The idea of the Third World was shot through with contradiction. It was an imaginary that conjured a future against and beyond empire, but, as Jeremy Adelman and Gyan Prakash argue in their introduction to this important new volume, it was an internationalist project that was nevertheless reliant on the construction and consolidation of nation-states. Thus, in the first few decades after 1945, the postcolonial state was a necessary condition for “negotiating redistribution, planning development, and sowing alliances,” but it was also, in the view of the editors, something of a trap.1 Because the state frequently served as a constraint on the exercise of freedom, Third Worldism was, they write, “vulnerable to capture by states and their leaders” (24).

Of course, anticolonial nationalism was not merely the replication of the “European model of national sovereignty” (10), Adelman and Prakash argue; it always “placed the postcolonial nation in an international frame” (13) that sought to correct historic political and economic inequities—to imagine an alternative world order, one in which hierarchy, as Adom Getachew has argued, was replaced with equality.2 Nevertheless, as alternative visions of federation collapsed in the first decades after 1945, and as the nation-state became the dominant vehicle through which the aspirations of the formerly colonized would be channeled, the Third World emerged as the product of a contradiction “sewn in the very project itself” (24). Yes, Third Worldist movements were battered by Cold War interventionism and economic interference, but, the editors conclude, the “agonies of Third Worldism” (24) were also internal to the state projects from and in which they were formed.

What, then, is to be revisited in Third Worldism? Should it be understood as more than the doomed project of sometimes corrupt, sometimes inept state leaders, who are styled by the editors as the “guerrilla fighter turned warlord” (16) who used the anticolonial mantle to enrich themselves and/or consolidate their own power? This volume, given its emphasis on the limits of the state as a vehicle for emancipation, largely sets its focus beyond interstate diplomacy. Much more than the political projects of anticolonialism or the economic imaginaries of developmentalism, Inventing the Third World concentrates on what the editors call in the preface “cultural understandings of freedom in the Third World” (ix). While Cindy Ewing’s chapter on the 1947 and 1949 Asian Relations Conferences opens the volume with a reconstruction of pre-Bandung inter-Asian state solidarity, examining its attendant effects on the United Nations, this chapter is something of an outlier.3

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Most of the twelve empirical chapters take an intellectual or cultural history approach to the topic at hand, centering scholars, writers, musicians, artists, book publishers, and journalists.

Three chapters by Patrick Iber, Augustín Cosovschi, and Marcelo Ridenti bring important and frequently overlooked Latin American actors into the Third World story, widening the lens beyond a typical Cuban-centric focus. In these chapters, left political figures and intellectuals from Chile, Mexico, and Brazil play a key role in fostering transnational ties within and beyond the region, linked to but not directed by the Soviet bloc. Reprising some of the themes of his award-winning book, Neither Peace nor Freedom, Iber examines the role of Mexico’s former president Lázaro Cárdenas and the Mexican Movimiento de Liberación Nacional (MLN) in the leadup to the famed Tricontinental Conference in 1966. Cosovschi examines the work of Chilean socialist intellectual Oscar Waiss, whose 1956 book Dawn in Belgrade chronicled his travels to and work to build solidarity with Yugoslavia. Using archival sources in multiple languages and arguing specifically for the importance of studying Third Worldism beyond the state, Cosovschi demonstrates how Waiss translated the Yugoslav experience in ways that left “deep imprints in the history of Chilean socialism” (79). Ridenti examines the transnational circulation of the work of exiled Latin American Communist writers such as Pablo Neruda and Jorge Amado. He demonstrates that key tenets of what would become a trans-regional Third World imaginary were already being developed within the regional context of Latin America, showing how ideological struggles between artists over “América nuestra” were a key building bloc of Third Worldism (112).

Two additional chapters also examine the role of intellectuals in the construction of a Third World imaginary. Daniel Steinmetz-Jenkins revisits the 1955 Milan Conference of the Congress for Cultural Freedom, a massive gathering of some 140 scholars from around the world that debated Raymond Aron’s assertion of an “end of ideology.” Tracing the tensions that arose between Western delegates and those from Africa, Asia, and Latin America, particularly around the question of development, he argues that the Milan gathering, coming on the heels of Bandung, marked the turning point in the CIA-supported Congress for Cultural Freedom’s fight against Communism beyond Europe—its turn to the Third World. In a subsequent chapter, Andreas Eckert reviews the work and life of the radical intellectual and activist Walter Rodney, tracing his time in Dar es Salaam and his return to Guyana. As a concise synthesis of the intellectual and political work for which Rodney would be assassinated, the chapter will be especially useful for undergraduate teaching.

