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Introduction by Brad Simpson

**Nick Cullather. *The Hungry World: America's Cold War Battle Against Poverty in Asia.***

Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010. ISBN: 9780674050785 (hardcover, \$35.00).

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Introduction by Brad Simpson, Princeton University

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From Angola to Afghanistan, a century's worth of U.S. efforts to reform agriculture and 'solve' the global riddles of food production and hunger continue to leave physical traces on the land and discursive traces on the way we imagine the world and America's role in it. In a quartet of articles over the last decade ("Development? Its History"; "Damming Afghanistan: Modernization in a Buffer State"; "Miracles of Modernization: The Green Revolution and the Apotheosis of Technology," and "The Foreign Policy of the Calorie") Nick Cullather has guided scholars seeking to understand these phenomena, offering some of the most theoretically and methodologically sophisticated work in a field which has struggled to develop meta-narratives of development and U.S. foreign relations.<sup>1</sup>

Nick Cullather's new book *The Hungry World: America's Cold War Battle Against Poverty in Asia* comes closer than most to providing that narrative, but his is fractured, multi-variant and highly contingent, "filled as much with paradox and contradiction and unintended consequences," Anne Foster writes, "as it is with firmly held beliefs and heroic achievements." That, of course, is his point. Emily Rosenberg considers it a strength that Cullather "resists refracting U.S. policy into any one simplistic developmentalist model." His book has justly garnered praise, winning the 2011 Ellis W. Hawley Prize of the Organization of American Historians and the 2011 Robert H. Ferrell Prize from SHAFR. As the four reviewers in this H-Diplo roundtable agree, this is a very important, even field defining account. Nicole Sackley calls *The Hungry World* a "seminal contribution" that "pushes diplomatic historians to think in new ways, not only about the historical construction of development practice, but also about the roles of calculability, models, spectacles, and narratives in the larger history of U.S. foreign relations." John Krige terms it "a major contribution to new studies of the global cold war."

This wide-ranging and ambitious book starts by investigating the intellectual and social scientific construction of hunger as an international relations phenomena in the early twentieth century, then examines early, foundation funded efforts to research and breed high yield strains of wheat in Mexico during the interwar period. The next several chapters trace the emergence of hunger in Asia as a strategic, Cold War concern commanding the attention of policymakers, funders and scientists, and the myriad responses they produced to combat it, ranging from programs of land reform to community development, the construction of hydroelectric complexes in Afghanistan, and the development of high yield strains of rice at the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) in the Philippines.

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<sup>1</sup> "Development? It's History," *Diplomatic History* 24: 4 (January 1, 2000): 641-653; "Damming Afghanistan: Modernization in a Buffer State," *Journal of American History* 89:2(September 2002) :512-537; "Miracles of Modernization: The Green Revolution and the Apotheosis of Technology," *Diplomatic History* 28:2 (April 2004) 2: 227-254; "The Foreign "The Foreign Policy of the Calorie," *American Historical Review* 112 : 2 (April 2007) : 336-364.

Focusing on India, Cullather demonstrates how its adoption of so-called Green Revolution seeds and technologies reshaped the imagined place of agriculture in national development plans and literally reconfigured India's place in the world food economy, often with unintended consequences.

The reviewers commend Cullather for his archival efforts, which draw on government collections in the US and India, records of the UN Food and Agricultural Organization, Ford and Rockefeller Foundation papers, and the records of the International Rice Research Institute, among others. They generally applaud his geographic focus, in part because the countries he selected for sustained analysis (Mexico, the Philippines, India, Afghanistan and to a lesser extent Vietnam) illustrate so well the varied approaches of U.S. policymakers, agronomists and technicians – from land reform and plantation agriculture in Mexico to massive hydroelectric projects in Afghanistan to intensified rice cultivation in the Philippines.

As one reviewer notes, Cullather's work joins with that of David Engerman, David Ekbladh, Matt Connelly and Emily Rosenberg in locating the roots of post-1945 development thinking and practice in early twentieth century crises. Cullather is not writing an origin tale, rather, but a genealogy; his concern is with how, as Nicole Sackley puts it, "the very awareness of these as crises depended upon the emergence and political uses of new scientific ways of thinking about hunger and poverty."

Perhaps the most important contribution of *The Hungry World*, several reviewers agree, is Cullather's innovative exploration of the narrative and symbolic work of development. The calorie as metric, the dam as spectacle, the short-stalk grain of rice as visual representation of agricultural modernization, the definition of famines; all operate as much on the plane of representation as of reality, shaping the plans and imaginations of policymakers and peasant farmers alike. President Lyndon Johnson's attempts to convince Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi to define a food crisis in 1966 as a famine points to the vital labor performed by these discursive constructions of hunger and scarcity, as famine became, in Emily Rosenberg's words "a narrative device designed to stampede obdurate factions in both countries to accommodate the developmental planning envisioned by both governments."

Although admiring of Cullather's scope and ambition, all of the reviewers thought *The Hungry World* raised questions it was unable, or did not attempt, to answer. Among them, "did American food aid alleviate or aggravate the problem of global hunger?" Emily Rosenberg feels that Cullather shied away from fully answering this and other questions, such as the degree to which green revolution boosters' claims of exponential yield increases were actually attributable to the new seeds, techniques and inputs they promoted, or to other, more secular forces.

The most substantive criticism, raised by both John Krige and Nicole Sackley, concerns Cullather's relative lack of engagement with the experience of European colonial powers, émigré intellectuals and others in constituting American thinking about agricultural reform, hunger and poverty in the first half of the twentieth century, in the same way that

other reform ideas circulated among transatlantic elites. Each of the Asian colonial powers pursued their own developmental projects and attempts at agricultural reform, and independence movements seized upon their threat or potential to imagine their post-colonial future. But Cullather, as one reviewer prodded, “rarely gives us a sense of [postcolonial elites’] commitment to [the development project], of the way in which they exploited the international opportunities provided by the language of development to further national ambitions and agendas, and indeed of the positive effects that the developmental project may have had on their societies.”

