive agriculture,” which “exclusively benefits concessionaires, merchants, and exporters.” While Fernandes asserted that this process would result in the “exhaustion of the soil” as a direct consequence of the methods employed by these mostly semi-no-

25 Holanda, *Raízes do Brasil*, 49.

26 Holanda, *Raízes do Brasil*, 50.

madic “pariahs of our civilization,” he emphasized its deeper reasons.²⁷ Due to the prevailing extractive economic model with its negative social implications, the *Sertanejos* lacked the means to impose a more sustainable alternative. The terminology, “pariahs of our civilization,” applied to Sertanejos, Caipiras and Caboclos to some extent mirrors the representations that Emílio Willems also criticized with regard to the “isolated” *Caboclos* in Brazil’s hinterlands: “These people are often judged harshly; they are labelled with epithets such as ‘backward’, ‘indolent’, and sometimes even less flattering terms” and “they are viewed as living in a manner deemed unworthy and contemptible.” Willems, with a touch of irony, adds: “It is believed that they should work and produce more and better; that they should fertilize their fields, use soap, attend school, have access to midwives, pharmacies, and doctors.”²⁸ In other words, these populations were expected to adopt the values and practices of what was considered the more advanced coastal civilization in Brazil—but Willems, unlike his predecessors such as Penna, believed that many cultural elements of the caboclos could be preserved throughout the modernization process, such as their knowledge of folk medicine or agriculture. From this perspective, Holanda’s line of thought suggests that the desire to break away from traditional practices was equally prevalent in *Raízes do Brasil*: “When we complain about how agriculture in Brazil was confined to routine practices for so long and lacked the technical progress that might have raised production levels, we must recall such factors” as the allure of adventure and wars of conquest, as well as the challenges posed by the tropical climate.²⁹ In other words, the backwardness of agriculture in Brazil was a consequence of the Portuguese inclination for “adventure and war,” not for the routine and stable work that agriculture requires, and even more so in a tropical climate, where large-scale agriculture was underdeveloped and required research. Consequently, if “in some cases, the Portuguese colonists adopted certain agricultural techniques that, compared to those of Europe, were actually retrogressions and were even considered ancient forms of cultivation,” the author argued that “nature’s obstacles in the Americas, very distinct from those in Europe, contributed just as much to the settlers’ slow progress as did their inertia and passivity.”³⁰

Equally important is the notion that the Portuguese colonists were uninterested in working the land, as noted by Sérgio Buarque de Holanda: “Evidently, the Portuguese came to seek riches, riches that required daring more than work”: dar-

²⁷ Florestan Fernandes, *Mudanças Sociais no Brasil* (Global Editora, 2015).

²⁸ Willems, *O Problema Rural*, 7–8.

²⁹ Holanda, *Raízes do Brasil*, 50.

³⁰ Holanda, *Raízes do Brasil*, 51.

ing to master wild landscapes, rivers, tropical diseases, and indigenous populations in order to find an Eldorado, rather than to settle and promote agricultural civilization.³¹ While Holanda emphasized this indifference among the Portuguese to explore and work the soils, Antônio Cândido observed a similar attitude among the *Caipiras* in his book *Parceiros do Rio Bonito*. The difference between the Portuguese described by Holanda and the *Caipira* studied by Cândido lies in their different living conditions: while the Portuguese could afford to seek wealth through adventure and the search for precious metals rather than farming, the *Caipira* was deeply connected to the land and its abundant nature but was frequently displaced due to the expansion of agricultural frontiers.

Thus, these authors attributed the limited agricultural production, traditional practices, and other issues in Brazilian rural areas not to racial factors but to historical and territorial conditions. In Brazil, “history” encompassed not only adapting to environmental challenges but also grappling with scarce resources, limited labour, and the Portuguese’s adventurous inclinations, all of which impacted advancements in agricultural techniques. According to these authors, such characteristics were not as rigid as race; furthermore, they did not view resolving the agrarian issue as the sole solution to Brazil’s rural problems. Following this line of reasoning, Brazilian peasants, *Caipiras*, or *Caboclos*, when granted a plot of land, would not necessarily initiate a process of social change toward the sanitary, scientific, cultural, economic, or political advancements of their time. From this perspective, public policies should facilitate the transition from tradition to modernity by introducing techniques and technologies that were, at that time, accessible only to large landowners. This became necessary due to the historical structuring of the Brazilian rural environment—isolated from the advancements of civilization—which often meant that even European colonists did not always represent technical progress and were more closely aligned with tradition.

Next, we will examine how the Brazilian state viewed the Amazon as a territory and how its complexities prompted the creation of various agencies aimed at integrating the region into the so-called developed world.

³¹ Holanda, *Raízes do Brasil*, 51.

Turning Amazonian communities into experts

Our main concern was to avoid a sentimental approach to the Amazon and instead objectively show that the Brazilian Amazon has resources that could be efficiently and immediately utilized to transform it into a thriving region, standing on its own and contributing to the progress of Brazil and its neighbouring and friendly countries on the continent³²

With these words, Rômulo Barreto de Almeida, head of the Economic Advisory Office of the Presidency, opened a technical-administrative conference aimed at identifying problems and solutions for the Amazon region, which had been a constant focus of various projects throughout the Getúlio Vargas administrations (1930–1945 and 1951–1954). Almeida's appointment as the conference coordinator was strategic: he had previously worked on projects in the Amazonian state of Acre and had been part of the Brazilian-American Mixed Commission for Economic Studies (Abbink Mission), which from 1948 to 1949 assessed the factors that, according to state bureaucracy, either promoted or impeded economic development. In 1951, Almeida also became a member of the advisory board of the São Francisco Hydroelectric Company (CHESF), Brazil's first regional planning initiative. The Estado Novo dictatorship believed that revitalizing the Amazon region depended on colonization and sanitation. The 1940s marked a turning point for the Amazon in federal government priorities, ceasing to be merely a “geographic spectre.”³³ Under the tightly controlled information environment of the Department of Press and Propaganda (DIP), the Amazon was portrayed as a region that, under the Estado Novo regime, would reclaim its “historical destiny” and, through occupation (the March to the West), would finally be rationally developed, leaving behind “the myths” of the past.³⁴

A recurring theme in the discourses of both the Estado Novo dictatorship as well as subsequent democratic governments is the “disenchantment” of the Amazon. One finds consistent references to overcoming the myths surrounding the

³² Brasil, *Valorização Econômica da Amazônia – Subsídios para seu planejamento – Relatórios e principais contribuições da conferência técnica sobre Valorização Econômica da Amazônia, reunião no Rio de Janeiro entre setembro e novembro de 1951, por determinação do Presidente Getúlio Vargas* (Rio de Janeiro, Imprensa Nacional, 1954), 6.

³³ José Augusto Pádua, Biosfera, história e conjuntura na análise da questão amazônica, *História, Ciências, Saúde-manguinhos*, 6, no. 1 (2000) 794, accessed December 9, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1590/S0104-59702000000500003>.

³⁴ Rômulo de Paula Andrade, “Conquistar a terra, dominar a água, sujeitar a floresta: Getúlio Vargas e a revista ‘Cultura Política’ redescobrem a Amazônia (1940–1941),” *Boletim do Museu Paraense Emílio Goeldi – Ciências Humanas* 5 no. 2 (2010): 454.

Amazon, emphasizing the connection between state intervention and rationality. Additionally, the Amazon became the focus of initiatives to explore and catalogue its local flora and fauna, exemplified by the failed attempt to establish the International Institute of the Amazon Rainforest in 1947 and the successful creation of the National Amazon Research Institute in 1952.³⁵ The 1946 constituent assembly marked an initial step in this direction when, through the efforts of the Amazonian parliamentary representatives, it approved constitutional provision 199, which allocated 3% of the federal budget to the Economic Development of the Amazon and led to the formation of a commission of local intellectuals and politicians to oversee the plan.

Given the turbulent political climate following the *Estado Novo*, it was not until 1953, during Vargas's second term, that the Superintendency for the Economic Development of the Amazon (SPVEA) was created and tasked with advancing the “rational development” of the region.³⁶ In the 1950s, this plan drew on the resources and methods available at the time, emphasizing modern planning techniques and the training of specialized technicians to mitigate potential political interference in the regional agency, one of the biggest fears in a region with many cases of corruption and low professional qualifications. Building on the national expertise in regional development projects, the SPVEA sought to forge international connections with the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), employing courses and manuals designed to promote a technocracy capable of driving the region's development.

According to Mendonça (1986), Brazil's industrialization process in the 1950s was accompanied by disproportionate growth in the urban tertiary sector, which led to the emergence of a more skilled and better-paid segment: the technical workforce.³⁷ To train professionals, the SPVEA organized a regional planning course focused on the Amazon from March 1955 to February 1956 at the newly established Brazilian School of Public and Business Administration (EBAPE).

³⁵ In 1947, scientist Paulo de Estevão Berredo Carneiro, Brazil's representative at UNESCO, tried to get the International Institute of the Amazonian Hinterland approved, with the aim of researching the forest's fauna and flora. In the Brazilian Congress, the issue was criticized by nationalist sectors, who denounced the possible “internationalization of the Brazilian Amazon.” The solution found was the creation of a national research institution funded by the Brazilian government: the National Institute for Amazonian Research, INPA, in 1952. See Marcos Chor Maio and Magali Romero de Sá, “Ciência na periferia: a Unesco, a proposta de criação do Instituto Internacional da Hileia Amazônica e as origens do Inpa,” *Hist. cienc. saude-Manguinhos* 6, no. 1 (2000): 975, accessed December 9, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1590/S0104-59702000000500011>.

³⁶ Andrade. “Conquistar a terra,” 453.

³⁷ Sônia Regina de Mendonça, *Estado e economia no Brasil: opções de desenvolvimento* (Rio de Janeiro: Graal, 1986).

The course was held in Belém do Pará, targeting the superintendency's work program, and was, according to Benedicto Silva, one of the founders of the EBAPE, the first of its kind in Brazil and globally.³⁸ It was offered to public officials from the SPVEA, as well as from federal, state, and municipal agencies, including military personnel. The goal was to communicate key concepts and information about planning, administration, and the development of the Amazon's natural, economic, and human resources. The program included lessons and readings on topics such as the psychology of planning, post-war planning in France and French Africa, the political dimensions of planning, implementation strategies, and financial planning.³⁹ Silva was responsible for the program. In his course introduction, Silva noted that the need for these classes arose from the disappointing results of recent Brazilian economic development efforts, which revealed a lack of planning and coordination. The development program's goals were clear: to transform the "archaic" habits (health, food) and practices (agriculture) of the targeted populations. Change was the key concept, and achieving this relied on the work of technicians who would receive advanced training on planning. In addition to classes and conferences, the partnership between the institutions promoted the creation of monographs to assist the SPVEA, published in the series *Casos de Planejamento Regional* by the EBAPE. This series aimed to provide regional development examples for the planners trained by the institution. Alongside books detailing aspects of the SPVEA, publications included studies on various topics, such as the São Francisco Valley Commission, the Belgian Congo Decennial Plan, the Brokopondo Hydroelectric Plan (Suriname), and the TVA. The monograph on the Amazon regional agency was authored by Iberê de Souza Cardoso, an administrator affiliated with the EBAPE. Cardoso noted that the legislative project 1806/53, which outlined the general action framework and provided the creation of the SPVEA, was inspired by the TVA experience, including its technician training, decentralized structure, and natural resource exploitation.

The SPVEA wanted to recruit local workers who knew the local reality and could be agents of change. Seeking simpler, more forceful language, Luiz Augusto de Castro Soares, the agency's copywriter, wrote the pamphlet "What do you know about SPVEA?" to inform and sensitize the institution's employees about their role and to make them see themselves as "technicians," that is, as agents who had technical solutions for solving socio-cultural challenges, as Chastain and Lorak point

³⁸ Benedicto Silva, *A Vez do Planejamento – Introdução à versão brasileira* (Rio de Janeiro: Fundação Getúlio Vargas, 1960).

³⁹ John R. P. Friedmann, *Introdução ao Planejamento Regional (com referência especial à Região Amazônica)* (Rio de Janeiro: Fundação Getúlio Vargas, 1960).

out.⁴⁰ Concepts of productivity, collectivism, and commitment were used by the editor: employees of the institution were to remember that this was not an ordinary job. The job was not to be seen as just any job but as one that required teamwork, perseverance, idealism, love, and civic exaltation. Thus, teamwork would be essential “for the first-person singular (I) to disappear and give way to the first person plural (we) that would symbolize the institution.”⁴¹ This would be one of the functions of the Regional Agency’s work: to take care of the people who lived in the Amazon, to prevent them from migrating to the big cities, and to reverse the path: the civilization of the coast should go there, not the other way around. The pamphlet emphasized that these “forgotten men” were also Brazilian and that the SPVEA was their first opportunity to integrate into society.

Thomas Mougey in his analysis of the First Five-Year Plan of the SPVEA concluded that the SPVEA failed to generate substantial growth in production and consumption patterns that, as he put it, would be comparable to the “Great Acceleration.”⁴² Still, the SPVEA succeeded in embedding the Amazon within a technocratic framework. This included the introduction of new methods and techniques that transformed the region’s bio-social landscape, alongside symbolic representations and discourses linking the economic exploitation of the Amazon to broader national interests. However, this assessment is limited by the scarcity of documentation and lacks empirical data.⁴³ As Martins has observed, although field research has identified mineral resources such as cassiterite, bauxite, iron ore, chromite, and manganese, evaluations from that period describe a time marked by numerous plans with minimal practical impact, as noted in the institution’s 1960 report, still under the democratic regime. It is important to clarify that this does not imply, as the military regime later suggested by framing the agency in a narrative of corruption, that the SPVEA was an irrelevant actor. Following the military coup of 1964, many government agencies and departments were dissolved and then re-established, including the SPVEA, which was restructured as the Superintendence for the Development of the Amazon (SUDAM) in 1966. Studying

⁴⁰ Andra B. Chastain and Timothy W. Lorak, *Itineraries of Expertise: Science, Technology, and the Environment in Latin America’s long Cold War* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2020).

⁴¹ Luiz Augusto de Carlos Soares, *Que sabe você da SPVEA?* (Belém: SPVEA – Setor de Coordenação e Divulgação, 1955), 1.

⁴² Thomas Mougey, “Tracing the Origins of Brazil’s Great Acceleration: The SPVEA’s Primeiro Plano Quinquenal and the Technoscientific Recovery of Amazonia, 1945–1959,” *Varia hist.* 34, no. 65: 376, <https://doi.org/10.1590/0104-87752018000200005>.

⁴³ The *Great Acceleration* refers to events characterized by a significant intensification of human activities to exploit natural resources, incorporating them into the global economic system. See Antoine Acker and Georg Fischer, “Historicizing Brazil’s great acceleration,” *Varia Historia* 34, no. 65 (2018): 4, <https://doi.org/10.1590/0104-87752018000200002>.

the SPVEA helps us understand the ways that local regional development agencies adapted the Global North technocratic concepts to local and specific contexts. A crucial detail to include in this conclusion is that one of the SPVEA's operational regulations mandated that only 8% of the budget could be allocated to employee salaries.⁴⁴ As a result, the staff primarily consisted of individuals who had been transferred and paid by other public administration agencies—the majority of SPVEA employees were non-qualified people, who did not participate in the planning courses provided by the agency. The lack of a selection criteria based on qualifications meant that many appointments were indicated by local politicians, resulting in a departure from strictly technical criteria in numerous decisions. Ultimately, the technocratic ambitions were overshadowed by the political issues of the time, underscoring the deep interconnection between ideological and technical concerns, despite recent narratives that attempt to portray them as separate to the public.

