

Book Review: Global Development: A Cold War History by Sara Lorenzini

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Lorenzini, Sara. *Global Development: A Cold War History*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2019. 296 pages. Hardcover. \$29.95.

At the zenith of the Cold War, “development” was a useful catchphrase utilized to create allies and satellites in the ideological battle between the East, represented by the Union of Soviet Socialist Republic and its satellite members and the West, represented by the United States and its allies. Sara Lorenzini, an associate professor of International History in the School of International Studies at the University of Trento, Italy, takes readers on a tour de force through the history of development as a Cold War global project from the late 1940s until the 1980s. Development, in the lexicon of the Cold War period, came to signify progress, modernity, and economic growth.

Development aid was closely aligned with the security concerns of the great powers, for whom infrastructure and development projects were ideological tools for conquering hearts and minds around the globe, from Europe and Africa to Asia and Latin America. Development was the panacea to all the world’s newly independent nations in the aftermath of the decolonization process that led to the creation of the so-called Third World. The expression “Third World” was coined in 1952 by the French demographer Alfred Sauvy. Sauvy believed that the expression “Third World” would lead to a “collective awakening of the subject peoples previously ignored, exploited, and watched warily...” (p. 40). All Third World nations shared a Cold War political position of neutrality. While sharing this neutrality position, Third World countries were also able to play the two superpowers against each other for developmental aid in a game of chicken.

Lorenzini’s *Global Development* makes three main points regarding developmental aid during the Cold War. First, the Cold War was fundamental in shaping the global aspirations and ideologies of development and modeling the institutional structures still rule foreign aid today.

Those institutions were created after the Second World War when development became a profession and could provide solutions to eradicate problems such as malaria, organize school systems, teach new farming techniques, or deal with workplace litigation (p. 92). Governments, both in the East and West, created organizations to promote development in the Third World. The West had its Peace Corps, while the East had its own version, created in 1963 by the Council of Ministers of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and known as the *Freundschaftsbrigaden*, made up of young East Germans, mostly highly skilled technicians (p. 86).

Second, Lorenzini argues that the role of the state was crucial, and that though development projects were articulated in global terms, as narratives to frame problems and provide solutions, they actually served national purposes. No period is more representative of the importance of the state as an engine of economic development than the 1980s known in Latin America as the “lost decade.” A period of high inflation, high unemployment, capital flight, deficit, and a negative trade balance. Third World nations were forced to swallow the bitter pill of the Washington Consensus with its structural adjustments programs (SAPs).

Third, development institutions tried to create a universal and homogenous concept of development but ultimately failed. This failure can be attributed to the United States adopting an approach centered on concepts of development and resorted to modernization theory (p. 60). Modernization theory was based on a set of cultural assumptions characteristic of the postcolonial transition: belief in industrial modernity and science as a common destiny; faith in capitalism supported by state regulation, and welfare provision to govern social conflicts. Furthermore, there was a universally valid and historically defined trajectory of progress that required the spread of Western liberal capitalist democracy (p. 60). During the “age of development” (1940-1970), economic growth became one with the national project, and

planning and state investments were key to promote prosperity and “take-off” among the newly independent nations of the Third World (p. 5).

In the aftermath of the failure of modernization theory to promote development in the Third World due to its conditionality and strings attached, enters China promoting a development alternative approach based on the notion of self-reliance (p. 107). Under this alternative model, China never attached conditions or asked for privileges; it tried to lighten the burden on recipient countries as much as possible; it helped recipient countries gradually achieve self-reliance; it strove to develop aid projects that required less investments and yielded faster results; it provided the best-quality equipment and materials of its own manufacture; it saw to it that the personnel of the recipient country fully mastered necessary techniques; and it did not allow its experts to make special demands or enjoy special amenities (p. 114). China becomes very active in Africa and Latin America promoting development aid as a tool to promoting the picture of China as a power capable of entering the donor’s club and deserving the prestige that went with it (p. 114). The Soviet Union was also very active during the period of developmental aid. However, the Soviet Union did not use the term “aid.” The Soviet Union did not give aid, because they were not imperialists repenting colonial legacies. They also rejected the distinction between donors and recipients, using the word “solidarity” (p. 81). The Soviet Union remained active as a development aid donor until Mikhail Gorbachev came to power in 1985. With the introduction of *perestroika* (economic restructuring) and *glasnost* (political openness), the Soviet Union begins a process of disengagement with the South and substantial subsidies and military aid to the Third World begins to decline.

The implosion of the Soviet Union also led pundits and political commentators to assert that the “end of history” had arrived and that nations of the world had a chance to “shape a new

world” (p. 169). Rather than peaceful coexistence, however, the world of the twenty-first century is more complex and less secured. We are not “better angels” in the anarchical world of the post-Cold War. Nations still struggle to provide their citizens with basic necessities. In conclusion, thirty years after the end of the Cold War, development, far from being a global project, is still closely bound to nationalist economic and political priorities of the industrialized world (p. 178). I recommend Lorenzini’s *Global Development: A Cold War History* to anyone interested in the history of development as well as to students of political science, international studies, economic geography, and economics.

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