Although several reviewers appreciated Cullather’s decentering of Cold War conflict, they also felt he could have more deeply explored, aside from an evocative chapter on Afghanistan, the views and programs of the Soviet, European and Chinese governments and given a sense of the precise role of Communism/anti-Communism in motivating such efforts and framing them for the recipients of aid and expertise.

It is a measure of *The Hungry World’s* timeliness that the reviewers were left wanting a more prescriptive conclusion than Cullather provided, especially in a work that engages with the agricultural policies of the Obama Administration and the revival, in more modest form, of central ideological and narrative tenets of the Green Revolution, especially in sub-Saharan Africa. His welcome deconstruction of policymakers’ technological hubris, the unintended consequences of their best laid plans, and the less than stellar results of the Green Revolution left all readers (including this one) wishing for fuller discussion of alternatives that might enable a still hungry world to escape from the neoliberal straightjacket that Cullather rightfully critiques.

### Participants:

**Nick Cullather** is Associate Professor of History at Indiana University. His publications include *Secret History: The CIA’s Classified Account of its Operations in Guatemala, 1952-1954* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2nd Edition, 2006; and *Illusions of Influence: The Political Economy of United States-Philippines Relations, 1942-1960* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994). His current project is an investigation of the early history of the CIA. *The Hungry World* has been awarded the Robert H. Ferrell Prize by SHAFR and the Ellis W. Hawley Prize by the OAH.

**Brad Simpson** (Ph.D., Northwestern 2003) is assistant professor of history and international affairs at Princeton University. His first book, *Economists with Guns: Authoritarian Development and U.S.-Indonesian Relations* (2008, 2010 pb), has just been translated into Indonesian. He is currently working on two book projects, one exploring U.S.-Indonesian-international relations during the Suharto era (1966-1998) and another examining the history of the idea self-determination, exploring its political, cultural and legal descent through post-1945 US foreign relations and international politics.

**Anne Foster** teaches History at Indiana State University. She is the author of *Projections of Power: The United States and Europe in Colonial Southeast Asia, 1919-1941* (2010). Her

current project explores international and transnational relations in colonial Southeast Asia regarding regulation and prohibition of opium.

**John Krige** is the Kranzberg Professor and the Director of Graduate Studies in the School of History, Technology and Society. He is the author of *American Hegemony and the Postwar Reconstruction of Science in Europe* (MIT Press, 2006). He has just completed a study of the role of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) as an international partner and as an arm of U.S. diplomacy. His current project is tentatively entitled *Dominance by Diversion. Technological Leadership, Political Leverage and U.S. Foreign Policy*.

**Emily S. Rosenberg** is Professor of History at University of California, Irvine. She is author, among other books, of *Financial Missionaries to the World: The Politics and Culture of Dollar Diplomacy* (Duke, 2000) and has just completed *Transnational Currents in a Shrinking World, 1870-1945*, part of *A New History of the World*, vol., 5 (Harvard University Press and Beck Publishers, forthcoming).

**Nicole Sackley** is Assistant Professor of History and American Studies at the University of Richmond. She is completing a book entitled *Development Fields: American Social Scientists and the Practice of Modernization during the Cold War*.

Nick Cullather's *The Hungry World* advances our understanding of the many ways U.S. power and Americans' ideas about the efficacy of the U.S. model have shaped the world. It does so, however, in ways which resist the urge to make the story have a neat ending, and a tidy, self-contained argument. Despite the often dramatic events which Cullather narrates, including a possible famine and almost complete change in the work of farming in many countries, the book is filled as much with paradox and contradiction and unintended consequences as it is with firmly held beliefs and heroic achievements. Those looking for the grand narrative of the Green Revolution, agricultural modernization, and development should look elsewhere. Cullather instead reveals the ways in which that narrative was constructed, exposing the contingencies, arguments, politics, and personal conflicts which shaped it, as well as the scientific discoveries, dedicated agronomists, and aid packages which made it possible. And even while accomplishing this complex task, Cullather's prose is at once entertaining and deftly incisive.

*The Hungry World* joins a burgeoning literature on modernization and development by accomplished scholars such as David Engerman, Michael Latham, Amy Staples and Bradley Simpson, among others. As a body, this work excitingly combines intellectual and foreign relations history, exploring what people believed about how the world economy did and should and would work, as well as the relations among countries and in international organizations which shaped what happened. Cullather's work likewise prompts us to think about how people imagined the connections of hunger, revolution, and development, and does so effectively. What sets *The Hungry World* apart is Cullather's ability to provide insight into the mindset and activities of both high level officials such as Lyndon B. Johnson and Jawaharlal Nehru as well as the agronomists and planners whose work on the ground had even more influence over how programs were implemented.

The bulk of the analysis centers on the Cold War era, particularly what we might consider its second phase for U.S. policymakers, in which their focus shifted from the geopolitical threat of Soviet expansion in the immediate aftermath of World War II to a more global, diffused, and unbounded perception of threat from the mid-1950s to the early 1970s. Despite that focus, however, *The Hungry World* draws attention to pre-1940 U.S. development efforts, centered more in private efforts, especially the Rockefeller Foundation, as well as to the persistent "development" inspiration of U.S. foreign policy for places such as Afghanistan. This focus suggests some important continuities in conceptions of U.S. foreign policy throughout at least the twentieth century. One of the most important continuities is the continued American faith in the efficacy of an American model for development in the rest of the world, even when that model did not fully work at home, and even when different U.S. organizations were promoting various, sometimes even contradictory, policies as reflective of the 'American model.'

The introduction explains how U.S. policymakers came to be concerned about hunger, not commonly considered a national security issue, in South and Southeast Asia, as well as

Central America and to a lesser extent other parts of what were during the Cold War called the Third World. Hunger required attention because these areas threatened to become communist, but hunger was itself a threat, a condition which might provoke a revolution. Cullather explains how a scientific approach to agriculture expanded in the United States after World War I. And although it appeared to serve more to expand production and lower retail prices at the expense of farmers' well-being, American policymakers still found, and indeed find until now, this scientifically-informed U.S. model for farming a beneficial one to export.