Conclusion: The paths and pitfalls of development in Brazil

Particularly following the heightened scientific debate of the 1970s about the environmental crisis, historians and modernization scholars have found their task somewhat controversial. Although sometimes viewed through an anachronistic lens, recent analyses of industrialization, urbanization, technologized, and industrialized agriculture based on artificial fertilizers and pesticides have critically examined the problematic legacies of these expansive programs, especially regarding their socio-environmental impacts. In hindsight, the aspirations of national elites for development are clearly crucial for historical analysis, though they are often overlooked in broader theories such as the Anthropocene, Plantationocene, or Capitalocene.

At the time, there are potentially three narratives: first, that rural populations were backward and irrecoverable; second, that although they were “backward,” their deficiencies could still be remedied; and, third, that they had value in themselves, and that this should be respected. In this text, we explored the first two narratives in a pair of case studies that each, in their own way, highlight unique aspects of Global South experiences within the global development narrative. The first case focuses on rural populations spread across a vast national territory, where a significant historical shift of ideas of intellectual elites aimed at integrat-

⁴⁴ Daniel Chaves Brito, *A modernização da superfície* (Belém: Ed. UFPA/NAEA, 2001).

ing them into a nation-building project aligned with Western development ideals. From this perspective, these populations represented a condition of “backwardness” due to the national state’s failure to implement public policies aiming for social and economic inclusion. After World War I, race ceased to be the main determinant factor for achieving social and economic development. By the 1940s, the central issue was how to effectively integrate these populations. The authors discussed in the first part of this text contended that, even with agrarian reform, a grand technical assistance project would be necessary to meet the expectations of national authorities for these overlooked populations such as Caipiras, Caboclos, or Sertanejos. So, by the end of the war and the onset of urbanization and industrialization processes in the 1950s and 1960s, Brazilian development programs largely overlooked the potential contributions of these poor rural populations to economic development and nation-building, contrary to the optimistic views held by the intellectuals we analyzed. Once deemed pivotal for the country’s modernization, the technification of agriculture, livestock, and more efficient extractive practices sought to homogenize social groups, suggesting that *Caboclos* and *Sertanejos* ought to be “developed” through such projects —technification as a means of social change.

Between the 1950s and 1990s, local, state, and federal governments embraced the green revolution as a way of improving the efficiency of Brazilian agriculture. As a result, a small number of farmers remained in the countryside and became actors in the development process through agricultural credit, technical assistance, seeds, and pesticides. It was only with the emergence of the ecological crisis (global) and the farmland crisis (national, with the growing number of landless farmers) that their way of life began to be reconsidered as positive examples, once again with an optimistic outlook. Nevertheless, the development paradigm became entrenched as a core element of Brazilian public policy. In the years following the period discussed in this text, regions such as the Amazon continued to be seen as areas requiring state intervention to align with the standards of Brazil’s urban-industrial regions. The Brazilian military dictatorship, for instance, decimated Indigenous groups to make way for the construction of highways. Even under progressive democratic administrations, such as Dilma Rousseff (2011–2016), the 2010 construction of the Belo Monte hydroelectric dam inflicted severe damage on the local Indigenous population. The recent murders of indigenous activist Bruno Pereira and journalist Dom Phillips underscore the enduring consequences of the state’s destructive and authoritarian expansion. Development was the paradigm that shaped the interventions of authoritarian, democratic, right-wing, and left-wing governments in the Brazilian rural areas during the twentieth and the twenty-first century: the construction of roads, hydroelectric dams, colonization, and mining policies had catastrophic consequences for nature

and for the local populations, who were excluded from these decision-making processes.

Although with some regional differences, we can argue that both of these analyses—an intellectual history and a “concrete” case study—suggest important results for understanding the principles of development in Brazil. The intellectual history points to how, according to the interpretation of progressive intellectuals, there was a rural population scattered throughout the territory that, even though abandoned by the national state in terms of education and health structures, for example, was able to integrate development processes. In short, this approach demonstrates that the national state should welcome these populations and provide them with the means to improve their precarious survival structures, through health and education programmes. In our “concrete” case on the SPVEA, we observed that part of these principles were adopted by the development agencies, i. e. the allocation of rural populations or residents of the Amazon rainforest in their workforce. In contrast, this inclusiveness was not complete, due to its ethnocentrism: the development programme disqualified regional knowledge, and it was vital to educate new technical personnel in accordance with the development ideal. With the subsequent “development crisis” in Brazil in the 1980s, the approach of valuing local knowledge in smaller-scale development programmes intensified—because, as we have seen, large projects such as dams continue to be carried out without the interests of local populations at all being considered. Finally, this example demonstrates how development was imagined by technical elites based on notions of incorporating communities and, at the same time, excluding their knowledge—which was later recognized as a potential alternative to the crisis of capitalism. In our view, this case study also opens up an agenda for comparative studies focusing on the Global South.

Michelle Mart

The perils of abundance: The unintended consequences of plentiful food in the modern United States

This chapter starts with the counterintuitive assertion that an abundance of inexpensive, good quality food in the modern United States was not an unalloyed good. Counterintuitive, indeed. What could be a downside of abundant food? The benefits of abundance are obvious. They include better health, stemming from sufficiency as well as variety and quality. Abundance also lowered food costs, increased access, and led to greater focus on food as an important part of culture. During the decades discussed here, the ability to produce sufficient food for the country as a whole was not in doubt, even if food distribution and access was unbalanced (and indeed lacking for some). Beyond sufficiency, the United States enjoyed plentiful—abundant—food through an efficient system of industrial agriculture, processing, distribution, and trade. Abundance, then, demonstrated the success of the modern food system, benefiting millions of people throughout the country.

While the benefits of abundance might be obvious, its downsides are less so. Untangling the various consequences of abundance is a difficult task. The following pages offer a preliminary attempt by providing a snapshot of how abundance had positive and negative impacts on American life since the middle of the twentieth century. Agricultural abundance relied on monocultures, and an increase of pesticides and other chemicals. The increased emphasis on yield and efficiency led to decreased soil fertility, animal abuse, and a loss of connection to the natural world as well as to the workers responsible for producing food. Lower prices enriched large corporations while impoverishing many farmers. Moreover, the widespread availability of cheap food masked the tiered food system that reflected greater economic inequality by the end of the twentieth century. Finally, abundant industrial food encouraged the homogenization of food cultures as well as over-eating of processed food, seriously harming health in the United States.

Thus, the benefits and harms of food abundance in the United States were reflected in culture, health, equality, and the environment. What follows offers examples of how abundance has—simultaneously—impacted each of these areas, positively and negatively, posing the essential question: can we keep the many benefits of food abundance, yet escape its downsides?

A word about assumptions used here. The American industrial food system originated in domestic production and processing in the nineteenth century

and in global trade and colonialism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; moreover, the system remains intertwined with global trade through the early twenty-first century. Nevertheless, the following discussion will focus on the post-World War II changes to the industrial food system and its impacts within the United States.¹ Another starting point concerns why people eat some foods and not others. The question of whether people have free choice about what they eat in the modern industrial system or whether they are constrained by the limitations imposed by corporations, government systems, and economic power is a controversial and complicated question. The following pages will make references to this dilemma, but addressing it in detail is beyond the scope of these pages.

Finally, before we delve into the impact of food abundance—for good and for ill—it makes sense to clarify this broad term. “Abundance” as used in this discussion refers to a plentiful supply of food that was widely accessible and affordable for the majority of Americans.² Abundance also meant that most Americans had ready access to a variety of foods, throughout all seasons. Thus, few Americans had to worry about malnutrition, let alone starvation, and the majority could afford sufficient food. The clearest examples of food abundance were measured in efficiency and yield per acre. For example, in the mid-1930s, the average farm-worker produced enough food to feed ten Americans; by 1955, that figure was 19. While agricultural productivity had risen roughly 1% per annum from the 1830s to the 1930s, from the 1940s to 2000, productivity went up at least 2% per annum. Such efficiency was also reflected in the yields per acre, for example: corn production jumped from 22.8 bushels per acre in the early 1930s to 51.7 in the late 1950s; in the same period, wheat yields increased from 13.1 bushels to 27.3 bushels per acre.³ The dramatic increases in agricultural yields translated into a dramatic increase in available food per person over many decades. By 2007, per capita calories available to Americans totaled 3750—far beyond what was needed for good health.⁴

¹ For discussion of how the industrial food system grew before WWII, as well as how the war era was “an intensification” of it, see *Acquired Tastes; Stories About the Origins of Modern Food*, ed. Benajmin Cohen, Michael Kideckel and Anna Zeide (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 2021), 2, 5.

² Note that in the following pages, for the sake of brevity and to reflect common U.S. usage, “Americans” is used to refer to people in the United States.

³ Bryan L. McDonald, *Food Power: The Rise and Fall of the Postwar American Food System* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 50.

⁴ Marion Nestle, *Food Politics: How the Food Industry Influences Nutrition and Health* rev. and expanded ed. (Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 2002), 8. One estimate from the Mayo Clinic calculated that average, moderately active 40-year-old men and women needed, respectively, 2400 and 1850 calories per day, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2016/12/13/whats-on-your-table-how-americas-diet-has-changed-over-the-decades/>.

The impact of abundant food went beyond material well-being. It led to what some scholars have summarized as “new ideas about nutrition, health, and sustenance.”⁵ One of these new ideas was the expectation of abundance—abundance that was taken for granted. This was a powerful assumption, both for native-born Americans and immigrants newly-arrived. Historian Hasia Diner summarized its impact: “Americans came to believe in their right to an acceptable standard of living wherein hunger played no role. They believed that as Americans they *all* deserved to live free from want.”⁶ Paradoxically, there were nevertheless intermittent fears about food supply in the United States; food scholar Warren Belasco observed: “Even as supermarket shelves groaned with convenience products designed to add value to the land’s mounting surpluses, Malthusian worries persisted.”⁷ Occasional fears, though, faded when confronted with stores of plentiful food.

The following discussion, then, begins with the assertion that food abundance in the United States was undeniable from the middle of the twentieth century onward and that most Americans expected such abundance—and celebrated it. Nevertheless, these pages offer examples of how abundance simultaneously benefited and harmed people.

Cultural consequences of abundance

Let’s begin by considering some of the benefits of unprecedented food abundance for food culture. In postwar America, plentiful food became a source of cooking creativity as well as a symbol of modernity and American identity. The rise of canned and other processed foods exemplified these benefits, even if such readymade ingredients were not new. Campbell’s, for example, had been selling 21 different canned soups starting in 1904.⁸ The increase of manufactured food products had continued since then, and got a big boost from the production of non-perishable

⁵ Cohen et al, *Acquired Tastes*, 7.

⁶ Diner noted the impact on immigrants was especially great: “Food was available at a price and in quantities which staggered the imagination of women and men who had been hungry.” Hasia Diner, *Hungering for America: Italian, Irish, and Jewish Foodways in the Age of Migration* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 16, 229.

⁷ Warren Belasco, *Meals to Come: A History of the Future of Food* (Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 2006), 48.

⁸ Mary Drake McFeely, *Can She Bake a Cherry Pie? American Women and the Kitchen in the Twentieth Century* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000), 57.

foods for the military and others in World War II.⁹ Following the war, the industrial food infrastructure remained and then grew dramatically. It is not surprising that consumerism became the organizing principle of the food system, especially with the increase in suburbanization and per capita income in the 20 years after World War II. This trend had implications for American political culture, as well-stocked supermarket shelves came to symbolize the West's superiority in the Cold War, embodying technological superiority and capitalist freedoms.¹⁰

Modern supermarkets, though, did not just impact political culture, they also changed what happened in postwar kitchens. For example, canned soups were not just used to substitute for homemade versions to be eaten as is, they became shortcuts in recipes to produce “gourmet” or “exotic” meals. Poppy Cannon’s best-selling *The Can Opener Cook Book* (first appearing in 1951) illustrates such creativity. Cannon often turned to a can of condensed Campbell’s soup as the basis of a sauce which she felt elevated every meal. Yet, the perfect sauce remained difficult to achieve, thus, “in a small inexpensive can of condensed soup it is possible to find almost the same concentration of flavor, the same blending of ingredients – all done for you!”¹¹ Cannon was not alone in her advice. Many

⁹ Laura Shapiro, “Do Women Like to Cook?,” in *American Food Writings: An Anthology with Classic Recipes*, ed. Molly O’Neill (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 2007), 597–98.

¹⁰ Many scholars have discussed the powerful propaganda created by abundant industrial food; see, for example, Shane Hamilton, *Supermarket USA: Food and Power in the Cold War Farms Race* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 2018). For discussion of the rise of consumerism more broadly, see Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumer’s Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003), and for how this was manifest in the food sector, Michael Ruhlman, *Grocery: The Buying and Selling of Food in America* (New York: Abrams Press, 2017). Ellen Ruppel Shell examined the corrosive effects of cheapness in consumer culture in *Cheap: The High Cost of Discount Culture* (New York: Penguin Press, 2009), and Bryant Simon detailed how factory-farmed meat hurt workers and communities in *The Hamlet Fire: A Tragic Story of Cheap Food, Cheap Government, and Cheap Lives* (New York: The New Press, 2017). A consideration of how shopping can both hurt or help communities is Sharon Zukin, *Point of Purchase: How Shopping Changed American Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

The ubiquity of evaluating food according to its visible price tag was well-illustrated by a publication such as *Consumer Reports*. For instance, three issues highlighting food (“How to Eat Clean and Live Healthy,” May 2015; “How to Shop Smarter for Food Today,” July 2017; “Your Smart Guide to Healthier Eating,” November 2017) discussed issues such as health and freshness and pesticides, but the most important source of comparison always came back to price.

Finally, related to the critique that food had been reduced to a mere consumer item, many critics of modern agriculture have argued that modern food is only cheap because many of its costs are externalized. See for example, Marty Strange, *Family Farming: A New Economic Vision* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), 85–107.

¹¹ Poppy Cannon, *The Can-Opener Cookbook* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1951, 1952), 137.

mainstream cookbooks in the twentieth century similarly included canned soups as ingredients in their recipes.

Canned ingredients were embraced for various reasons. Not only did they encourage the creation of more elaborate meals, they were also celebrated as a way to increase the variety of foods served. For example, authors of the *Women's Home Companion* in 1954 wrote: "Best of all – canned foods know no season: January, February, June, and July – who ever stops to think nowadays whether anything is in season! They're available all year long and offer a wealth of variety and excellence that were never dreamed of by our grandmothers and that help make us the best-fed nation in the whole wide world."¹² In addition to a diet unlimited by season, many writers also praised the quality of prepared ingredients that could be substituted for homemade with equivalent taste and texture. Such assumptions were found far and wide. For example, one character in Mary McCarthy's 1954 novel *The Group* expounded on the virtues of Campbell's soups, some of which "were better than anything the home cook could achieve." Another character added that canned corn niblets were "Almost like corn on the cob."¹³

Beyond the widespread availability of canned ingredients and processed foods, abundance had another impact on food culture. With sufficiency no longer an issue, abundant food inspired creativity and the idea that food was more than the utilitarian pursuit of sustenance. Instead, many postwar Americans sought new tastes and explored international foods. No one better exemplified this cultural trend than Julia Child, co-author of the 1961 bestseller *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*. Her book was a celebration of and tutorial in French foodways, designed for American housewives with abundant foods at their disposal. Child wrote that the book could well have been titled "French Cooking from the American Supermarket."¹⁴ In the recipes that followed, Child was true to her word, with only the rare recipe having an exotic ingredient such as truffles or foie gras. Nevertheless, Child made it clear to readers that whole or fresh ingredients were to be used (not overly processed or prepared foods), with a few exceptions (occasional use of canned broth or frozen vegetables).