The second half of the volume turns from intellectual toward cultural production, beginning with Penny Von Eschen’s essay the global circulation of Black Arts and African-American artists in the early postwar period. Von Eschen starts in London in the late 1940s, focusing on the friendship of American singer and activist Paul Robeson and the Assamese singer and filmmaker Bhupen Hazarika, who produced Hindi interpretations of African-American spiritual songs. She then follows African American artists like the dancer and choreographer Katherine Dunham, who had encountered Robeson in London in 1948, to the controversial 1966 First World Festival of Negro Arts, which was boycotted by cultural luminaries such as Harry Belafonte.

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and James Baldwin for its ties to the US state. In tracing this complicated history, she demonstrates the “fissures in anticolonial modernity” (150) that marked Black American engagement with Third Worldism.

Monica Popescu’s chapter similarly narrates the tensions that arose among African novelists and writers when two important literary conferences were held during the same week in the summer of 1979: one in West Berlin, Germany, and the other in Luanda, Angola. In a context in which the two gatherings of Africa’s literary greats were held on opposite sides of the Cold War ideological map, she argues that “postcolonial writers emerge as the prized intellectual commodities over which the superpowers and their allies battled” (220). But crucially, she concludes, these writers were not mere pawns in a chess game of cultural superiority. Rather, the writers themselves, people like South Africa’s Dennis Brutus, Nigeria’s Chinua Achebe, and Senegal’s Ousmane Sembène, had a “determining contribution…in shaping the cultural Cold War,” through their anti-imperialist agitation, their formal creativity, and even their decisions about which conferences to attend (234).

Other chapters also examine boundary-crossing artistic endeavors. Atreyee Gupta examines the work of painter Francis Newton Souza, a London-based South Asian artist from Goa, toward “rethinking the politics and poetics of color in postwar art.” Naresh Fernandes’s essay traces the lineages of jazz in Bombay and in Bollywood film, examining the careers of musicians such as Chic Chocolate—“India’s Louis Armstrong”—as well as the U.S.-government sponsored visits to the subcontinent of the likes of Duke Ellington and Dave Brubeck. Jessica Bachman’s chapter narrates the history Progress Publishers, an Indian Marxist-Leninist publishing house that translated and distributed Soviet literary and historical works and amplified Soviet visual culture for an Indian audience. In each of these chapters we see alternative transnational circuits of Third Worldism, which often coexisted in an uneasy tension with the states whose borders they crossed.

The final chapter, by Srirupa Roy, flips the transnational focus of the preceding essays to ask how a set of domestic processes in India shaped the rise of a post-internationalist project in the late 1970s. Examining the work of Indian journalists and intellectuals in the wake of the National Emergency of 1975–77, Roy traces an “involution” away from Third Worldism toward a notion of domestic “curative democracy” (241) for the Indian nation. As Indian writers and intellectuals developed “wide-ranging critiques of [the] top-down statist models of developmental modernity” (251) that had marked the first three decades of independence, she argues that the Third World imaginary was transmuted, rather than defeated, by this emerging critique of the state as the bearer of alternative possible futures. As movements and intellectuals railed against nation-states and clamored for the “freedom they had failed to deliver” (254), these actors looked not to the heroically international but to more local concerns.

The volume therefore concludes in what the editors call the “ruins” (7) of a triumphant, state-led Third Worldism; Samuel Moyn argues in the volume’s coda that “the rise and fall of the Third World as a political project…is hardly to be treated as a fund to draw upon now.” Perhaps logically for a volume that stresses movements and thinkers beyond the state, Moyn concludes instead that the Third World project stands as a cautionary tale, even for those who continue to dream that another world is possible. If anticolonial

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internationalism “helped created the conditions for the neoliberal breakthrough” (265), as Moyn concludes, we are left with what Roy calls in her chapter “a diverse range of social actors and organizations that did not have an express interest or direct investment in international solidarity projects” (253). As globalization accelerated and alternative international orders were foreclosed, questions of the local took center stage in Third World politics. Have we therefore left behind the period in which “another globalization was possible,” (261) as Moyn asks? Today, at a time when, perhaps paradoxically, “globalization is met with retreats to national borders” (ix), as the editors put it, the lessons of these histories are ambiguous at best.

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