The first chapter, which presents some material from Cullather's article "The Foreign Policy of the Calorie" from 2007 but set in a somewhat different context, demonstrates how Americans were beginning to think of food consumption as calorie/energy/nutrient consumption after 1890.<sup>1</sup> The government campaigns during World War I to convince Americans to talk about "100 calories of bread" rather than "a slice of bread" demonstrate how the government (futilely, I'm sure) wanted Americans to think of food merely as fuel, and as such to be conserved as much as possible. This attitude, though, also meant that if peoples in other nations had insufficient "fuel," they might take political action, even revolutionary action, to get it, and they might be susceptible to medical diseases, which could not be contained within the hungry nation's borders.

The notion that U.S. security might depend on alleviating hunger had its origins in the decades after World War I. Fortunately, the Rockefeller Foundation, founded in 1913, proved ready to take on the hunger issue, in part because Raymond Fosdick, a leading figure in the Rockefeller Foundation all through the interwar period, believed malnutrition caused many of the health problems Rockefeller was already addressing, but also because to him, "the world food supply presented an immediate opportunity for a demonstration of the type of world-scale scientific reform he had in mind." (29). He was optimistic about success, and he believed American models best for the world. Despite the apparent failures of the U.S. system in the United States during the 1930s, and despite growing attention to some of the paradoxes of a development mindset, such as the economic burden of the population growth made possible by improved health conditions and more prevalent food, Rockefeller and other U.S. philanthropists, social scientists, and policymakers believed they had found the answer to the world's needs. As Cullather notes, "To a substantial degree, the agenda for postwar development had already been set before anyone defined the specific strategic problems it was to address." (41) This insight is a critical one, demonstrating that the U.S. reliance on development to address perceived international problems stems less from a consideration of those problems on their own terms and merits, and more from a faith in the applicability of a particular model of progress.

The implications of that approach are on full display in chapter 2, which explores the first large-scale U.S. development project, a Rockefeller-led, U.S. government-supported, effort in Mexico during the 1930s and through World War II. Americans knew what was wrong

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<sup>1</sup> Nick Cullather, "The Foreign Policy of the Calorie," *American Historical Review* 112:2 (April 2007): 336-364.

in Mexico: too many people, too poor to feed themselves. The solution was increased productivity, the same one pursued in the United States. No matter that in the United States it had made food so cheap that farmers suffered more during the Depression than almost any group. Increased productivity would provide enough food so that people should not go hungry. Image and reality did not match, however. Mexico in fact was self-sufficient in food to the early 1930s, and exported food to the United States. U.S. agronomists did not pay attention, however. Cullather argues that they were self-consciously developing a model to export to other parts of the world. They had a solution, and needed to make sure the problem fit it. The solution emphasized a more scientific agriculture, using specially developed high-yielding seeds, and more inputs (such as fertilizer). Peasants demonstrated their readiness for development by jumping at the chance to use higher-yielding seed, but unintended consequences such as increased plant disease and cost of production left Mexico worse off by the late 1940s than it had been in 1930.

In these first two chapters, Cullather has introduced most of his story elements, if we think of his monograph as a novel. Most of the protagonists, both American and those in the host countries, believed scientific solutions to perceived agricultural problems would lead to increased food production and directly to a more developed society. And in most places, production did dramatically increase, especially at first. Even these early experiments, however, met with selective adoption by local farmers, scientific failures such as increased susceptibility to disease and diminishing productivity over time, and uncertain economic results. Although the scale of U.S. involvement in agricultural production and development increased dramatically with the start of the Cold War, the basic blueprint was well established by the early 1940s. It might have been helpful for Cullather to have drawn out that conclusion, which he does make, more explicitly as it suggests an important continuity in U.S. foreign relations.

In the next chapter, the model moved to the Asian sub-continent, and U.S. policymakers tackled what they saw as the necessary challenge in India. On this “continent of peasants” (the title for chapter three), India was the largest nation, filled with villages of peasants about whom American policymakers had contradictory notions. But these policymakers shared the firm commitment that these peasants had to be “developed” or India would face political turmoil. This chapter provides fascinating exploration of attempts to take American models of community development directly to India. Albert Mayer, a key player in India, during the 1930s had developed “large-scale, planned housing projects in New York City, during the late 1940s and early 1950s constructed from a “blank sheet of paper” (82) both a rural and an urban planned community in India, and in the late 1950s designed the planned community of Reston, Virginia. Another dilemma of the development approach arises here: Mayer’s ideas were, even are, in many ways appealing. He emphasized that urban communities should be built in units of village size, promoting personal connection, local shopping, a walk-able community on what he called a “human scale.” Who would argue? But in creating this “human scale” as a universal model, Mayer removed space for *tandoors* (82). There was no space for the Indian custom of charcoal burning in his universal model. Designing Indian tradition out of the architecture was both imperialistic and unlikely to work.



Chapter three also explores why land reform of the type the United States carried out in Japan was not advocated or implemented elsewhere, despite its great successes in Japan. This story is a more familiar one, with predictable influences from McCarthyism. But it was also de-legitimized because the technical experts at the core of U.S. development policies promoted a scientific, corporate model for farming.

It is difficult to read the fourth chapter without a sinking feeling. This chapter explores development efforts in Afghanistan, especially the building of an enormous TVA style dam, the Helmand dam, during the 1950s and early 1960s, just as that model for development was being discarded in the United States. Corruption, hubris, and underfunding doomed a project which likely would not have brought the promised benefits even if everything had gone well. Simple things, like necessary soil testing, simply were not done, with disastrous consequences. The dam did allow expansion of agriculture, but the soil was not sufficiently good and was harmed by the consequences of the dam, leaving many worse off. Politics finished off any benefits, as the agricultural economy collapsed during the war years, and land was abandoned or “uselessly salinated.” (131) One of the few crops to grow well in the dry climate and saline soil is opium poppies. The United States rushed to rebuild the Helmand system both after the collapse of the pro-Soviet government and again after its own invasion. Development (assistance) is also, apparently, self-perpetuating.