Part of Child's advice to only use convenience ingredients if necessary was the assumption that fresh vegetables and other foods were readily available in an American store no matter what the season. For Child, "fresh" was a relative term. Unlike later chefs who sought just-picked vegetables, Child made it clear

12 Quoted in Sherrie Inness, *Dinner Roles: American Women and Culinary Culture* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2001), 160.

13 Mary McCarthy, *The Group* (San Diego CA: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1954, 1982), 81.

14 Simone Beck, Louisette Bertholle and Julia Child, *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1961), vii.

that technique and method created wonderful meals—not raw ingredients. Historian Laura Shapiro summarized Child's belief that the origin of ingredients was unimportant: "Julia never doubted for a moment that the quintessential taste of France was portable, that it could be realized by any cook, anywhere, with the right instructions."¹⁵ Several observers credited Child's popularity with the increased availability of specialty ingredients in even more stores.

Child might have encouraged a broadening of supermarket fare, but she was also reflecting a zeitgeist in postwar culture, in an age of food abundance and increasing per capita income. Food writer Betty Fussell wrote about the heady atmosphere in this era when educated, white American women were discovering a new world of exotic flavors; —she described how she and her contemporaries were inspired by trips to Europe and were eager to recreate their meals at home.¹⁶ Filmmaker Nora Ephron had similar memories of the excitement with which middle-class women discovered international foods—as well as the pressure they felt to serve more sophisticated cuisine: "food acquired a chic, a gloss of snobbery it had hitherto possessed only in certain upper-income groups. Hostesses were expected to know that iceberg lettuce was déclassé and tuna-fish casseroles *de trop*... The American hostess, content with serving frozen spinach for her family, learned to make a spinach soufflé for her guests."¹⁷

While American home cooks might have reveled in their international sophistication and explorations of new cuisine, the freedom represented by abundant, mass-produced food can also be viewed in a negative light. Some observers have argued that abundant industrial food harmed American food culture more than it benefited it. In the mid-twentieth century, American cuisine appeared to become more homogeneous rather than heterogeneous. Mainstream cookbooks were a prime example of this. Poppy Cannon's "international" flavors were not necessarily what a twenty-first century cook would expect, and certainly did not embrace the use of fresh ingredients. For example, a recipe for a doctored, canned minestrone was improved as follows: "Canned minestrone is a fine product, but if you want to achieve something really akin to the great soups of northern Italy, try this one, complete with basil-blessed *pesto*." Cannon's pesto was a mixture of olive oil, butter or margarine, salt, Parmesan, garlic, and a half tea-

15 Laura Shapiro, *Julia Child* (New York: Viking, 2007), 69.

16 Betty Fussell, *My Kitchen Wars* (New York: North Point/Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999), 127, 153.

17 Nora Ephron, "The Food Establishment: Life in the Land of the Rising Soufflé (Or Is It the Rising Meringue?)", in *American Food Writing*, ed. M. O' Neill, 411–12.

spoon of dried basil¹⁸—hardly what most Italians would recognize as pesto.¹⁹ Many popular recipes did not attempt an international flavor; instead they merely used combinations of packaged goods to become staples of postwar meals. For example, one commentator described tuna noodle casserole—in different variations—as “the emblematic dish of the postwar kitchen.”²⁰ Some recipes reached the absurd, such as pancakes made with 7-Up.²¹ It is difficult to argue that American food culture was elevated by the abundance of such industrial products.

Later participants in what came to be called the California Food Revolution and then the New Food Movement laid out the many deficiencies of the food culture created by abundant industrial food. Emerging from the Counterculture in the late 1970s, many Americans began to challenge the dominant assumptions that abundance and convenience were the most important measures of food. One such American was Alice Waters, who became famous as the founder of Chez Panisse restaurant in Berkeley, California in 1971 and as a food activist over many decades. The impact of her restaurant was great with one writer asserting in 1989 that Chez Panisse “changed the way America eats.”²² Waters’s leading role as one of the founders of the New Food Movement was based on her devotion to a set of principles which challenged the dominant assumptions of abundant industrial food.

Foremost for Waters was the quality of ingredients used. In her first book in 1982, she wrote, “My one unbreakable rule has always been to use only the freshest and finest ingredients available.”²³ In many of her recipes and other books, Waters emphasized the importance of how food tasted more than anything

18 Poppy Cannon, *The New, New Can-Opener Cookbook* (New York: Thomas Crowell and Company, 1968), 53.

19 Even one of Cannon’s later cookbooks in 1968 contained recipes that appeared almost to be self-parodies of 1950s fare, including Lucianian Eggs au Gratin (canned cooked macaroni in cheese sauce mixed with sliced hard cooked eggs and topped with grated cheese), Ham in Champagne Sauce (canned sliced ham topped with a sauce from water, cornstarch, consommé, lemon, and champagne), or Strawberry Flummery (canned strawberry pie filling baked on buttered, sliced white bread). Cannon, *New, New Can-Opener Cookbook*, 65–66, 114, 240.

20 McFeely, *Can She Bake a Cherry Pie?*, 98.

21 James Lileks, *The Gallery of Regrettable Food: Highlights from Classic American Recipe Books* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2001), 32–36, 42–48, 128. Lileks’s book and other samples of magazines and cookbooks from the era were also notable for the garish, poor-quality photographs. The photos themselves—especially in comparison to the quality of modern food photography—were almost a self-parody and probably contributed to the late century judgments about earlier American cuisine.

22 Ruth Reichl, “The ‘80s, A Special Report Tastemakers,” *LA Times*, December 24, 1989, 11.

23 Alice Waters, *The Chez Panisse Menu Cookbook* (New York: Random House, 1982), x.

else, and the importance of the ingredients used.²⁴ Waters's focus on the taste of quality ingredients encapsulated one of her fundamental values: simplicity in cooking. She often preached the value of simplicity and argued that it was a mistaken idea to assume that good cooking had to be complicated.²⁵ "Just remember, sometimes the best dishes are the simplest," she wrote.²⁶ Along with freshness and simplicity, Waters prized "beauty" in food. She was convinced that the yearning for beauty was inborn: "Beauty is in our biological makeup... Finding the beauty in food can change your life."²⁷ More than mere appearance, "beauty" for Waters was inextricably connected to the experience of pleasure: "Food is the easiest way for all of us to engage with beauty in our everyday lives. Any meal has the potential to crack us open to pleasure and connection and joy."²⁸

One example of Waters's celebration of beautiful, simple, and fresh food was her use of "baby lettuce" in one of her signature dishes of a mixed green, "mesculin" salad. It would have been difficult to find baby lettuce in stores before the new food movement, since it was not a very efficient way of growing vegetables. In an industrial system, the goal was to achieve the maximum yield per acre, with full-grown plants helping to do that. The choice to harvest baby lettuce because it was tastier seemed illogical in such a system, and indeed surprised the farmer whom she started working with as a supplier to her restaurant.²⁹

Another challenge from Waters and other food activists to the industrial food system based on yield, abundance, and a low-price tag was the Slow Food Movement that emerged in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The movement began with the work of Italian journalist Carlo Petrini, and soon became an international, grass-roots phenomenon. The ideology included many beliefs that Waters had long held. She criticized "fast food culture," which was pervasive and prized yield, speed, and uniformity. She argued that people in many parts of the world had absorbed its values, such as the idea that "food should

24 See, for example, Reichl, "The '80s," *LA Times*, December 24, 1989, 11.

25 For example, see, Waters, *Chez Panisse Menu Cookbook*, 161–65.

26 Alice Waters, *In the Green Kitchen: Techniques to Learn by Heart* (New York: Clarkson Potter Publishers, 2010), 3.

27 Alice Waters, *We Are What We Eat: A Slow Food Manifesto* (New York: Penguin Press, 2021), 97.

28 Waters, *We Are What We Eat*, 105.

29 Organic farmer Warren Weber recalled that one of the chefs at Chez Panisse, Sibella Kraus, visited his farm asking about "baby lettuce." He was happy to discover that what she sought was lettuce plants 5–6 weeks old—when he usually sold lettuce that was 10–16 weeks old; his contract to supply lettuce to Chez Panisse three times a week doubled his income from the usual sales. Samuel Fromartz, *Organic, Inc.: Natural Foods and How They Grew* (Orlando FL: Harcourt, Inc., 2006), 120–21.

look and taste the same, no matter the season.”³⁰ In contrast, she explained that “slow food culture” celebrated simplicity, seasonality, stewardship, and beauty.

Health consequences of abundance

Turning away from the cultural realm, we can find another area in which the industrial food system simultaneously helped and harmed the United States: health. Perhaps the greatest benefit of abundant food was improved health for Americans through much of the twentieth century. With a global system, these benefits spread to many other countries as well, and by many measures world hunger and malnutrition fell from the twentieth to twenty-first centuries. Beyond lessening hunger, plentiful food impacted other areas of American life, including the role of government in its citizens’ health and nutrition. With the assured abundance of food produced by the industrial system, government policymakers did not need to worry about sufficiency. They focused instead on teaching Americans to improve their health through better nutrition and on new programs to distribute nutritious food more widely. Next, I will highlight two areas in which the existence of plentiful food led the federal government to take a more active role in promoting health and lessening diseases: dietary guidelines and school lunches.

As food became more plentiful in the early twentieth century, the US Department of Agriculture began to issue advice to citizens about what to eat in pamphlets such as the 1917 “How to Select Foods.” It established a pattern that would be continued for decades to come, dividing foods into groups based on their nutritional components and encouraging Americans to choose a varied diet with foods from each category. By the Depression in the 1930s, USDA guidance shifted as some Americans had less money to buy food. USDA nutritionists such as Hazel Stiebeling designed distinct diets to meet the needs of different families: “Diets at Four Levels of Nutritive Content and Cost.” The diets used food substitutions and combinations to maximize calories and nutrients for different costs. Stiebeling and others also published specific guidelines about the vitamin, mineral, and protein content of specific foods. It is worth noting that while such nutritional guidelines were being developed at the USDA in the 1930s, this was also hap-

³⁰ Waters, *We Are What We Eat*, 12, 22.

pening abroad at League of Nations nutrition conferences in Europe and South America (where one of the U.S. representatives was Hazel Stiebeling).³¹

This scientific approach to food was continued as the country geared up for war. The USDA established “recommended daily allowances” (or RDAs) to standardize nutritional advice, such as in a 1941 guide, “Eat the Right Food to Help Keep You Fit” and the 1943 “National Wartime Food Guide.” RDAs were also used to design food allowances and rations for military personnel. Using these guidelines, soldiers and civilians enjoyed plentiful food during the war; in 1942, for example, American soldiers were allocated 5,000 calories a day, including an annual 360-pound per capita allowance of meat.³² After the war, USDA attention to dietary guidelines continued, shifting somewhat in specifics, but holding to the early framework of food groups based on nutritional components and recommending a variety of foods.

As food supplies increased after WWII, the government ventured into a new area of nutritional policy: a national school lunch program in 1946. Interestingly, the program was established with a dual mission: to provide nutritious lunches to school children based on the RDAs and to provide a ready market for surplus agricultural commodities. Initially, it seemed that the nutritional and economic goals blended together—though it soon became clear that they sometimes clashed, affecting the menus offered which depended on surplus foods available. Historian Susan Levine and others have concluded that “The program was, in its goals, structure, and administration, more a subsidy for agriculture than a nutrition program for children.”³³ Despite its shortcomings, the program grew and the number of school children receiving meals increased. By the 1960s, the program was expanded dramatically and the number of subsidized meals increased, so that more low income children could be fed.

It’s worth pausing to note that new foreign policy programs—not just domestic ones—were launched to distribute abundant food. Just as school lunches benefited millions of children, the evidence of improved health for Americans and people throughout the globe stemming from the availability of abundant, quality

³¹ Alfred Harper, “Contributions of Women Scientists in the U.S. to the Development of Recommended Dietary Allowances,” *Journal of Nutrition* 133: 3699–3700; Edna Yost, *American Women of Science* (Philadelphia PA: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1943), 170.

³² McDonald, *Food Power*, 26.

³³ Susan Levine, *School Lunch Politics: The Surprising History of America’s Favorite Welfare Program* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 39. Historian A.R. Ruis similarly concluded that although the lunch program was “a political triumph,” it was “a public health failure.” A.R. Ruis, *Eating to Learn, Learning to Eat: The Origins of School Lunch in the United States* (New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2016), 10.

food is great. The best-known example after WWII was the Marshall Plan, started in 1948, with more than 25 % of its funds going for food aid. Food continued to be central to US humanitarian assistance during the Cold War. For example, PL 480 ran from the mid-1950s to the mid-1970s, under which more than \$24 billion in agricultural products were sent to countries throughout the world. Historian Bryan McDonald summarized the central place of food in American foreign policy:

Abundance was written into the structure of this [food] system – it depended on agricultural surpluses, the growing desires of American consumers, and the rapidly expanding landscape of American foods. This would become the governing vision for the postwar food system – the strategic deployment of American abundance.³⁴

At home, abundant food also lessened hunger. But the increase of available calories also had a more negative impact on the quality of life. Numerous critics have outlined the harm to public health that has stemmed from the overconsumption of food and of industrial food products. Thus, in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, there has been a dramatic increase in chronic diseases and conditions in the U.S. that include obesity, diabetes, coronary disease, and cancers. Unpacking the causes of these conditions and their link to overconsumption of food is complicated and controversial. For the purposes of this discussion, we will focus on three related causes for increased food consumption: the rise of food as a consumer product; the increase of available calories; and the power of the food industry.

Why did some people eat more food than they needed? After all, many commentators have observed, humans have “fixed stomachs.” This problem was overcome in part by the simultaneous rise of food abundance and consumerism as a bedrock of American identity. Food producers were a major economic sector by the early twentieth century—one that continued to grow, earning the moniker “Big Food” from some commentators late in the century. In order to keep expanding and to make a profit in an age of ever-growing abundance (when commodity prices were predictably falling), the food industry focused on reprocessing and creating value-added foods, and convincing Americans to buy such new products.³⁵ In other words, one way the food industry dealt with excess supply was to get Americans to eat more in the form of processed food. Some processed food had an obvious appeal to authors such as Poppy Cannon who saw in a can of soup the origins of a gourmet meal. But along with the promise of conve-

³⁴ McDonald, *Food Power*, 12, 96–97, 49.

³⁵ McDonald, *Food Power*, 58–59.

nience and varied cuisine, food companies worked hard to entice consumers in other ways. Historians Gary Cross and Robert Proctor observed that consumer technologies in the twentieth century were aimed at “sensory intensity to compete with satiety and boredom” and “optimization” of “subtle sensual encounters.” For example, engineering food pleasure, attending to “flavor mixes” and “mouth feel,” was illustrated by packaged foods such as a Snickers candy bar.³⁶

A long-standing observer of the food industry, nutritionist Marion Nestle criticized such manipulations, however, she asserted that the constant pressure from the food industry to “eat more” was inevitable; most Americans at the start of the twenty-first century had a regular food supply that was “so plentiful, so varied, so inexpensive” in “a society so affluent that most people [could] afford to buy more food than they need.” In various books and articles, Nestle detailed different ways in which food companies pressured Americans to increase their consumption of processed foods—beyond the mouth feel of a Snickers bar. For example, Nestle critiqued the contracts signed between soda companies and school districts that encouraged the sale of soda to children throughout the day, greatly increasing their intake of sugar and calories. She also detailed how food companies sponsored academic research on particular foods to produce scientific evidence that eating more of certain foods would improve health. Such health claims were routinely used in marketing food products, as part of elaborate consumer campaigns. Nestle and others concluded that an “eat more” food environment was pervasive and resulted from the deliberate strategy of food corporations in pursuit of profits to cajole, pressure, and trick people into consuming more calories than they needed. The inevitable consequence of an “eat more” environment and overconsumption of calories was obesity.