In the next chapter, the politics, both international and domestic, of food aid intersect with an unfolding story of the unintended consequences of that food aid. By the mid-1950s, U.S. policymakers had come to believe that India would be an important test case for a policy of preventing revolution by spreading agricultural development and ending hunger. To raise the stakes, U.S. policymakers and media began reporting on a “development race” between the People’s Republic of China and India. The need for the democratic country to win this race formed an important aspect of the international politics of food aid. But Cullather pays equal attention to the domestic politics of food aid. In India, food aid in the form of inexpensive or free American wheat allowed them to choose certain kinds of industrial or export agricultural development without asking for ordinary Indians to eat less. Indeed, they generally had better access to food. In the United States, providing wheat to India meant the U.S. government continued to provide massive subsidies to American wheat farmers. It appeared to be a win-win situation, but the unintended, and unforeseen consequences of food aid began to appear, not least was that India and the United States each became dependent on the other country continuing to make the policy choices which permitted this food aid.

Chapter six explores the developments most people associate with the Green Revolution, the new rice and wheat strains which raised productivity so dramatically, in the context of development politics in South Vietnam and the Philippines. These strains were called “miracle” rice or wheat because they were supposed to have solved the food insufficiency problems of the Philippines and South Vietnam, where they were implemented most completely. They required, however, that traditional agriculture be discarded completely, and that rice farmers plant rice in neat rows, use purchased fertilizers and seeds, mechanical harvesting methods, and in general modern methods of farming. Could these

new strains produce miraculous amounts of rice and wheat? Certainly they could, and for some, did. But the real point of these strains was what Cullather called a “visual representation...and later a memory...of what happens when modernization comes to a countryside.” (179) In the Philippines that visual representation was in the neat rows of rice and the luxurious buildings, homes and grounds of the International Rice Research Institute, an image both attractive and offensive to many Filipinos. In South Vietnam, it was a more contentious image, for the Americans, of miracle rice grown in areas controlled by the South Vietnamese government and those controlled by the National Liberation Front. If the United States’ agricultural model was supposed to assist the United States in fighting the Cold War, it failed in that instance.

The contested meanings and purposes of development play out explicitly in chapter seven, which examines India’s efforts to craft its own development path with dynamic export sectors in jute and other non-food products, while U.S. observers considered the Indian agricultural sector to be stagnant because producing insufficient food. The Rockefeller and Ford Foundation staffers pushed a “food first” (187) development model. Indian officials wanted to work on producing more food with less labor, in order to emphasize industrial production. Cullather’s analysis demonstrates that neither group had an inherently better argument, complicating simple notions about how dependency and take-off and modernization were both conceived and worked.

One outcome of the disputes examined in chapter seven was a reported famine in India in the late 1960s, which is the primary subject of chapter eight. Hunger, the real and imagined hunger of Indian peasants, was used for political purposes by U.S. and Indian officials alike. A famine in India might help engage an increasingly isolationist American public in activities overseas while providing impetus to U.S. government purchase of American wheat for the purpose of distributing to hungry Indians. For Indian officials, famine was a double-edged sword: its presence prompted delivery of useful aid but reinforced notions that India was undeveloped and incapable.

Chapter nine explores the Green Revolution during the years after 1968, the year it retrospectively was given the name applied to developments of the previous two decades. The paradoxical and unintended consequences of agricultural development were on display during the 1970s. New rice and wheat strains and other developments had improved agricultural productivity where applied but “intensified class tensions” (241) because the primary beneficiaries of Green Revolution improvements were those who already were reasonably well off, not peasants. The Green Revolution often did produce surpluses, which were exported or used to improve urban diets rather than the standard of living of peasants. Surpluses also meant less food aid, which angered farmers in the developed world (especially the United States) who had more difficulty selling their crops. Agricultural development did mean more food could be produced with less labor, and peasants moved to the cities. This urbanization was not accompanied by sufficient industrialization to provide them all sufficient jobs, however, leading to the growth of massive slums. And improved food delivery which accompanied the Green Revolution also helped prompt increase in population, prompting global concerns about the environment, the limits of growth and the finiteness of the earth’s resources. By the late 1970s, the U.S.

commitment to funding agricultural development had waned considerably, but the Green Revolution consequences were still unfolding.

The final chapter briefly notes the persistence faith in the modes of agricultural development tried in the 1950s and 1960s. Barack Obama's inaugural address in 2008 referenced the successes of the Green Revolution, and the need to extend them. Some of the high ideals, of transforming whole societies with simple agricultural interventions, remained, but Cullather notes that the scope of more recent efforts is less grand.

Even this long summary does not do justice to the breadth and depth of Cullather's analysis. It is a truly important book. It seems churlish to ask him to do even more than he's done but there are two areas in which I wanted to know more, or see a larger context. Although the Cold War clearly shaped important aspects of how and where the United States chose to implement these agricultural policies, the pre-1940 efforts by the Rockefeller Foundation which Cullather explores, as well as missionary efforts (in both Asia and Africa) and U.S. government efforts (in its colonies) to teach agriculture as a civilizational marker, suggest this American faith is a long-held, enduring one. That point is not at odds with Cullather's argument, but neither is it as central to it as might have been useful. In addition, although the sub-title announces the book will confine itself to Asia, and that is certainly a sufficiently large geographical area, it might have been helpful to explore at least briefly the extent to which these "universal models" were indeed exported to other parts of the developing world, and why or why not.

*The Hungry World* will be mandatory reading for all scholars exploring both the history and politics of development policy. It would be even more useful if it could be made mandatory reading at the US Agency for International Development and the UN Food and Agriculture Organization.

The birth of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in October 1949, and the PRC's entry into the Korean War a year later alerted American policymakers to the power of the peasant to change the course of history. The danger to international stability posed by the rural poor had long-since been recognized, and a new universal metric – the calorie – had been devised to measure misery and to calibrate progress. In his Point IV proposal Harry Truman had identified the possibility of using America's "inexhaustible" technical knowledge to relieve the suffering of the millions who lived in the "under-developed areas". The leverage provided by technological leadership dovetailed with Franklin Roosevelt's elevation of 'freedom from want' to an international right, and was given urgency by the expansion of the cold war to Asia. A noble goal became a global imperative. Agricultural researchers, social scientists, foundations, political elites in the United States (U.S.) and in 'developing' countries, as well as international agencies combined forces in "a sustained confrontation with the physical and cultural environment of rural Asia" (6) intended to relieve hunger and poverty. Billions of dollars, and decades later, 1.2 billion people in the developing world outside China still live on less than \$1.25 a day. The United States is again being called upon to stimulate a 'green revolution' that will underwrite "global economic revival, the stability of Africa, and security against failed states and terror havens" (265). As Nick Cullather argues so persuasively in this book using a variety of illustrative case studies, it will fail miserably in its objectives unless it parses the problem of poverty in quite different terms to those that have dominated development thinking for the past 50 years.

The challenges to world order in rural Asia posed by communist expansion, nationalist uprisings and the revolution of rising expectations propelled American scientists and foundations to the forefront in a campaign to feed the hungry and to control population.<sup>1</sup> The productivity of American agriculture in the interwar years, thanks to mechanization, horticultural innovation and the use of pesticides and fertilizers, led to overproduction for the domestic market. Agricultural scientists were marginalized at home; the internationalization of hunger as a world problem provided exciting new opportunities for them abroad. Already in the early 1940s the Rockefeller Foundation had put Norman Borlaug – who was to become the 'father of the green revolution' for which he won the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1970 – to work in Mexico. Borlaug saw his task as increasing yields by improving the soil and by developing new strains of wheat and corn that could be planted under widely varying conditions. He enrolled local landowners and Mexican agronomists in his schemes, and counted on the visible effects of his technological interventions to have a catalytic impact on the attitude of peasants who were moored in tradition. Increased output would support a migration to the towns and cities, where individualism and consumerism would drive down the desired family size so that population and food would eventually come into equilibrium. Beginning in 1950 the

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew Connelly, *Fatal Misconception. The Struggle to Control World Population* (Boston: Harvard, 2008).

Rockefeller Foundation began promoting an “uncomplicated picture of population growth, scarcity and scientific rescue” that universalized the lessons of the Mexican Agricultural Program (MAP). Pundits predicted that the “problem of food production in the Orient” could be solved by combining training with modern agricultural methods – the use of “rust-resistant varieties, irrigation, and chemical fertilizer” (68). The enthusiasm was not sustainable. When the MAP was re-evaluated in the 1970s it was criticized for destroying indigenous practices and the diversity of local seed varieties to the benefit of commercial agribusiness, “pushing millions of peasants into urban slums or across the border” (68). Such doubts, even if they had been voiced at the time, would not have dented Washington’s determination to win the “development race – alongside the arms race and the space race” (139) that pitted democratic India against Communist China in every National Security Council paper on the subject from 1954 to 1960.

The language of development fused with the conception of modernization being promoted by Walt Rostow and other social scientists in Washington in the 1950s. The telos that drove countries through his ‘stages of economic growth’ inspired the elite of the post-colonial establishment in India. In 1955 Homi J. Bhabha, Secretary to the Indian Department of Atomic Energy, held out the hope that, thanks to the exploitation of the peaceful atom, India would be set on the path to “full industrialization” eventually being able “to reach a standard of living equivalent to the present U.S. level”.<sup>2</sup> In the interim Jawaharlal Nehru’s government relied on surplus American grains shipped abroad under Public Law (P.L.) 480, against considerable Congressional opposition in Washington, to support the rapid build-up of heavy industry. American farmers benefitted from stable prices despite overproduction, the federal government saved the costs of storage in silos that had reached \$1 million a day, and the Indian authorities could use counterpart funds obtained from the sale of American grains (16 million tons of wheat and 1 million tons of rice for three years beginning in 1960) for domestic purposes (142-3).

Meanwhile the countryside stagnated. The Ford Foundation, in partnership with Truman’s Point IV program, and with the backing of the United Nations, launched a major Community Development program in the 1950s to modernize villages by improving productivity in cottage industries and farm production. Social workers were sent to live and work among the rural poor teaching them the rudiments of water management, education, road construction and the use of fertilizers. 80 million people in 123,000 Indian villages had been reached by 1956, but to little avail: the peasants saw no point in improving output to satisfy the greed of absentee landlords. The stress “on gradual autochthonous development was rejected in favor of a new emphasis on engineering and dramatic technical breakthroughs” (93). Community Development was recycled as a suitable approach for the Peace Corps: it failed again.

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<sup>2</sup> John Krige, “Techno-Utopian Dreams, Techno-Political Realities: the Education of Desire for the Peaceful Atom,” in Michael D. Gordin, Helen Tilley and Gyan Prakash, eds, *Utopia/Dystopia. Conditions of Historical Possibility* (Princeton University Press, 2010), 151-175, at 152.

The so-called green revolution seemed to provide the answer. The demonstrable, visible differences between neatly planted, sturdy, dwarf strains of rice and wheat would propel previously skeptical and conservative peasants along a modernizing arc fuelled by fertilizers and herbicides, irrigation, credit and genetically modified seeds developed in agricultural research institutes. Released with much fanfare in Manila the new 'miracle rice' IR-8 secured Ferdinand Marcos' victory in the 1969 elections through the "simple device of exporting small quantities amid great fanfare while secretly importing tons of rice from Hong Kong and faking the figures" (172). In India the situation was different. Norman Borlaug along with Monkumbu S. Swaminathan, an energetic Indian agronomist who had been trained in the U.S., promoted the introduction of dwarf strains of wheat along with various incentives to sustain production. Opposition from a central government that had become dependent on U.S. food shipments crumbled thanks to a fortuitous combination of circumstances. In the mid-1960s the Johnson administration was under pressure at home to reduce domestic farm subsidies. It was also unhappy with India's border skirmish with Pakistan in 1965, and resented Indira Ghandi's criticism of U.S. actions in Vietnam. Food aid could no longer be taken for granted. LBJ adopted a short-tether policy – P.L. 480 shipments would only be released on a month-by-month basis, and were conditional on agricultural reform in the countryside. Two consecutive droughts led to a desperate condition that was eventually defined as 'famine' in the state of Bihar, so obliging the central government to intervene, and to subsidize irrigation, fertilizer and prices for villagers who planted dwarf varieties of wheat. The results were spectacular, or so it seemed. Huge increases in output were recorded in India, but also in Pakistan, in Turkey and in the Philippines. In March 1968 William S. Gaud, the director of the U.S. Agency for International Development hailed a "green revolution" that was sweeping across Asia, producing plentiful harvests in nearly every crop. This was the desired quantum jump that carried with it "the implications that there has been a major breakthrough ...that this has been achieved by peaceful and 'democratic' means; and that a 'red revolution' has been unnecessary or has been averted" (233), as one British economist astutely put it. The success turned out to be a temporary aberration, an 'improvement' that selectively favored the few who tilled large, irrigated tracts of land. "By the mid-1970s commentators had pronounced the green revolution dead" (251).