The increase of overweight and obese Americans in the late twentieth century became an epidemic and a health crisis, according to medical authorities, policy-makers, and nutritionists.³⁷ The incidence of obesity was clear from the statistics. For example, CDC data said that the percentage of obese adults tripled from 1960 to 2000, going from 11% to 33%, with the biggest rate of increase in the 1990s from 23% to 33%. Meanwhile, in the same decade, overweight Americans jumped from

³⁶ Gary Cross and Robert Proctor, *Packaged Pleasures: How Technology and Marketing Revolutionized Desire* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014), 242, 243, 249.

³⁷ Note that the following statistics of overweight and obesity are based on measures of BMI (body mass index); overweight is defined as a BMI between 25 and 30, and obese as a BMI of greater than 30. BMI has become mired in social and medical controversy due to: 1) the way it has been used as an absolute measure irrespective of individual body types; and 2) debates about body image and acceptance. Nevertheless, despite its drawbacks, it continues to be accepted as a broad tool of measuring weight.

56% to 65% of the population. By 2007–2008, the combined number of overweight and obese adults reached 68% of the population. The CDC said that the health consequences meant that almost as many people would die from poor eating and lack of exercise in the 1990s as from smoking in the same decade. The data for children and teenagers was also discouraging, with the number of overweight children (aged six to 11) in the 1990s measured at 13%, and overweight teens at 14%; other experts said these estimates were low and that 25–30% of children were overweight or at risk of becoming so. By 2007–2008, the percentage of obese children aged six to 11 was estimated at 20% and aged 12–19 at 18%. These statistics predicted an increase of chronic diseases for adults, including hypertension, diabetes, and some cancers.³⁸

In addition to excessive calories, the causes of obesity and chronic diseases were multiple, going beyond the overconsumption of calories. Scientists and commentators still debate other factors, including metabolic changes brought by exposure to endocrine disrupting chemicals, differences in lifestyle and mobility, and the composition of processed foods. For instance, some, such as author Gary Taubes, focused criticism on the increase of various sugars in modern diets.

Even if there were multiple causes to chronic diseases, most agreed that the overconsumption of food—particularly some types of food—was a factor. Thus, Marion Nestle and others encouraged Americans to be smarter food consumers, to become more savvy about how food was laid out in a supermarket, more educated about food labels, and more knowledgeable about nutrition. Nestle was not naïve about the modern, industrial food system. She told her readers that “Food companies... are not social service agencies. They are businesses required by stockholders to prioritize profit above all other values – human, social, and environmental.”³⁹ Even if Nestle understood the lopsided power of large corporations to impact health and the food system as a whole, it is worth asking whether she and other activists nevertheless placed an unfair burden on individuals. Many observers have decried the neoliberal tendency to focus on individual actions and responsibility—in other words, the power of consumerism—for improving diet, health, and even the entire food system. Mark Bittman made clear that while such intentions were reasonable, they were simplistic: “Admonitions to ‘get up

³⁸ Statistics on obesity are found in many sources. These are taken from Warren Belasco, *Food: The Key Concepts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 88–89; slightly different figures are cited by Marion Nestle, and the ones from 2007–2008 cited above are taken from her: Marion Nestle and Malden Nesheim, *Why Calories Count: From Science to Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 141–42.

³⁹ Marion Nestle, *Slow Cooked: An Unexpected Life in Food Politics* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2022), 1.

and move' or even to 'eat a wide variety of foods' aren't *wrong*, but unless they're accompanied by changes in supply and policy, they'll do little to challenge the *status quo*."

Environmental consequences of abundance

Along with health, the environment is another area where the complexity of the industrial food system is revealed. Abundance itself is testament to the technological advances in agriculture, production, and processing. The post-World War II period has been referred to by more than one commentator as the "golden age" of American agriculture. In these years, the rate of food production continued to climb due in part to the spread of chemical fertilizers and synthetic pesticides, an increase in average farm sizes, and improvements in mechanical technologies. As efficiency on farms increased, the labor needed for food production fell, leading to increased suburbanization. Farmers who remained on the land benefited from government programs that subsidized their income. Meanwhile, the food industry grew in size and profitability, while consumer prices for food continued to fall. Thus, the undeniable increase of cheap, plentiful food demonstrates the successful manipulation of the environment to benefit millions of people.

This success may be self-evident, but there was an underside to food abundance of environmental damage. I will highlight this damage in two areas: pesticide contamination and factory farming. The civilian adoption of synthetic pesticides following their wartime use was hailed by most Americans as a significant advance in agriculture. Best known and most widely used right after the war was dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane [DDT], a persistent insecticide, thought to be relatively harmless to mammals and much of the environment. By the late 1950s and into the 1960s, evidence began to mount from wildlife biologists about the widespread environmental damage from DDT, as well as more powerful compounds formulated to combat insect resistance. In 1962, Rachel Carson made the case against the overuse of synthetic pesticides in her best-selling book, *Silent Spring*. Carson's book was a turning point not only in how some Americans thought about pesticides but in how they understood their relationship to the environment.

Those in the tiny—but growing—organic food movement were inspired by Carson's environmental vision. Organic food was a challenge to the industrial food system that had created unprecedented abundance. Nevertheless, one can argue that the organic food movement was a challenge to the industrial system that rested upon abundance. People have the luxury of critiquing the *status quo* only when basic needs are being met. Instead of measuring agricultural success by yield, efficiency, and price, those in the organic movement rejected the use

of synthetic pesticides and fertilizers, chemical additives, and large food operations that separated people from the land. By the late twentieth century, organic food production grew in popularity, spurred on by the counterculture as well as by groups of farmers in California and Maine who established associations and certifications for organic farmers. By the turn of the twenty-first century, the US government had established national certification for organic production. And, by 2012, 4% of the massive US food market was organic. Four percent might seem small, but the sector was the fastest growing food sector in the US, and many Americans (25% according to one 2009 survey) ate at least some organic vegetables weekly. Specialty stores such as Whole Foods represented a new sector in the food market, while most established supermarkets also began stocking organic foods.⁴⁰

One might read such statistics and conclude that there was growing awareness about the environmental damage from pesticides used to produce food, and that the food system was improving. Yet, I offer two cautions to this assumption. First, by the second decade of the twenty-first century, organic food remained roughly 4% of the market. Second, much of the growth in organic food sales came in what writer Michael Pollan and others refer to as “industrial organic” areas, large corporate farmers and processors still dedicated to measuring success by yield, efficiency, and price. Scholar Julie Guthman examined California agriculture to understand this “paradox.” She found that the exponential growth of organic acres in California at the end of the twentieth century not only betrayed (small family farm) organic methods in favor of industrial monocropping but also perpetuated economic gaps between large landowners/producers and small-scale farms and farmworkers. Organic agriculture was clearly industrialized; half of all organic agricultural sales came from just 27 large farms in California.⁴¹

Environmental harm from abundant food was also seen in meat production. The American taste for meat was long-standing, resulting in a meat-centered diet featuring, especially, pork, beef, and chicken. As urbanization increased in the twentieth century, pork consumption declined relative to beef and chicken. By the early 1950s, per capita beef consumption had surpassed that of pork. Although pigs had been relatively easier for rural Americans to raise, “beef has held a remarkably constant place in the nation’s symbolic food universe,” observed historian Roger Horowitz, with steak at the “pinnacle” of desirability since the eight-

40 Michelle Mart, *Pesticides, A Love Story: America’s Enduring Embrace of Dangerous Chemicals* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2015), 210–11.

41 Guthman also argues that the romantic celebration of the family farm—given new life in the organic ideal—is unrealistic in an era of low food prices, high land values, and an entrenched industrial agricultural system. Fromartz, *Organic Inc.*, 188.

teenth century.⁴² Nevertheless, the greatest revolution in meat consumption was in chicken. With a revolution in how chickens were raised, packaged, and sold, the pounds consumed overtook all other meat by the early twenty-first century. Chicken had gone from being a special occasion meal to a convenient, inexpensive, prepackaged ingredient in many different dishes. There were three primary reasons for the revolution surrounding chicken eating: the adoption of different breeds that grew meatier, more efficiently; the adoption of new technologies and business models (including processing and pre-packaging, and raising chickens indoors with the regular use of antibiotics); and extensive publicity regarding the health dangers of beef and fattier meats.

Putting aside the health issues of meat consumption, the environmental consequences of the industrial production of meat were great—and spreading as meat consumption rose in many parts of the world. Many Americans first learned that there was an environmental consequence to excessive meat consumption from Frances Moore Lappe's best-selling 1971 book, *Diet for a Small Planet*. Lappe argued that getting protein from meat—especially beef—was highly inefficient since in the modern industrial system, excessive amounts of grain were used to feed livestock instead of directly feeding humans; it took 16 pounds of grain to make one pound of beef.

Decades later, as the consequences of climate change became more obvious, many charged that a diet based on meat was not just inefficient but dangerous to the survival of the planet. Jonathan Safran Foer made this argument in his 2019 book, *We Are the Weather*, where he provided detailed data about the outsized impact that factory farms had on the climate crisis as measured by the CO₂ and methane produced, and the land, water, and fuel resources squandered on animals raised for human food. He wrote that the link was undeniable and urgent: “We cannot keep the kinds of meals we have known and also keep the planet we have known. We must either let some eating habits go or let the planet go.”⁴³

⁴² Roger Horowitz, *Putting Meat on the American Table: Taste, Technology, and Transformation* (Baltimore MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 18. Historian Joshua Specht examined the creation of the modern industrialized beef market, based in part on the unique desirability of this particular meat. *Red Meat Republic: A Hoof-to-Table History of How Beef Changed America* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019).

⁴³ Jonathan Safran Foer, *We Are the Weather: Saving the Planet Begins at Breakfast* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019), 71.

Social consequences of abundance

The fourth area in which we can find both benefit and harm in the pervasive industrial food system concerns equality. Abundant food challenged class and gender inequalities, while at the same time it reinforced those very same inequalities. There are different ways to sort out this contradictory statement. On the positive side of the ledger is the improvement to health discussed above. Plentiful, varied food, year-round, did not just increase health for the nation as a whole but benefited in particular poorer and working-class Americans. The wealthy always have easy access to food, but providing a predictable supply of affordable food to most people is the real accomplishment. This abundance allowed nutritionists such as Hazel Stiebeling to focus on practical programs—whether dietary plans or school lunches—that would benefit all.

Ironically, another way in which abundant food challenged inequality was the extent to which food became one more consumer good in a consumerist society. Historian Rachel Laudan has argued that critics of the industrial food system (“Culinary Luddites”) had a certain willful blindness to the many benefits of “Culinary Modernism.” One benefit was not only access to labor-saving ingredients and a varied diet but also more egalitarianism with ingredients “available more or less equally to all.”⁴⁴ Historians Gary Cross and Robert Proctor have further described how egalitarianism is linked to consumerism broadly, with its “packaged pleasure revolution” which they agree has been accessible to all: “The revolution is... about the democratization of consumption: the poor can now have goods once available only to the rich.”⁴⁵

Democratization of access was undeniable, but it was not absolute. Even in an age of abundance, some aspects of new food culture remained inaccessible to some. For instance, Julia Child targeted an audience of middle to upper middle-class, educated women, with a certain amount of international sophistication. While Child asserted that she wrote for a “servantless American cook,” she added that the cook was one “who can be unconcerned on occasion with budgets, waistlines, time schedules... or anything else which might interfere with the enjoyment of producing something wonderful to eat.”⁴⁶ Working-class people could not

⁴⁴ Rachel Laudan, “A Plea for Culinary Modernism: Why We Should Love New, Fast, Processed Food,” *Gastronomica*, February 2001, 42. Also, Rachel Laudan, *Cuisine and Empire: Cooking in World History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 346–47.

⁴⁵ Cross and Proctor, *Packaged Pleasures*, 271.

⁴⁶ Beck, Bertholle and Child, *Mastering the Art*, vii. Child’s reference to being unconcerned about waistlines is a shorthand reference to a complicated obsession with weight among American

throw aside such concerns easily. Betty Fussell recalled, “In food terms, we middle-class Americans were all nouveaux riches, giddy with a cornucopia of goods and techniques that poured in from Europe.”⁴⁷ Fussell knew such riches, though, were not available to all: “This was no undertaking for the poor. Such equipment cost money, and we weren’t looking for bargains... Julia warned us away from cheap pots. She taught us that a pot with a copper bottom less than one-eighth inch thick was worse than useless.”⁴⁸

Related to the issue of class access was the role of women in providing food. One could argue that modern food culture, with aspirations to sophisticated, diverse cuisines, both elevated the role of women and made the expectations of their role more onerous. Most mainstream cookbooks in the twentieth century were aimed at white middle-class women shopping in American supermarkets with plentiful stock, year-round. Authors such as Poppy Cannon and Julia Child had very different food sensibilities, but they both spoke to middle-class women aspiring to more creative cuisine. They wrote recipes with widely available ingredients but also affordable ones; they were preaching the accessibility of gourmet food. While many Americans might have automatically assumed French food to be fancy, complicated, and something eaten by the wealthy, Child repeatedly made it clear that food was not restricted by class. Anyone could prepare delicious French meals once they mastered the proper techniques. She preferred the term “gourmand” (a connoisseur of food) to “gourmet” (a picky or pretentious eater), made fun of people who sought out “Haute Kweezeen,” and expressed her frustration with fussy, pretentious restaurants (“I would far rather have something quite simple and perfect than something fancy”).⁴⁹

While cookbooks were clearly addressed to women who were assumed to be responsible for food preparation, their emphasis on creativity attempted to elevate the job. Cannon called on women to be “artists” with their cooking, though still encouraged readers to view cooking as an intellectual pursuit: “Don’t check your brains at the kitchen door. The kind of thinking that gets you an A in English

women starting in the early twentieth century. For a brief look at this cultural discourse, see Helen Zoe Veit, *Modern Food, Moral Food: Self-Control, Science, and the Rise of Modern American Eating in the Early Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), esp. 158–76. Harvey Levenstein also summarizes the changing standards for female beauty in the early twentieth century. *Revolution at the Table: The Transformation of the American Diet* (Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 2003), 165–66.

⁴⁷ Fussell, *My Kitchen Wars*, 158–59.

⁴⁸ Fussell, *My Kitchen Wars*, 155.

⁴⁹ Julia Child to James Beard, January 22, 1968, folder 130, box 10, Series II Correspondence, Julia Child Papers, Schlesinger Library, Harvard University.

or Economics will stand you in very good stead when you cook. Taste your food analytically. Read recipes carefully. Examine labels.”⁵⁰ Cannon also observed that many women were not stay-at-home wives (including herself); thus, she included such tips for working women: “you will find it convenient to write out your meal plans for a whole week... and shop for staples all at one time.”