This book makes a major contribution to new studies of the global cold war. It is based on research in primary sources in America, Europe, the Philippines and India. It is not restricted to national archives, drawing also on material in the archives of international bodies (the Food and Agriculture Organization, the International Rice Research Institute), and in two American foundations (Ford and Rockefeller). It is both descriptive and prescriptive, exposing the follies of the past to formulate guidelines for the future. Historically the policy described as development replaced the colonial arrogance of the civilizing mission with the determination "to engineer progress on a national scale, and a belief that technology and scientific planning could initiate a historic transformation of timeless agrarian societies into dynamic modern nations" (14). As Nick Cullather shows emphatically in this rich analysis, that simplified faith in the transformative power of science and technology was seriously challenged in the wheat fields in Bihar, in the rice paddies in the Philippines, in the plains of Afghanistan – yet it lives on in the imaginations

of influential social actors who continue to craft agendas for development that uncritically reproduce Whiggish historical narratives celebrating success.

This book is above all a critique of representations.<sup>3</sup> Cullather's main target is the discourse of development and he is at his best when he teases out the multiple processes of "scripting and scenario building" involved in its "performance" in "expository conventions" (5). Development is "framed in a martial language of conquests, revolutions, and explosions" (6). It is the staging of spectacles to "display" the fruits of modernity (5), the recourse to "models" that translate experience gained in one part of the world to another, while remaining "blind to local contexts and contingencies" (9), the mobilization of a "visual language of blueprints, charts and symbols" (179), the production of a "heroic parable of population, food and science" that "solidified into history" (7-8), "the new style of diplomacy Americans devised to meet the crisis in Asia" in the early 1950s (3), and more. The idea of development criticized here is thus predominantly a discourse that structures the questions that we ask, and so the kind of answers that we can give to them. Above all it is about an uncritical faith in the power of science and technology to provide an apolitical "fix" to a deeply political problem, the problem of access and entitlement to food. Cullather does a wonderful job at demystifying a concept of development that rose to prominence during the post-colonial, Cold war period in the U.S. This focus, however, ignores the political origins of development projects in British and French colonial regimes beginning in the 1940s, and the enthusiasm with which colonial subjects embraced their emancipatory potential. As Frederick Cooper never ceases to remind us, the language of development that was promoted by colonial powers was quickly turned against them, and used to make claims for sovereignty and citizenship with at least some of their social, economic and political entitlements.<sup>4</sup> Select leaders in post-colonial countries demanded that the promisory note of development be cashed by the industrialized west. Liberated from the tutelage of European governments, they were able to exploit to their advantage the internationalization of the developmental project, and the postwar competition for their allegiance between leading powers and ideologies. It was colonial governments, not only American agronomists, social scientists and foundations that first tried to resolve conflicts of empire by invoking development, and in so doing to define social improvement as a quantifiable technical and financial problem, not a political one. The simplification that came with measurement, and the recourse to a technological fix, could also be turned against colonial regimes to expose their inadequacies. Cullather is of course aware that many indigenous actors in the countries that Washington and New York targeted for development were fully engaged in an American-led project. But he only rarely gives us a sense of their commitment to it, of the way in which they exploited the international opportunities provided by the language of development to further national ambitions and

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<sup>3</sup> Arturo Escobar, *Encountering Development. The Making and Unmaking of the Third World* (Princeton University Press, 1995), is best known for this approach.

<sup>4</sup> Frederick Cooper, "Writing the History of Development," *Journal of Modern European History*, 8:1 (2010), 5-23. See also Frederick Cooper and Randall Packard, eds, *International Development and the Social Sciences. Essays in the History and Politics of Knowledge* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), Introduction.

agendas, and indeed of the positive effects that the developmental project may have had on their societies.

The emphasis on the view of the 'third world' from Washington also writes out the efforts at social improvement made by other countries, with the exception of dam building in Afghanistan in chapter 4. A more thorough analysis of Soviet programs, and those of Western European governments, would not simply have enriched our appreciation of the different models of rural development that were available to post-colonial leaders. It would also further puncture the domestic rhetoric of a communist threat that was used to justify wide-ranging American involvement in countries like India, a rhetoric that had little or no meaning for many others who supported intervention in the third world. And it might provide some insights into alternate strategies that have been embarked on to improve the lot of the rural poor, perhaps with some measure of success.

Ultimately it is here that Cullather's book is least satisfying. It provides, as I have suggested, a ruthlessly successful deconstruction of past development discourse. It has immediate and important policy implications for, as Cullather explains, everyone from Bono to Bill Gates to Barack Obama is again mobilizing that self-same discourse, with its embedded assumptions. Once again hunger is being treated as a discrete problem that can be resolved by a technological fix, by a new 'green revolution', all historical evidence to the contrary. Cullather's argument derives its critical edge from the disastrous heritage of the American-led green revolution – its epicenters are among the most undernourished nations today. 200,000 farmers have been reportedly driven to suicide in India due to chronic indebtedness resulting from their efforts to take advantage of the enhanced productivity of specialized varieties bred in agricultural research stations (266). But does that mean that there are no positive lessons of history at all? Cullather shows us what is wrong with the definition of hunger as "a discrete problem divorced from politics, an independent variable that can be managed through technical means." (263). He leaves us rudderless when it comes to proposing what concerned pop-stars and Presidents, foundations and international agencies should do.