The yearning for artistry, though, was oppressive as well as liberating. Many scholars have examined the pressure on women in these years. Sherrie Inness summed up the burden: “The 1950s ideal was for a woman to transform a humdrum meal into a memorable event.”⁵¹ Such pressure led some women to worry whether or not they were doing enough to live up to the expectations, a dilemma illustrated in the evolution of the modern cake mix. A number of scholars have written about the initial failure of modern cake mixes to sell widely, since they required only the addition of water, apparently leaving some women feeling as if they were not actually “making” a cake. In response, food manufacturers released new products requiring women to add an egg as well as water, helping to make cake mixes widely used and popular.⁵²

Putting aside gender expectations, abundant, inexpensive food—whether fresh or processed—lessened inequality. Nevertheless, the meaning of “inexpensive” makes this assertion more complex than it seems. As Marion Nestle and others argued, the corporate food industry (“Big Food”) held disproportionate power in determining what foods were available and what people ate. With continuing food surpluses in the late twentieth century, corporate producers worked hard to create “value-added” food products, thus encouraging increased and over-consumption. Under the industrial system which provided more-than-sufficient calories for all, processed foods were often cheaper than healthier, fresh foods. Thus, the plentiful, “cheap” food worsened health and increased chronic conditions. Numerous studies indicated that poorer Americans relied more on cheap, processed foods and had higher rates of chronic diseases. Food, then, was not really that “cheap” if its true cost was externalized.

There were many other examples of the externalized costs of cheap food. As Julie Guthman demonstrated, small farmers in California were increasingly squeezed out by corporate producers. Cheap price tags also relied on low pay for farmworkers in the US and in many parts of the world, who also suffered

⁵⁰ Poppy Cannon, *The Bride's Cookbook* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1954), 219, 169.

⁵¹ Inness, *Dinner Roles*, 149.

⁵² Laura Shapiro, *Something from the Oven: Reinventing Dinner in 1950s America* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2004), discusses the issue, 76–80, as does McFeely, *Can She Bake a Cherry Pie*, 100; many other scholars also discuss what has become a well-known question about women’s roles and manufactured foods.

poor health from agricultural chemicals and the hollowing out of rural communities. Thus, farmworkers and small farmers paid a disproportionate price for cheap food.

Those in the New Food Movements argued that most people did not realize the extent to which food costs were externalized. For example, industrial food was cheap in part because it relied on subsidized petroleum, essential for the production of fertilizers and pesticides, processing, and transport. The costs of global warming, then, were not included in the supermarket price tag. Similarly, meat factory farms that produced cheap hamburgers worsened climate change, but the cost of that damage was also externalized. Alice Waters and others argued that all of these externalities were connected: “I cannot accept any excuses, because I don’t believe they’re true. They’re myths promoted by the fast food industry. ‘It’s too expensive to eat organic, regenerative food.’ It is not.”⁵³ Waters also argued against the charge that the New Food Movement was elitist: “Organic foods seem elitist only because industrial food is artificially cheap, with its real costs being charged to the public purse, the public health and the environment.” In addition, Waters argued that the myth of elitism fed off the expectation (shared by rich and poor alike) that food should be cheap, as well as the failure to value people who raised the food: “the language of cheapness is inescapable.”⁵⁴

Consumerism, with its expectation of cheapness, had other environmental and cultural consequences. Waters argued that many people were seduced by the illusion of choice in a consumerist system—even if many of those choices were mediocre and came from the same large corporations, not different producers. Waters argued that the illusion of choice led to excess and food waste (30–40% per year in the U.S.) and serious environmental consequences. Waters’s holistic understanding of food choices was clear: Desirable food was that which was beautiful and authentic, and food could only be beautiful if it was raised in an environmentally sound way with slow food values. Moreover, food that was healthy for the environment was also healthy for humans. Everything was connected.

As has been argued in the past several pages, abundance is a key characteristic of the modern American food system. Abundance has been a clear blessing—but also a paradoxical curse with positive and negative consequences for culture, health, the environment, and equality. While the preceding pages have laid out selected examples in each of these areas, they have not offered a definitive answer

53 David Marchese, “Talk: Alice Waters,” *New York Times Magazine*, May 23, 2021, 17.

54 Alice Waters, “Slow Food Nation,” *The Nation*, September 11, 2006, 13. Waters, *We Are What We Eat*, 59, also 60–65.

to the question posed at the outset: Can we keep the many benefits of food abundance, yet escape its downsides? While not definitive, I'll end with the reminder from Alice Waters and other new food activists that in order to repair the food system, we need to take a holistic perspective. The goals of high yield, low cost, and varied foods year-round cannot be separated from other equally important goals, such as preserving food cultures born of long traditions or valuing the people who produce food or taking care of the earth that produces sustenance or making sure that all benefit equally from abundance. Whether or not the new food activists will succeed remains an open question in the third decade of the twenty-first century.

Odinn Melsted

Finding oil for the developing world: Maurice Strong, the environment, and the International Energy Development Corporation (IEDC), 1979–1983

Introduction

During the 1979 oil price shock after the Iranian Revolution, the economic repercussions were not only felt in the oil-importing countries of the Global North. Even though the petrostates that had created the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) were originally considered developing countries, most of the developing world did not benefit from the spectacular increase in oil export earnings. Just like the industrialized countries, oil-importing developing countries in the Global South had to buy their oil at world market prices, which severely deteriorated their payment balances after 1973 and particularly after the second oil price shock in 1979. Recognizing the severe economic repercussions for oil-importing countries in the developing world, Maurice F. Strong, a Canadian oil and mining businessman who had started a second career in international environmental and development diplomacy, created the International Energy Development Corporation (IEDC). This Geneva-based corporation was intended to search for oil in developing countries and turn them into oil producers.¹

Why would Maurice Strong endorse petroleum exploration for the developing world? After all, Strong is best known for his role in the emergence of international environmental conferences and institutions. In 1972, he chaired the first United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm and subsequently became the founding director of the UN Environmental Program (UNEP) in Nairobi. And in 1984, just a few years after he founded the IEDC, Strong became a mem-

¹ The research and writing for this article was supported by the Nederlandse Organisatie voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek (Dutch Research Council) under the grant VI.C.191.067 “Managing Scarcity and Sustainability: The Oil Industry, Environmentalism, and Alternative Energy in the Age of Scarcity, 1968–1986” at Maastricht University. I am indebted to my colleagues Cyrus Mody and Simone Schleper (Maastricht University) as well as Mattias Näsmann (Umeå University) and George Roberts (University of Sheffield) for insights and sources for this chapter.

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ber of the Brundtland Commission that defined and promoted sustainable development. However, despite his engagement for environmental governance and the fight against pollution, he seemed to see no problem in promoting oil development on a new frontier in the Global South. But Strong's IEDC project is an example of a development project that cannot be labelled positive or negative that easily. On the one hand, Strong's IEDC vision aimed at solving the alarming economic problems of oil-importing developing countries. Finding domestic oil could reduce the cost of importing it, and supply the valuable resource for further economic development and even export earnings. On the other hand, Strong's IEDC vision clearly placed economic development priorities over environmental priorities. By creating new dependencies on oil, the IEDC also contradicted Strong's pledges for sustainable development and the fight against pollution.

This chapter examines Strong's IEDC project, which stands out among his many endeavors in the realms of business and international organizations, as it joined his interests, aspirations, and expertise in the oil business with those in international development. Strong's involvement in global environmental governance has received considerable scholarly attention in recent years, particularly his involvement in various international institutions and conservation organizations but also his relationships with international business organizations like the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC).² Yet at the same time, very little has been written about his many business endeavors before, between, and after his appointments for international organizations. Having originally made a career in the Canadian oil industry, Strong moved directly from the UNEP headquarters in Nairobi to Canada's oil capital, Calgary, where he built up the new state-owned oil company Petro-Canada. In 1979, Strong created the IEDC and managed the company from its London offices until 1983, before taking a seat on the Brundtland

² Previous studies that examine Strong's role include: Iris Borowy, *Defining Sustainable Development for Our Common Future: A History of the World Commission on Environment and Development (Brundtland Commission)* (London: Routledge, 2013); Joshua P. Howe, *Behind the Curve: Science and the Politics of Global Warming* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2014); Stephen Macekura, *Of Limits and Growth: The Rise of Global Sustainable Development in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Simone Schleper, *Planning for the Planet: Environmental Expertise and the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources, 1960–1980* (New York/Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2019); Glenda Sluga, "Capitalists and Climate," *Humanity Journal* blog, June 11, 2017, accessed April 30, 2025, <http://humanityjournal.org/blog/capitalists-and-climate/>; Ben Huf, Glenda Sluga, and Sabine Selchow, "Business and the Planetary History of International Environmental Governance in the 1970s," *Contemporary European History* 31 (2022): 553–569; Ann-Kristin Bergquist and Thomas David, "Beyond Planetary Limits! The International Chamber of Commerce, the United Nations, and the Invention of Sustainable Development," *Business History Review* 97, no. 3 (2023): 481–511.

Commission the year after.³ In his autobiography, Strong recalled the IEDC adventure as “one of the most interesting episodes in my own career in the oil and gas business.”⁴ Within weeks of its creation in 1979, Strong recruited a highly respected and experienced management team: the Venezuelan oil economist Francisco Parra, the Canadian exploration manager Keith Huff, and Algerian geologist and oil company executive Nordine Ait-Laoussine. They raised substantial funds from several international companies and investment funds and set up exploration projects in Congo, Egypt, Sudan, Ghana, Angola, Tanzania, and Turkey. By 1982, however, the company ran into financial problems and Strong sold the company to the Kuwait Petroleum Company in 1983—without having fulfilled the original vision of finding oil for the developing world.

Based on Strong’s archives, this chapter analyzes the background of the IEDC creation and operations in the context of Strong’s earlier endeavors in the oil industry, environmental governance, and international development. Why did Strong opt for a private development corporation? Why did he propagate oil development despite his previous and later commitments to environmental governance and sustainable development? And why did the IEDC project ultimately fail? In examining those questions, the chapter will consist of three parts: The first one examines Strong’s journey from the oil industry to development and environmental diplomacy and back, and how his interest in international oil exploration paired with plans for economic development grew out of his work for Petro-Canada. The second part will zoom in on Strong’s IEDC proposal, how it evolved from an idea to create an international organization to a private corporation, and how Strong’s role in the oil business contradicted his previous and parallel environmental roles. The final part looks at the promise and limitations of the IEDC project, which initially raised substantial funds and set up promising exploration projects in the developing world, before declining prices and exploration failures put an end to the experiment. Overall, the IEDC represents a unique case of North-South energy and development cooperation. It reveals the ambiguity in the actions and rhetoric of Maurice Strong, who propagated sustainable growth and development, but also the development of new oil provinces in the Global South, and thereby showcases the inherent contradiction and competition between positive and negative narratives of development.

³ An overview of the IEDC can be found in a chapter of the history of the Kuwait Foreign Petroleum Exploration Company (KUFPEC), *Against All Odds: The KUFPEC Story* (Safat: KUFPEC, 2001).

⁴ Maurice F. Strong, *Where on Earth are We Going?* (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2001), 158.

Strong's contradictory journey: From oil to UNEP and back to oil

Maurice Strong was one of the key actors in the emergence of global environmental governance, who presided over the Stockholm conference in 1972 and the foundation of UNEP in Nairobi in 1973. What is often only mentioned in passing is that he started his career in the oil industry, and that he returned to that industry between his appointments with international organizations, which clearly contradicts his endorsement of environmental governance, nature conservation, and sustainable development. Having escaped poverty, Strong was a boy wonder of the Canadian oil industry, who rose through the ranks at one of Canada's largest oil companies, Dome Petroleum, and by the age of 35 steered the largest Canadian energy holding company, the Power Corporation of Canada. From the mid-1960s, he made use of his network and credentials in Ottawa—especially within the Liberal Party under Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau—to fulfil his original aspiration of working in international development. Those aspirations, by Strong's own account, dated back to his travels around Africa in the 1950s, when he worked for an oil company in Nairobi setting up service stations throughout East Africa.⁵

In 1966, Strong took on the management of the Canadian External Aid Office, which he transformed into the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). Already at the time, Strong argued that international development would benefit from a more “businesslike approach,” as he would later implement with the IEDC. Development organizations, he criticized, were “over-bureaucratized,” which to him meant that “the very structure of the development enterprise is one of the greatest inhibiting factors.”⁶ When confronted with a problem, development organizations would only add a new division that adhered to the same centrally organized and inhibiting bureaucracy, whereas business reacted by creating a custom “project organization” to perform a specific task as needed. Development organizations therefore needed more freedom and flexibility. His new post with CIDA also brought Strong into contact with international organizations, both the World Bank and particularly the UN. In 1970, Strong ended up being appointed Secretary General of the Stockholm conference, and in 1973 became the first executive director of UNEP.⁷

5 “We Need a Businesslike Approach to Development,” *Ceres* 3, no. 2 (1970): 26–29.

6 “We Need a Businesslike Approach to Development,” 26–29.

7 Schleper, *Planning for the Planet*.

When he entered public service in 1966, Strong resigned from all of his executive roles in private business, which included his presidency of the Power Corporation and 30 other company boards.⁸ Even though he formally relinquished all of his business functions, Strong maintained close ties to the business world. Soon after he took on his first UN role in 1970, Strong established a partnership with the oil executive and philanthropist Robert O. Anderson, the head of Atlantic Richfield Co. (ARCO). Anderson was the chairman of the Aspen Institute for Humanistic Studies, which organized summer seminars and events for business leaders and from 1970 also put the environment on its agenda.⁹ In 1971, the Aspen Institute created the International Institute for Environmental Affairs (IIEA), which offered Strong its services for the preparations of the 1972 Stockholm conference, and later became the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED). In relation with the Stockholm conference, the IIEA hosted a two-week workshop on “International Management of Environmental Problems” at the Aspen Institute in 1971 to discuss the thematic framework for the conference and coordinated the writing and publication of *Only One Earth*, the official report commissioned by Strong and authored by Barbara Ward and René Dubos in consultation with 152 international experts.¹⁰ At the same time, IIEA also organized meetings between Strong and the business world, notably a “private briefing for world business leaders” in Paris in February 1972 together with the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC).¹¹

Strong explained his environmental awakening with the mounting environmental problems he saw around him while in the oil industry.¹² But even though Strong was a nature lover who would gain the trust of many in the environmental movement, he was not exactly “environmentalist” in his convictions. He recognized environmental issues as essential societal challenges that the business world had to deal with constructively, and would passionately argue for environmental conservation and against pollution. But he also saw the environment as

⁸ According to Carroll Wilson: Carroll L. Wilson Papers (MC-0029), Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Department of Distinctive Collections, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Box 41–1715. Wilson to Robert V. Roosa, April 5, 1975.

⁹ Sydney Hyman, *The Aspen Idea* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1975).

¹⁰ Maurice F. Strong Papers (ESPP MFS001), Environmental Science and Public Policy Archives, Harvard College Library, Box 34–335. Participants in the 1971 International Environmental Workshop (June 20–August 6, 1971 at Aspen, Colorado). See also Barbara Ward and René Dubos, *Only One Earth: The Care and Maintenance of a Small Planet* (New York: Norton & Co., 1972).

¹¹ Joseph Elliott Slater Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Library, Box 15–13. IIEA-ICC, Private Briefing for World Business Leaders, February 21, 1972. Bergquist and David, “Beyond Planetary Limits”; Huf et al., “Business and the Planetary,” 553–69.

¹² Strong, *Where on Earth are We Going?*, 116.

the kind of global problem that could revive the United Nations and international cooperation.¹³ When he agreed to prepare the Stockholm conference in 1970, he told an Ottawa newspaper that he viewed the UN as a “sick organization,” but it could be “cured” through the environmental challenge, since the “call for international action on the environment might offer a means of showing that the organization can be effective.”¹⁴

During his time in the service of UNEP, Strong promoted a dialogue with industry about environmental regulation and management, notably with the UNEP industry seminar program.¹⁵ In 1975, Strong announced that he would leave UNEP at the end of the year and turn to another challenge. Instead of taking on another international post, though, Strong went back to the oil industry. Having convinced Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau that Canada needed a national oil company, he became the founding chairman of Petro-Canada in 1976–1977. “Petro-Can,” as it was soon called, was headquartered in Western Canada’s oil capital Calgary. As Strong emphasized, it was intended to serve as a catalyst to find new energy sources for Canada and would primarily explore for oil and gas off the Canadian shores, in the Arctic and the Alberta Tar Sands (a plentiful but thick and difficult to process form of crude oil).¹⁶

To legitimate his return to the oil industry, Strong argued that in private business he could implement the environmental changes he could only preach while at the UN.¹⁷ In reality, though, Petro-Canada cannot be considered a particularly environmentally friendly oil company. Even though Strong emphasized it would abide by the highest environmental standards,¹⁸ and that he made it a condition when accepting the post that he would not abandon his “environmental interests,”¹⁹ Petro-Canada did not substantially differ from other companies. Like most oil firms, they hired environmental managers, but Petro-Canada was nevertheless involved in some of the riskiest and most polluting oil developments along Canada’s shores, the Tar Sands, and in the Arctic.²⁰ Strong’s involvement in Petro-Canada was much less an attempt to “green” the oil industry as it was a response to the widespread expectations of an impending oil scarcity. From around 1970, oil

¹³ Howe, *Behind the Curve*, Ch. 3; Schleper, *Planning for the Planet*.

¹⁴ “Fight Against Pollution May be ‘Cure’ for UN,” *The Ottawa Citizen*, September 17, 1970.

¹⁵ Bergquist and David, “Beyond Planetary Limits.”

¹⁶ Petro-Canada: Annual Report (1977).

¹⁷ Strong, *Where on Earth are We Going?*, 116.

¹⁸ Strong Papers, Box 51–496. Notes for Speech to Canadian Association of Petroleum Landmen, February 9, 1976.

¹⁹ “Strong Challenges”, *To the Point International*, April 19, 1976, 39.

²⁰ Strong Papers, Box 88–838. Petro-Canada, Personnel: D.B. Bowie.

companies became increasingly concerned with the outlook for oil supply at prevailing growth in demand, and feared that the world might run out of conventional crude oil reserves before the end of the century (which in retrospect we know did not happen). In developing his thinking about the future of oil, Strong took part in one of the most comprehensive energy studies of the time, the Workshop on Alternative Energy Strategies (WAES). It was organized by MIT professor Carroll L. Wilson, a friend of Strong's, who sat on the Executive Committee of the Club of Rome and had been instrumental in the making of the 1972 modelling study *Limits to Growth*. The WAES workshops assembled a group of 90 experts from energy agencies and oil companies in 15 countries, including Strong's Petro-Canada. In its final report, WAES presented several scenarios that all diagnosed an oil shortage before 2000 and recommended the immediate development of alternatives; in the short term nuclear and coal, and in the long term synthetic fuels and renewables.²¹ Strong saw those conclusions as a confirmation of Petro-Canada's mission to search for new energy sources, which to begin with had to be fossil fuels but in the future would also be renewable alternatives (although renewable plans remained rather vague).²²

In April 1975, around the time that Strong was preparing to transition from UNEP back to the oil industry, he spoke at the founding meeting of the International Petroleum Industry Environmental Conservation Association (IPIECA), an organization intended to facilitate exchange between the oil industry and UNEP (and he would also join IPIECA as a corporate member in 1976).²³ In his speech before environmental managers of international oil companies, Strong chose not to speak much about pollution control or the conservation of nature but about another pressing issue at the time: the oil price crisis and its effect on the developing world. After all, in Strong's view, allowing the Global South to develop was at least as important as addressing environmental issues: "Indeed a truly integrated, multi-disciplinary environment programme must relate not only to physical and biological factors, but also to socio-economic conditions

²¹ Carroll L. Wilson, *Energy: Global Prospects, 1985–2000: Report of the Workshop on Alternative Energy Strategies* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1977).

²² Strong proudly presented the study to Canadian media in 1977: Workshop on Alternative Energy Strategies Records (MC 180), Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Department of Distinctive Collections, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Box 33–483. World Press Reception, Canada, 1977.

²³ Strong Papers, Box 103–978. Strong to Leon de Rosen, April 22, 1976; 143–1354. UNEP Petroleum Seminar.

and to improvement of the quality of life.”²⁴ For this reason, Strong found that the recent oil price increases of 1973–1974 were both positive and negative:

As one who has spent most of his working life in the petroleum industry, I have always believed that this resource was under-priced – not in terms of the cost of producing it, but in terms of the absolute unique qualities it possesses as a resource that is not renewable, and in many of its uses not replaceable by any practical alternative. Thus, I welcomed recent price increases as a powerful incentive to conservation and to a much more selective and qualitative approach to the use of petroleum in the future. ... The era of cheap energy from petroleum has come to an end just as the newly independent poor nations of the world are beginning the processes of modernization and industrialization required to make possible the better life to which their peoples aspire. They are thus deprived of one of the basic advantages which the now industrialized nations enjoyed in the process of their development, and indeed, on which much of their present wealth and power has been based.²⁵

The price increases that may have been an incentive for resource conservation came at a high cost, and the economic repercussions were particularly and disproportionately felt in the developing world that needed oil for economic development. In seeing this problem, Strong was not alone. While the economic shock in the developing world went largely unnoticed in “oil crisis” debates and action plans in the Global North, those concerned with international development aid and policies took note of the deteriorating situation in the Global South.²⁶ While many of the oil-rich OPEC countries were located in the Global South, the majority of those countries remained oil importers. In a classification of the oil situation in “lower developed countries” from 1980 (not including the so-called “Centrally Planned Economies” of the Soviet Bloc), 27 were already oil exporters, 13 of them as OPEC members and 14 as non-OPEC exporters (e.g. Mexico), which were generally the high-income developing countries. The much larger group of developing countries were net oil importers, of which 13 already produced oil in their territory that could cover part of their domestic requirements, e.g. Brazil

²⁴ Strong Papers, Box 149–1419. Remarks by Maurice F. Strong at opening of International Petroleum Industry Environmental Conservation Association Symposium, Tehran, Iran, April 7, 1975, 7.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

²⁶ The oil shock in the developing world was explored specifically at the conference *Third World Oil Crises: Global Connections, Everyday Repercussions, and the 1970s* (Edinburgh/online, August 25–27, 2021), where I presented an earlier version of this paper.

or Ghana. Yet the remaining 80 countries had no oil production and relied exclusively on oil imports—40 of them in Africa, 19 in Latin America, and 21 in Asia.²⁷

Table 12.1: Oil-exporting and oil-importing developing countries. Source: Favre Le Leuch, “Petroleum Exploration Trends in the Developing Countries,” Table 1.

		Oil-exporting developing countries		Oil-importing developing countries	
Region	OPEC (13 countries)	Non-OPEC (14 countries)	Producing (13 countries)	Non-producing (80 countries)	
			0–50 %	50–100 %	
Latin America	Ecuador	Bolivia	Brazil	Argentina	19 countries
	Venezuela	Mexico	Chile	Colombia	
		Peru	Guatemala		
		Trinidad			
Africa	Algeria	Angola	Ivory Coast	Ghana	40 countries
	Gabon	Cameroon		Zaire	
	Libya	Congo			
	Nigeria	Egypt			
		Tunisia			
Asia	Indonesia	Bahrein	India	Burma	21 countries
	Iran	Brunei	Pakistan		
	Iraq	Malaysia	Philippines		
	Kuwait	Oman	Turkey		
	Qatar	Syria	Burma		
	Saudi Arabia				
	U.A.E.				

The energy economies of the developing world were still mainly based on non-oil energy sources, which were often also short in supply, as “energy poverty” in the rural parts of the developing world was for instance problematized by the IIED under Barbara Ward’s leadership (which Strong remained associated with).²⁸ But even though the 93 oil-importing developing countries only consumed a small fraction of the world’s oil, most of those countries had little or no domestic oil production and needed to import refined petroleum products at world market

27 Jean Favre and F.M. Le Leuch, “Petroleum Exploration Trends in the Developing Countries,” in *Petroleum Exploration Strategies in Developing Countries: Proceedings of a United Nations Meeting held in The Hague, 16–20 March, 1981* (London: Graham and Trotman Ltd, 1982), 17–49.

28 Strong Papers, Box 74–715. IIED: Arjun Makhijani, Energy Policy for the Rural Third World, September 1976.

prices. As oil-burning technologies were part of many development and modernization programs, oil use in those countries tripled from around 100 million tons in 1960 to over 310 by 1979, of which 80 percent was imported. Those countries therefore had a growing oil deficit, which at the same time meant an increasingly negative payment balance as oil had to be purchased in foreign currency.²⁹ Particularly African oil-importing countries were hit hard by the first oil price shock in 1973–1974, and even more so by the second oil price crisis in 1979–1981. Zambia, for instance, had benefitted from a decade-long boom in copper revenues, before the oil price shocks sent its economy into turmoil from 1973.³⁰ Tanzania, which had embarked on an ambitious socialist state-building project under Julius Nyerere, suffered a fatal economic blow from the increasing cost of oil imports that exposed economic fragility and ultimately contributed to the collapse of the Tanzanian experiment.³¹

Based on an assessment of oil import cost being a fundamental problem for the developing world, and Canada's need for additional supplies of fuel, Strong saw an opportunity for Petro-Canada. After initially focusing on Canadian oil exploration, Petro-Canada announced an international expansion in 1977, aiming to create new oil and gas import relationships, as it was expected that the Canadian oil demand would grow and ultimately require significantly more imports.³² Even though Petro-Canada was a state-owned company, international involvement was not considered contradictory to its national purpose, as Strong and his team saw international entanglements inherent to the oil business given its international price, trade, and capital investment structures. Finding and establishing new oil import channels was seen as a logical extension of exploring for oil and gas on Canada's frontier areas.³³

To that end, Strong established relationships with existing oil producers, particularly Venezuela. There he saw an opportunity for cooperation between the national oil companies, Petro-Canada and Petróleos de Venezuela, S.A. (PDVSA), in

²⁹ J. Favre and H. Le Leuch, "Petroleum Exploration Trends in the Developing Countries," *Natural Resources Forum*, 5 (1981), 327–46, here 33.

³⁰ Jonas Kreienbaum, "Der verspätete Schock: Sambia und die erste Ölkrise von 1973/74," *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 43 (2017), 612–33. See also: Jonas Kreienbaum, *Das Öl und der Kampf um eine Neue Weltwirtschaftsordnung: Die Bedeutung der Ölkrisen der 1970er Jahre für die Nord-Süd-Beziehungen* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2022).

³¹ George Roberts, *Revolutionary State-Making in Dar es Salaam: African Liberation and the Global Cold War, 1961–1974* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 277.

³² Strong Papers, Box 149–1415. Petro-Canada, News Release, Maurice Strong calls for Major International Role for Petro-Canada, April 18, 1977.

³³ Strong Papers, Box 160–1508. John Ralston Saul, Sketch Outline for Petro-Canada International Involvement Paper, August 18, 1976.

developing the vast but still largely unused heavy crude oil reserves in the Alberta Tar Sands and the Orinoco oil belt.³⁴ Strong also looked at promising new oil provinces in the developing world, particularly in east Asia, where he travelled extensively in search of oil and gas exploration opportunities for Petro-Canada.³⁵ Recognizing the exploration gap in the oil-importing parts of the developing world, Strong also advocated that Petro-Canada should play an active role in expanding production in developing countries, “particularly those which offer a prospect of becoming an additional source of supply for Canada,” as he wrote to his friend and confidant, World Bank president Robert S. McNamara in January 1978.³⁶

Even though Strong left UNEP for the oil industry in late 1975, he continued to be active in environmental organizations, particularly the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN), and maintained his environmental governance network next to his day jobs as an oil executive. During the late 1970s and early 1980s, Strong would repeatedly wear different hats. When speaking to environmentalists he would argue passionately for environmental conservation; when speaking to oil and development audiences he would argue that environmental standards were important but that the more pressing problem was oil supply security and economic development. During those years, Strong accepted honorary degrees and prizes for his environmental diplomacy achievements, notably two environmental prizes from petrostates. In 1976, Strong was the recipient of the first International Pahlavi Environment Prize sponsored by the Iranian government, which he proudly accepted from Prince Abdul Reza Pahlavi.³⁷ In April 1977, when Strong visited Venezuela in his Petro-Canada capacity, he ended up combining the talks with the state oil company PVDSA about a cooperation in oil sand development with a reception where he was awarded the Venezuela Nature Conservation Prize.³⁸ Just a few months later, in June 1977, Strong travelled to Iceland for a very different purpose, to attend the International Conference on Environmental Futures, organized by his long-standing associate, ecologist Nicholas Polunin. Even though Strong was now an oil executive, he was still considered as a key man in international environmental or-

³⁴ Strong Papers, Box 160–1507. Petro-Canada and Petróleos de Venezuela, “International Energy Prospects to 2000,” February 1978.

³⁵ Strong Papers, Box 170–1603. Trip locations: China, Vietnam; and 171–1613. Trip Locations Papua New Guinea.

³⁶ Strong Papers, Box 163–1537. Strong to Robert S. McNamara, January 5, 1978.

³⁷ Strong Papers, Box 169–1593. Remarks by Maurice F. Strong on Receipt of Pahlavi International Environment Prize, June 4, 1976.

³⁸ Strong Papers, Box 172–1618. Trip locations: Venezuela.

ganizations, and held a much-applauded speech about “Growth in a Conserving Society.”³⁹

Strong’s business plan: Finding oil for the developing world

In late 1977, Strong handed over the leadership of Petro-Canada and moved his main domicile to Colorado, where he bought the natural resource company AZL Resources. At the same time, he also served as the new head of the Canadian government-funded International Development Research Centre (IDRC) in Ottawa.⁴⁰ In those functions, he developed a plan for promoting oil exploration in the developing world, which would result in him creating the IEDC in 1979.

In the late 1970s there were many speculations about the oil potential of the developing world, both among petroleum geologists and in international development circles. The crucial question was how much oil could be found in the regions that had not been explored yet, and whether the lack of oil production in most of the developing world was due to geology or rather an exploration deficit. From a geological viewpoint, the world’s potentially petroliferous regions (essentially the geological formation of a sedimentary basin) were not only concentrated in the main producing regions in the Americas and Middle East but all around the world, with many possible oil reservoirs still to be found in offshore sedimentary basins (like the North Sea, which was only explored for oil and gas from the 1960s). There were diverging estimates as to how much oil could be found in the developing world, though. Assessments of ultimately discoverable oil reserves ranged from lower estimates by oil companies to more optimistic ones that suspected a huge unexplored oil potential in the developing world, notably by geologist Bernardo Grossling of the US Geological Survey (USGS).⁴¹

While there were diverging interpretations of the potential scale of hydrocarbon resources, most could agree that the uncertainty stemmed from a lack of exploration, since the developing regions had been much less explored compared to North America and the other known major oil regions in the USSR and Middle

³⁹ Strong Papers, Box 69–667. *Growth in a Conserving Society*. See also: Nicholas Plunin, ed., *Growth Without Ecodisasters? Proceedings of the Second International Conference on Environmental Future (2nd ICEF) held in Reykjavík, Iceland, 5–11 June 1977* (London: Macmillan, 1980).

⁴⁰ Strong Papers, Box 143–1362. International Development Research Centre.

⁴¹ Bernardo Grossling, *Window on Oil: A Survey of World Petroleum Resources* (London: The Financial Times Ltd., 1976).