The language of development was originally a language of hope. It elevated the lot of the world's rural poor into a global issue and demanded that newly independent states, in collaboration with other influential social actors, raise the standard of living of all their citizens to tolerable levels. If hope has turned to despair, it is not just because a vastly complex problem has been simplified, decontextualized and depoliticized. It is not simply language, but structures of power and patronage, some of them inherited from colonial times, that continue to devastate the rural poor. Cullather rightly insists that we repoliticize the problem of hunger, and here and there he suggests that we once again call upon the state to be the major catalyst of social improvement. However, he does not use his historical insights to develop this agenda, which flies in the face of the neoliberal paradigm now running amok, nor could he in a book whose main focus is on representations. Thanks to Cullather's study we can now see through the rhetoric of the green revolution, old and new, and situate it in the intellectual and political context of cold war America. But the healthy skepticism that this fine analysis produces can easily slide into an unhealthy



cynicism and hopelessness –to the detriment, again, of the wretched of the earth, who surely deserve better.

Alarms about a Hungry World are back in the news. World grain prices have doubled since early 2007, and the consequences surface everywhere. In Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya the price of food helped touch off long-standing discontent with kleptocratic dictators. Countries as diverse as Russia, Vietnam, and Argentina have tried to soften rising domestic food prices by restricting exports. Wealthy investors and food-scarce nations are quietly buying up agricultural land and water world-wide. They are grabbing large acreages for future use especially in African countries whose populations are even now sustained on food assistance from abroad.<sup>1</sup> Now is the time for reading Nick Cullather's *The Hungry World*, which presents a rich and complex interpretation of U.S. attempts to battle hunger and poverty in Asia.

*The Hungry World* explains why America's romance with rural development in Asia began; how so many different approaches had severe limitations or failed (despite the mythology of the green revolution's success); and why we should care about the strange career of "rural development." The "green revolution" in Asia emerged from multiple actors and goals; it came dressed in multiple guises and produced variable outcomes. All of the diverse approaches to rural poverty detailed in the book, however, had one thing in common: the sense that transformation of Asia would be possible if some American model, together with American technological expertise, would be brought to bear. One of *The Hungry World's* central concerns thus involves a critique of technological fixes and of scientific, universalistic model-building approaches to policymaking. Winding through the twists and turns of the programs of rural development, Cullather develops an insightful analysis of the limitations of "models" without slipping into expert-bashing or anti-scientism. He uses history less a guide to workable futures than as a foreshadowing of the inevitable messiness of presumably benevolent interventions in human affairs.

*The Hungry World* begins with an unusual and understudied historical character – the calorie. The calibration called the calorie arose along with a new statistical approach to demography, and both involved measurements that, together, seemed to promise that science could now carefully define and solve the Malthusian dilemma of balancing food supply with population. One area of the world, above all, seemed the appropriate target for such social engineering – Asia. Drawing upon popular and scientific literature, Cullather explains the contours of the long discourse of an eternally hungry Asia that would need the tools of the West to lift it out of destitution and malnutrition. After 1949, of course, the threat of hunger and poverty became magnified and thoroughly identified with the twin threat of communism. Intent on balancing statistics on calorie production with those on population, experts often lost sight of local context or became deluded by wishful thinking about transforming "peasants" into "citizens" through agricultural reform.

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<sup>1</sup> Lester R. Brown, "The New Geopolitics of Food," *Foreign Policy* (May/June, 2011), online at [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/04/25/the\\_new\\_geopolitics\\_of\\_food?page=full](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/04/25/the_new_geopolitics_of_food?page=full) [accessed May 28, 2011].

In the immediate post-World War II era there was no shortage of plans for how Americans might spearhead agricultural reform in Asia (and elsewhere), and Cullather resists refracting U.S. policy into any one simplistic developmentalist model. Chapter by chapter, the book introduces the reader to a broad array of people, institutions, and approaches that focused on rural poverty in Asia. Coming out of the war, one group of U.S. military planners in Japan, Korea, and Taiwan made land reform (moving away from a tenancy system) a key part of a democratic transition. They envisioned improving independent-minded citizens (on the yeoman farmer model) as well as crops. This view, however, clashed with a model developed in Mexico by the Rockefeller Foundation even before the war. U.S. agricultural reformers there viewed *ejidos* as relics of traditionalism and promoted America's model of large-scale holdings as the path toward a modernity in which scientific inputs and machinery increased yields. Yet another group of "community development" experts focused Truman's Point Four programs on reforming Indian villages. "Community development" aimed to harmonize the top-down planning being undertaken in the Indian government with a reformed and revitalized village culture that would be eager to spread American-devised practices to increase productivity. Still another approach to rural poverty alleviation drew from the TVA model and touted dam building and water engineering as keys to rural revival. For this example the book focuses on the dam project in Helmand valley in Afghanistan, where Cold War competition kept Americans upping the ante to keep the development alive even as it slipped into failure. In all of these efforts, tension existed between land reform (which envisioned more rural people owning smaller holdings) and boosting yields (which meant displacing people into the cities in favor of input-heavy agribusiness). Gradually, any emphasis on land reform as a central part of agricultural policy fell away – red-baited by Midwestern conservatives tied to emerging agribusiness methods in the U.S. and demeaned by those who advocated that larger yields had to be the paramount policy goal in a "hungry world."

The apogee of developmentalism came, of course, in the early 1960s. Elected to the presidency in 1960, John Kennedy seemed to like to set targets in decades. The UN and Kennedy declared the 1960s would be the "decade of development," and the U.S. created a new agency, AID, to spearhead the effort. (JFK also announced the goal of landing a man on the moon before the decade was out and shoveled money to the new agency, NASA, that Eisenhower had created under pressure from the Sputnik scare.) The early 1960s exuded a romance with the idea of such huge undertakings, and global "development" to eradicate poverty—perhaps even more than a moon landing—captured the imaginations of many: area and culture experts, good-hearted youth, Cold Warriors, Asia hands, statisticians, foundations, agriculturalists. A concerted American-led effort could surely wipe out hunger—the age-old scourge of mankind—and win the Cold War in the third world by so doing. Cullather explains how the "miracle seeds," rice and wheat, which the Ford Foundation supported and hoped would reform Asia, became a new weapon both to transform peasants and to win hearts and minds in the Philippines, Vietnam (especially during the war), India, and elsewhere.