East.⁴² During the 1970s, the overall number of wells drilled in non-OPEC developing countries did increase from 620 wells in 1970 to 819 by 1979, most of them in Latin America.⁴³ The main barrier to developing the potential oil fields of most developing countries, as Strong would later also point out, was raising the funds for exploration. And in the event that funding was obtained, a related challenge was acquiring the exploration technology and management skills to do geo-physical surveys—above all seismic studies—, interpret those results, and take decisions on where to drill exploratory wells. In order to obtain funding and expertise, the choices for non-oil-producing developing countries were either to offer exploration licenses to foreign oil companies, or to build up a national oil company, as for instance Brazil or Argentina did in the 1960s and 70s, which required substantial government spending.⁴⁴ The three main segments of the oil industry—the major companies, smaller independents, and national oil companies—were not particularly interested in exploration in developing countries, however. The main reasons were low hopes for major discoveries but also hesitation and concerns about potential expropriation. Exploration agreement practices, whereby companies could acquire promising licenses without any obligation to explore or develop them, also hampered oil exploration in new regions.⁴⁵

As for financing exploration ventures, there were few international funds that provided loans for oil exploration. With the added cashflow after the oil price shocks, OPEC governments created a so-called Special Fund, which offered low-interest loans for infrastructure projects in developing countries as a gesture of solidarity but not for oil exploration or development.⁴⁶ Similarly, the World Bank had long declined to lend to oil exploration—allegedly at the pressure of oil companies—but changed their policy in 1977 with a new energy exploration loan program. Still, the World Bank loans would only cover 10–20 percent of an explora-

⁴² Peter Odell, “Oil and Gas Potential in Developing Countries: Prospects for and Problems of Its Development,” in *Petroleum Exploration Strategies in Developing Countries* (London: Graham and Trotman Ltd., 1982), 17–26.

⁴³ Francisco Parra, “Exploration in the Developing Countries: Trends in the Seventies, Outlook for the Eighties,” *OPEC Review* 5, no. 2 (1981): 22–38.

⁴⁴ Drielly Peyerl and Silvia Fernanda de Mendonça Figueirôa, “Applied Geophysics in Brazil and the Development of a National Oil Industry (1930–1960),” *History and Technology* 36, no. 1 (2020), 83104.

⁴⁵ Parra, “Exploration in the Developing Countries,” 22–38.

⁴⁶ Mohammed Yeganeh, OPEC Special Fund: An Illustration of Solidarity with the Third World, *OPEC Review* 1, no. 4 (1977), 3–9.

tion project, and only if there was a reasonable potential to increase existing petroleum production, which was not the case in most developing countries.⁴⁷

In response to the World Bank efforts, Strong wrote a manuscript entitled *A Proposal for Increasing Oil Production of Developing Countries* in June 1978 and sent it to his contacts at the World Bank and UN Development Program (UNDP).⁴⁸ Strong pointed to a recent World Bank report on *Minerals and Energy in Developing Countries*, which had identified the unexplored petroleum potential based on the more optimistic resource assessments of USGS geologist Bernardo Grossling. Strong's proposal therefore envisioned an international agency that would oversee a special oil exploration fund and development program, and since Strong was still working for Petro-Canada, he found that his company could assume a key role.⁴⁹ McNamara of the World Bank welcomed the proposal but had several concerns about the practical implementation of Strong's plan.⁵⁰

Strong's original idea of raising funds from industrialized nations for a development program turned out to be difficult to implement. So he revised his plan and proposed a private business alternative with a corporate structure, where funds would not become development aid but instead be investments in an oil exploration venture. In August of 1979, Strong presented the revised plan entitled *Proposal for Creation of a Corporation to Promote Oil and Gas Exploration and Development in Developing Countries*.⁵¹ Strong now saw the need for a private business organization, which, as he emphasized, could be "credible both with developing countries and with the oil and gas industry." Its purpose, according to Strong, would be "the creation of groups or consortia of companies willing and able to carry out increased oil and gas exploration and development in developing countries under conditions that are acceptable in both economic and political terms to such countries." Unlike a development institution, it would operate as a private corporation, but in principle would not be aiming for profits and control of re-

⁴⁷ Philippe Bourcier, "The World Bank Programme to Accelerate Exploration in Developing Countries," *Petroleum Exploration Strategies in Developing Countries: Proceedings of a United Nations Meeting held in The Hague, 16–20 March, 1981* (London: Graham and Trotman Ltd., 1982), 193–201. See also: Strong Papers, Box 163–1536. Platt's Oilgram News, Friday May 26, 1978: "World Bank to Provide Third World \$500-million yearly in Oil Loans." In the first years, the World Bank exploration loans mainly went to India and Pakistan.

⁴⁸ Strong Papers, Box 163–1536. Maurice Strong, Memorandum (Confidential): A Proposal for Increasing Oil Production of Developing Countries, June 1, 1978.

⁴⁹ Strong Papers, Box 163–1536. Maurice F. Strong to Robert S. McNamara, January 5, 1978.

⁵⁰ Strong Papers, Box 163–1537. Robert S. McNamara to Maurice F. Strong, January 31, 1978.

⁵¹ Strong Papers, Box 246–2325. Maurice F. Strong, Outline of a Proposal for Creation of a Corporation to Promote Oil and Gas Exploration and Development in Developing Countries, August 25, 1979.

sources. Instead, Strong explained, it would act “as an instrument, or ‘prime mover’, in putting together and initiating exploration projects,” before those could be sold off to other oil companies for final development and production.⁵² That way, the Strong foresaw a corporation that would be very similar to Petro-Canada and primarily serve as a catalyst for oil development by exploring new fields and then selling them to other developers. Strong’s ideas were also the subject of a special North-South Energy Roundtable created by the Society for International Development from 1978, which provided an intellectual forum to discuss solutions to the developing world’s oil deficit.⁵³

When the second oil price shock hit the markets in 1979—which sent the real (deflated) crude oil price to twice the level it had reached during 1973–1974—the time seemed right for Strong to go ahead with his corporation proposal. The second oil price shock had a devastating effect on already negative payment balancing of oil-importing countries, and especially from 1979, the solidarity of so-called “NOPECs” with OPEC price policies waned, since OPEC exporters did not give discounts to oil-importers from the developing world.⁵⁴ The 1979 price shock also created a boost for oil exploration. As Strong quickly saw, funds for oil exploration became readily available, as the entire oil industry mobilized for an exploration boom in the windfall of added oil earnings, and other investors were keen to take part in the oil rush. It was in this business environment that Strong wanted to help developing countries by creating the International Energy Development Corporation (IEDC) in August 1979. Strong saw an opportunity, which was rooted in his earlier involvement in international development politics and the oil business, and his many contacts in both the business and development scenes.⁵⁵

Sustainable development? The promise and limitations of Strong’s IEDC venture

The IEDC vision was to get developing nations started in the high-risk exploration phase and help them transition to the relatively low-risk development phase once they knew where the oil was. The IEDC would raise funds for geological studies,

52 Ibid.

53 John Foster et al., *Energy for Development: An International Challenge: Prepared for the North-South Roundtable of the Society for International Development* (New York: Praeger, 1981), 254.

54 Jonas Kreienbaum, *Das Öl und der Kampf um eine Neue Weltwirtschaftsordnung: Die Bedeutung der Ölkrise der 1970er Jahre für die Nord-Süd-Beziehungen* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2022), chapters 4 and 5.

55 *Against All Odds: The KUFPEC Story*, 12.

seismic profiles and exploration drilling, and sell the explored licenses to other oil companies to develop them, thereby creating a return that could be used to invest in new exploration projects. The company was based in Geneva to give it a neutral character, with the express purpose of raising funds for oil exploration in developing countries. Opening the headquarters in Switzerland, however, was not self-evident. In order to incorporate the IEDC in Switzerland, Strong had to call in favors from contacts at the UN and World Bank, to convince the Swiss parliament to allow a new oil company to be incorporated in Geneva in August 1980.⁵⁶

To implement the IEDC vision, Strong recruited an experienced and well-connected management team in August of 1979.⁵⁷ In many regards, the IEDC was a direct continuation of his earlier work for Petro-Canada, as he used his industry contacts from that time to recruit the IEDC management and technical expert staff. One of them was Francisco Parra, a renowned Venezuelan oil economist, who had worked for the state oil company PVDSA and served as OPEC Secretary General in 1960, before he became an independent oil consultant. Strong's second key partner was Algerian Nordine Ait-Laoussine, a US-educated petroleum geologists who rose through the ranks of the Algerian national oil company Sonatrach and became its executive vice president in 1970. In that capacity, he negotiated with the French government and presided over the nationalization of Algerian oil and gas infrastructures in 1971.⁵⁸ The third key member of IEDC management was Keith F. Huff, a Canadian who had decades of experience in exploration with major companies, until 1977 as the global exploration manager for Exxon.⁵⁹ Strong also recruited John Malcolm Godfrey, an experienced Canadian exploration and production manager who had already worked with him at Petro-Canada.⁶⁰

The first task for the management team was to raise the necessary funds from international investors, and it managed to do so within a relatively short time. The first investor and largest shareholder was Strong's own company, AZL Resources, which had until then been involved in oil and resource development in the US. The second investor was the Canadian oil refining company Sulpetro, which had significant German and Swiss shareholding, and was primarily interested in securing new crude oil supplies. Another shareholder became the Swedish car manufacturer VOLVO, which was in the process of establishing the energy investment sub-

⁵⁶ *Against All Odds: The KUFPEC Story*, 13.

⁵⁷ Strong Papers, Box 246–2325. Maurice F. Strong to Pehr G. Gyllenhammar, August 17, 1979.

⁵⁸ Francisco R. Parra, *Oil Politics: A Modern History of Petroleum* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2004), 151.

⁵⁹ Keith F. Huff, "Frontiers of World Exploration," in *Facts and Principles of World Petroleum Occurrence*, ed. Andrew D. Miall (Calgary: Canadian Society of Petroleum Geologists, Memoir 6, 1980), 343–62.

⁶⁰ See the CVs in Strong Papers, Box 244–2308.

sidiary VOLVO Energi. There Strong relied on personal relationships, as he and VOLVO CEO Pehr Gyllenhammar were close friends. They were both trustees of the Aspen Institute and therefore met on several occasions over the summer of 1980, where they negotiated the details of VOLVO's participation in the IEDC.⁶¹ Strong's IEDC proposal met with Gyllenhammar's interest in petroleum investment opportunities, as he had personally lamented the Swedish decision not to participate in the Norwegian oil venture in the 1960s, and in the early 1980s led VOLVO into the oil business to diversify its operations and create new revenue streams.⁶² With the help of Parra and Ait-Laoussine, who were well-connected within OPEC, Strong could also win Arab investors: the Kuwait Petroleum Corporation and the APICORP investment fund (owned by Arab OPEC governments).⁶³ Clearly, the IECD concept was very convincing to a diverse set of companies and Gulf monarchs, who were keen to take part in the oil rush and—as a bonus—do something good for the developing countries.

Backed with the seed capital from the new shareholders, the IEDC set up its corporate offices in Geneva and London. The formal headquarters for the holding company IEDC were in Geneva, with an office led by Ait-Laoussine and Francisco Parra and a total of 20 employees. Strong himself—when not jetting around the world—would oversee the corporation's operations from its Ewell offices near London with up to 30 employees.⁶⁴ The IEDC managers immediately went to work and set up exploration projects in Africa. In July 1980, the IEDC management team travelled to Angola to speak to the Minister of Petroleum and made informal agreements on three exploration blocks, both on land and offshore, which they presented to the shareholders as their first venture.⁶⁵ In the same month, the management team met with Sudanese government representatives and established contact with a consortium led by the French oil company CFP, where the

⁶¹ Strong Papers, Box 246–2325. Pehr G. Gyllenhammar to Maurice F. Strong, April 22, 1980.

⁶² Volvo Årsredovisning (Annual Report) 1982, 27. See also in Gyllenhammar's biography: Henric Borgström and Martin Haag, *Gyllenhammar* (Udevalla: Bonniers, 1988), 188–95. The IEDC was Volvo's first oil venture, followed by the Colorado oil firm Hamilton Oil and the Norwegian Saga Petroleum.

⁶³ Strong Papers, Box 246–2325. Maurice F. Strong to Nureddin Farraq, November 26, 1980. See also: *Against All Odds: The KUFPEC Story*, 13.

⁶⁴ Strong Papers, Box 70–682. Memorandum: Personnel List: Update, July 15, 1983. The IEDC Group later also maintained an office in Australia with 25 employees, a Houston office that specialized in natural gas (or LNG) exploration with 12 employees and subsidiary companies (limited partnerships) in each country it operated. See: Strong Papers, Box 244–2303. Memorandum: International Energy Development Corporation, July 20, 1983.

⁶⁵ Strong Papers, Box 247–2339. Memorandum: Angola, July 26, 1980.

IEDC would acquire a 25% interest in the southeast-Sudan venture.⁶⁶ Additional projects were set up in Ghana, Congo, Tanzania, Egypt, Turkey, and Oman, as well as some departures from the developing world in Australia and Italy (allegedly to create revenue that could be reinvested in developing countries). Many more potential sites, especially in Africa and Latin America, were also considered.⁶⁷

Seeing itself generally in more of a catalyzing and consulting capacity towards developing countries, the IEDC established a consulting arm, IEDConsultants in 1981, which offered expertise in the planning, evaluation, negotiation and forecasting of oil exploration and development, and also did feasibility studies for developing countries, e.g. a natural gas study for Tanzania.⁶⁸ Consulting was also seen as an opportunity for the company to earn revenues, which was difficult to accomplish with exploration projects, where little could be earned before the oil was found.⁶⁹ With the expertise and connections of the management team, the IEDC also worked towards changing the conditions for oil exploration in developing countries by analyzing what was needed to attract more investments by Western oil companies. In 1981, for instance, Parra and Ait-Laoussine presented their concept of revised exploration agreements in non-oil-producing developing countries at the annual conference of the Society of Petroleum Engineers. They argued that distrust and reservations between host governments and foreign exploration companies could be reduced by a neutral third party like the IEDC, which would ensure that agreements specified revenue sharing in the event of a discovery. That way, host government were guaranteed rents from potential production, while exploration companies had the necessary flexibility for the risky business of oil exploration.⁷⁰

By 1981, Strong and his partners had built an oil exploration company with a broad range of expert staff but no physical infrastructure in the form of exploration equipment, tankers, or refineries, as all exploration work on the ground (or off the shore) was done by external partners. The staff mainly consisted of managers and consultants, who coordinated the international exploration activities. From 1982, however, the market situation changed dramatically. Between 1981 and 1982, the international oil market went from a sellers' to a buyers' market, and turned an exploration boom to a market glut plagued by oversupply (from

⁶⁶ Strong Papers, Box 247–2339. Memorandum: Sudan, July 31, 1980

⁶⁷ See an overview in *Against All Odds: The KUFPEC Story*.

⁶⁸ Strong Papers, Box 244–2302. IEDConsultants S.A.

⁶⁹ *Against All Odds: The KUFPEC Story*, 26.

⁷⁰ Nordine Ait-Laoussine, Norman W. Miller and Francisco R. Parra, "A Framework for Exploration and Production in Developing Countries," paper presented at *Society of Petroleum Engineers, 56th Annual Fall Technical Conference*, October 1981.

the perspective of oil companies). Under those changed circumstances, oil companies and especially exploration companies started downsizing and even laying off exploration staff. With declining oil prices and crisis sentiments among oilmen, it became difficult to raise new funds for exploration projects, as Strong lamented at a symposium organized by the IEDC in December 1982.⁷¹

Next to the difficult economic circumstances, the IEDC also suffered from a lack of a major exploration breakthrough. As of 1983, they had several promising exploration projects but not found any commercially viable oil reserves that could be sold to developers. In Egypt, they had only found non-commercial quantities of oil in the Gulf of Suez, with a second well promising but not yet fully tested for its potential. In Oman the projects seemed promising but had resulted in a well that was ultimately abandoned with minor quantities of oil and gas. In Sudan they were still in the process of doing seismic exploration work and had not yet drilled. In Congo they ended up with a dry well that was abandoned, and awaiting the test results from another well. In Tanzania and Turkey, they were still doing preliminary seismic studies and preparing a drilling program. Overall, they desperately needed a win in the form of a sizeable oil discovery.⁷²

In an attempt to turn the tides, Strong reshuffled his IEDC shareholdings. Together with two Swiss business partners, Strong had created a new company in 1981, the Société Générale pour l'Énergie et Ressources (Sogener). This company, which the Swiss daily newspaper *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* labeled a “confusingly complicated financial group,”⁷³ formally took over Strong's shares in AZL and the IEDC along with various other interests in energy and real estate.⁷⁴ When the IEDC desperately needed new capital in 1983, Strong arranged for a merger of AZL (formally owned by Sogener) with the US oil company Tosco Corporation (The Oil Shale Corporation), and became Tosco's new vice-chairman. Tosco had primarily been involved in shale oil development in Colorado but by then had branched out into oil refining and hoped to gain crude oil supplies from AZL

⁷¹ Strong Papers, Box 244–2302. Notes by Maurice F. Strong for a session on “Energy Development – New Initiatives,” at IEDC conference, Geneva, December 14, 1982.

⁷² Strong Papers, Box 245–2312. Letter from the Chairman and Managing Director, 1983.

⁷³ “Sogener-Mehrheit für die Crédit Immobilier S. A.: Verwirrend komplizierte Finanzgruppe in Genf,” *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, August 19, 1981, 16.

⁷⁴ Strong's Swiss partners in Sogener with Léonard Hentsch and Michel Le Goc. The new group took over Strong's own holding company, Strovest, which held the shares in AZL and IEDC. Upon creation in 1981, Sogener also completed a merger with the Swiss real estate company Crédit Immobilier.

and the IEDC.⁷⁵ Yet only a little later, TOSCO faced bankruptcy. Strong therefore arranged for another deal in 1983, in which TOSCO sold the IEDC to one of the companies that had been involved in Strong's project from the beginning: the Kuwait Petroleum Corporation.⁷⁶

Strong ended up resigning a year after the IEDC reshuffle in ownership, in February 1984, as part of another agreement by which he transferred all of his remaining powers to the other shareholders.⁷⁷ Meanwhile, the IEDC had prioritized completing existing projects before adding new responsibilities.⁷⁸ There were attempts to bring in a new major partner with the Italian oil company AGIP (part of ENI), but the cooperation never materialized.⁷⁹ Instead, the Kuwait Petroleum Corporation acquired the remaining shares of the partners Volvo and APICORP and integrated the IEDC into its foreign exploration program.⁸⁰ As Strong later lamented, the business failures of the early 1980s "came as a major financial blow to me, wiping out most of the capital value I had built up over the past several years."⁸¹

Strong's IEDC adventure therefore ended in 1983 and did not transform the oil industry in favor of developing countries. Initially, Strong had declared that he wanted to expand the IEDC from a 10 to a 100 million dollar company by getting more and more investors and farming out the initial exploration projects to other oil companies that would help fund the cost of further exploration and drilling.⁸² The Kuwait Petroleum Corporation ended up developing part of the explored fields but nowhere near what Strong and his management team had envisioned for the developing world. As Ait-Laoussine analyzed the IEDC failure in 1985, he pointed out that the push for oil exploration in the developing world by the World Bank and IEDC improved the conditions for oil exploration and oil companies to come to developing countries significantly but came too late. By the time the IEDC exploration projects could have materialized, the exploration rush was

75 "Energy Expert Gets A Top Post at Tosco," *New York Times*, January 31, 1983. Strong's AZL became the largest individual shareholder of TOSCO, which earned Strong the position of vice-chairman.

76 Strong, *Where on Earth*, 157–58.

77 Strong Papers, Box 244–2306. 1984 Strong resignation list.

78 Strong Papers, Box 244–2311. IEDC Corporate Strategy 1983–1985.

79 Strong Papers, Box 245–2312. Background Information Relevant for Possible AGIP Entry into IEDC.

80 *Against All Odds: The KUFPEC Story*, 26.

81 Strong, *Where on Earth*, 158. Pulling out of the IEDC, however, did not mean an end to Strong's involvement in international development, as he served as chairman of the Canada Development Investment Corporation during 1982–1984.

82 *Against All Odds: The KUFPEC Story*, 26.

over and the oil market was faced with an oil surplus, which meant that oil companies lost interest in acquiring new supplies in developing countries.⁸³

In retrospect, it is obvious why the IEDC failed. As a business proposition, though, it seemed to come at exactly the right time and won the trust of major investors—under the expectation of a sustained high level of oil prices and a worldwide oil exploration drive. Geologically speaking, their instincts were right. As Strong and IEDC managers later reminisced, some of their exploration projects were ultimately unsuccessful, such as the Ras Winde block in Tanzania. But others turned out to be rich in oil, such as in offshore Congo, where they had stopped drilling after the second unsuccessful well, primarily because VOLVO and other shareholders lost patience and wanted to limit the losses. After the IEDC sold the exploration license, another operator ended up finding oil in a third well.⁸⁴ Strong would later lament that some “some of the [exploration] properties we had assembled turned out to be real winners, and we would have done very well had we been able to maintain our interest in them.”⁸⁵ As later spectacular oil finds in the developing world confirmed (particularly in East Africa), it was not due to geology that developing countries had little oil production in the 1970s but rather due to the absence of exploration.

Whether successful or not, however, is not the crucial point to evaluate the IEDC as a case study in the history of development. The IEDC represented a development project that revealed the trade-off between developmental and environmental priorities. Largely unnoticed by the Global North, developing economies suffered just as much from the oil price shocks, and even more so in terms of their payment balances and foreign debt obligations. As Strong saw it, addressing the oil deficit was one of the fundamental issues in developing economies. However, somewhat curiously, the IEDC did not particularly spotlight its environmental management. Unlike other oil companies, they did not highlight how they protected the environment with safeguards during exploration and drilling. The IEDC saw its legitimization primarily in aiding the developing world.

In the 1980s, Strong was closely involved in the making of the concept of sustainable development, as a combination of economic development and environmental protection. Soon after the IEDC adventure ended, in 1984, he was appointed as a delegate of the Brundtland Commission. As Iris Borowy has pointed out, Norwegian chairwoman Gro Harlem Brundtland included Strong because of his

⁸³ Nordine Ait-Laoussine and Francisco R. Parra, “The Development of Oil Supplies during the Energy Crises of the 1970s and Some Questions for the Future,” *OPEC Review* 9, no. 1 (1985): 29–62.

⁸⁴ *Against All Odds: The KUFPEC Story*, 23.

⁸⁵ Strong, *Where on Earth*, 158.

network to a broad range of organizations, policymakers, and scientists, as well as his experience in the business world, which would become instrumental for the organization of the Commission.⁸⁶ Strong later took on another major environmental role as chairman of the Rio Earth Summit in 1992. There he would shape international climate diplomacy but at the same time bring industrial polluters to the table and allow them to shape, or ultimately weaken, international efforts to address the problem of global warming.⁸⁷

In the early 1980s, while Strong acted as chairman of the IEDC, he was also closely involved with the Aspen Institute, which maintained a program on *Food, Climate and the World's Future* under the leadership of distinguished atmospheric scientist Walter Orr Roberts.⁸⁸ As a trustee of the Aspen Institute, Strong (and other oil executives) supported Roberts' climate program by establishing contact with corporate donors and promoting the associated events and publications.⁸⁹ In the late 1970s, Roberts' program increasingly focused on carbon dioxide (CO₂) and the greenhouse effect, including a special study program on "The Impact of Man on Climate Change."⁹⁰ In 1981, the Aspen Institute even financed and promoted a book-length report by pioneering climate scientist William Kellogg entitled *Climate Change And Society: Consequences of Increasing Atmospheric Carbon Dioxide*.⁹¹ Strong already had first-hand knowledge of the science of global warming from his time at UNEP and a special workshop with international scientists on Outer Limits at the Aspen Institute in 1973, but continued his involvement in the oil business despite being aware, and also raising awareness, of the science of global warming.⁹² In retrospect, those dual activities—promoting environmental conservation and climate science while at the same time managing oil companies—are highly contradictory. Yet in Strong's eyes, petroleum was still an essen-

⁸⁶ Borowy, *Defining Sustainable Development*, 57–73 and 153–154.

⁸⁷ Strong Papers, Box 467–4436. Documents on the Rio Earth Summit 1992.

⁸⁸ Walter Orr Roberts Papers (COU:1356), Rare and Distinctive Collections, University of Colorado Boulder Libraries, Box 19-H. Walter O. Roberts, Food, Climate and the World's Future, July 15, 1981.

⁸⁹ Roberts Papers, Box 85-E. Strong to D.A. Riddell, April 15, 1977.

⁹⁰ Roberts directed climate programs at the Aspen Institute and the International Federation of Institutes for Advanced Studies, IFIAS, both of which Strong was closely involved with: Strong Papers, Box 173–1629. Walter Orr Roberts, Brief Status Report, IFIAS, The Impact of Man on Climate Changes, September 19, 1978.

⁹¹ William W. Kellogg and Robert Schware, *Climate Change And Society: Consequences of Increasing Atmospheric Carbon Dioxide* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1981).

⁹² Strong Papers, Box 34–336. Report on the Consultation on 'Outer Limits' held in Aspen, Colorado (August 19–24, 1973).

tial energy carrier, while environmental problems, including climate change, could and should be *managed*.⁹³

In the end, Strong left a deeply contradictory legacy. On the one hand, he helped raise awareness of global environmental problems, helped create the leading institutions for international environmental governance, and took the stance of the developing world both in environmental governance and during the oil price crises. On the other hand, he helped business gain a seat at the table and influence environmental diplomacy, argued for environmental management of industries rather than environmental regulation, and sometimes clearly prioritized business interest and oil development over environmental conservation. Over the course of his career, Strong would switch between business and international organizations several times. While he left the business world to enter Canadian and international public service in 1966, he returned to business in 1976–1984, while maintaining his links to environmental organizations like the IUCN. When recruited to serve on the Brundtland Commission in 1984, Strong had just ended his IEDC involvement but maintained a string of holding companies and business interests—notably in natural resources like water in Colorado.⁹⁴ Strong's involvement in business and global environmental governance cannot be that neatly distinguished. While he formally focused on public service roles for Canada and the UN in 1966–1975, his appointments with the Brundtland Commission, chairmanship of the IUCN from 1977, and the 1992 Rio conference overlapped with business roles, interests, and activities.

The IEDC remains an example for a development history that cannot be deemed good or bad that easily but reveals the tension between the competing positive and negative standard narratives of development. From a developing country perspective, and in the eyes of Strong, petroleum exploration and development promised to solve the key economic issue of oil-importing countries' payment balances in the early 1980s, and in the long term domestic oil supplies and possibly even export earnings. That way, developing countries could become hydrocarbon societies like they already existed in the Global North. Strong clearly chose economic development priorities over environmental priorities, and framed oil exploration for struggling developing countries in positive terms.

Yet at the same time, the IEDC promise obviously encompasses a negative narrative of development. From an environmental and climate history perspective, the IEDC proposal was in retrospect clearly short-sighted and potentially harmful. After all, petroleum development was everything but an environmentally friendly

⁹³ Strong Papers, Box 214–2208. Maurice Strong, Environmental Management, October 20, 1975.

⁹⁴ Strong, *Where on Earth*, 161–65.

or sustainable form of economic development. Moreover, petroleum development would inevitably reinforce existing and create new dependencies on oil and oil-based technologies, such as cars, airplanes and fertilizers, and at a time when energy experts in the Global North and South were already advocating a transition away from oil, while environmentalists and climate scientists were problematizing its environmental pollution and potentially destructive role as a greenhouse gas—of which Strong had first hand knowledge.⁹⁵ The IEDC promise also—whether intentionally or not—served neo-colonialist trade relationships. Strong first developed the plan of oil exploration in the developing world while at Petro-Canada, with the intention of creating new supply channels for Canada. There were clearly also commercial and strategic interests on behalf of Strong's and the industrialized world, since developing countries without refining infrastructures would at first have to export the crude oil to countries like Canada. Yet it remains a contentious question whether the developing world should be held to the same standards as the industrial world; after all, it is difficult to argue against the developing world's right to develop despite global environmental problems like atmospheric CO₂ accumulation, which were historically mainly caused by the so-called developed world.

Conclusion

The history of the International Energy Development Corporation (IEDC) is in many ways exemplary for the deeply contradictory legacy of its founder, Maurice Strong, and for the conflicting positive and negative narratives of development. Founded in 1979 to explore oil for the developing world, the IEDC hoped to enable those oil-importing countries to escape the trap of increasingly negative trade balances after the oil price shocks of the 1970s. Inspired by geological assessments of a vast unexplored oil potential, and enabled by an oil exploration boom following the 1979 oil price increases, the IEDC aimed at providing the financial and technological means for oil exploration in the oil-importing parts of the developing world. To implement the IEDC vision, Strong could rely on an experienced and well-connected management team and a variety of international investors willing to provide the funds for the risky business of oil exploration. Yet while the IEDC set up a number of promising exploration projects all around the world, the com-

⁹⁵ For instance discussed at the 1981 UN Conference on New and Renewable Sources of Energy in Nairobi: Duccio Basosi, "Lost in Transition: The World's Energy Past, Present and Future at the 1981 United Nations Conference on New and Renewable Sources of Energy," *Journal of Energy History/Revue d'Histoire de l'Énergie* 4 (2020): 1–16.

mercial circumstances for oil exploration deteriorated rapidly from 1982 with declining oil prices. Strong's own company and those of his partners ran into financial difficulties before the explored resources could be exploited for the benefit of the host countries, and Strong ended up selling the IEDC by 1983. Despite its failure, the IEDC represents a unique case of North-South energy and development cooperation, where a private business approach was used to enable oil exploration in the vast oil-importing parts of the developing world.

The case of the IEDC also reveals the ambiguity in the actions and rhetoric of its founder Maurice Strong. Having come from the oil industry, he went on to become one of the most influential actors in international environmental and development diplomacy by shaping landmark events like the Stockholm conference and leading institutions like UNEP. At the same time, Strong remained faithful to his business roots, endorsed a dialogue with industry and its voluntary management of environmental problems, and ended up returning to the oil business after having built up UNEP. Strong clearly prioritized development over environment, both in the sense of oil exploration to prevent energy shortages like he did with Petro-Canada and by defending the developing world's right to economic development despite environmental concerns. Strong would passionately argue for environmental conservation but at the same view environmental problems in a pragmatic manner and endorse trade-offs between developmental and environmental priorities. For the time being, he saw oil as essential to both the developed and the developing world, and believed, or perhaps hoped, that developmental and environmental priorities could be reconciled if they were only managed in a proper and balanced manner—or his understanding of *sustainable development*. The IEDC therefore reveals deeply contradictory narratives of development. On the one hand, Strong's IEDC promised to solve an alarming economic problem for oil-importing developing countries and enable economic development. On the other hand, the IEDC scheme served Strong's business interests and conflicted with the environmental ideals he preached. In the end, Strong left a colorful legacy that encompasses black and green as well as positive and negative histories of development.

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