And why wouldn't Americans have believed that they had the answers to hunger? America's postwar agricultural revolution, propelled by irrigation, fertilizers, new seeds, and advice from cadres of government-supported experts in land-grant colleges, produced

seemingly limitless quantities of food. So much so, that had there not been hunger in the world Americans would have had to invent it in order to find sufficient markets for their staggering surpluses. In fact, Cullather suggests, they often *did* invent, or at least greatly exaggerate, the world food shortage in general and, in particular, the much ballyhooed famine in India in the mid-1960s. India's "food crisis," Cullather shows, ran parallel to its boom in export of jute and cotton—products of plantation agriculture that were defined as being outside of the "agricultural" sector. And the "famine" that LBJ and Indira Gandhi did so much to publicize became a narrative device designed to stampede obdurate factions in both countries to accommodate the developmental planning envisioned by both governments. The "famine" and LBJ's rescue effort were linked together in a popular and politically useful narrative about the need to distribute American agricultural surpluses to hungry people in India and elsewhere while, at the same time, introducing the new seeds and techniques of the "green revolution."

Through the examination of these various efforts, Cullather's book directly challenges the simplistic narrative of third-world "famine" and U.S. "salvation." The results of careful scientific studies from the 1970s, he writes, are far more ambiguous about the reality of either. In addition, over this postwar period the mounting civil unrest arising from class tensions between prosperous landowners and poor sharecroppers, many of whom were being pushed into cities, confirmed substantial new hazards arising from the agricultural changes of the "green revolution." Indeed, the nations most targeted for programs to eliminate rural poverty have today become those most afflicted.

The "famine and rescue" narrative, however, remains deeply embedded. Lester R. Brown's recent *Foreign Policy* article outlining today's food crisis, in fact, restates it without question: "When the Indian monsoon failed in 1965, for example, President Lyndon Johnson's administration shipped one-fifth of the U.S. wheat crop to India, successfully staving off famine."<sup>2</sup> Brown and Cullather should talk—both about history and, perhaps more importantly, about its uses.

*The Hungry World* joins the growing shelf of books that is re-writing the field of the history of U.S. international relations. Governments are key players here, but so are foundations, universities, and networks of experts. The Cold War provides a central dynamic, but the focus is not on specific crises, the arms race, or war. Development, Cullather suggests, was a major focus of cold war competition: "an arena for a tournament of modernization" (126) in which scientists, engineers, community development theoreticians, demographers, and statisticians all participated. The book may fruitfully be read alongside Matthew Connelly's *Fatal Misconception* and books by Michael Latham, Nils Gilman, Ron Robin, David Engerman and others on "modernization."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Matthew J. Connelly, *Fatal Misconception: The Struggle to Control World Population* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010); Michael E. Latham, *Modernization as Ideology: American Social Science and 'Nation-building' in the Kennedy Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000) and *The Right Kind of Revolution: Modernization, Development, and U.S. Foreign Policy from the Cold War to the Present* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011); Nils Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future: Modernization Theory in Cold War*

Another of the book's strengths is its comparative canvass. Although focusing principally on Asia, Cullather telescopes down on a variety of particular places: especially Mexico, India, Afghanistan, with a little on Vietnam and the Philippines. He rightly chooses not to try to tell a story that would be comprehensive in "covering" all Asian countries over all of the decades since the calorie's discovery or even since World War II. Some readers might wish for more detail on China before 1949, on postwar Japanese agricultural reform, on Indonesia and Pakistan (which are hardly mentioned), on Korea, on Vietnam (where the strategic hamlet program is mentioned as an outgrowth of community development efforts and "miracle rice" but fairly briefly). But coverage is not the point here; a detailed look at particular approaches in particular places is more useful. We know more from his coverage of less.

By examining his particular cases, Cullather raises many prickly and interesting questions: How did the fear of hunger in the world become so greatly over-hyped? Should food security for actual people have been so conflated with boosting the statistics of overall yields in the global marketplace? Even if large scale agricultural production on the corporate U.S. postwar model brought more food to market, did that make nations, regions, or small farmers pushed off land and into cities less hungry? Did American food aid alleviate or aggravate the problem of global hunger? It is good to raise these questions, but Cullather's answers to them are not entirely clear. Lester Brown and others claim that production per acre increased by five-fold over this period and are alarmed that such rapid gains appear now to be at an end. They again forecast an alarming future of scarcity. Does Cullather agree with this five-fold estimate? And how specifically does aggregate food yield per acre—then and now—relate to Asia and to his critiques? Such questions raise the broader issue of the purpose of such a history.

Cullather's book (examining programs addressing food and poverty) and Matthew Connelly's *Fatal Misconception* (examining population control efforts) make very interesting parallel reading. They both strongly critique the top-down, statistical and model-building approaches to addressing the Malthusian fears that gripped the mid-twentieth century. Both emphasize a dubious record with often unforeseen, unintended, and downright perverse consequences. But neither (separately or read together) leaves a reader with a very clear idea of the possibly interrelated trajectories of population growth and food production in the postwar era; of what factors explain the overall trend lines; or of how the efforts they studied to increase food yields and slow reproduction did or did not affect the macro picture of the dramatic imbalances policymakers feared and predicted. One might wish for a little more clarity on such issues. Still, like Connelly's excellent book, Cullather's is a work of history and specific context, and it is therefore no criticism to say that it does not answer questions in a way that an economist or social scientist might.

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*America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007); Ron Robin, *The Making of the Cold War Enemy: Culture and Politics in the Military-Industrial Complex* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003); David Engerman, *Modernization from the Other Shore: American Intellectuals and the Romance of Russian Development* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004).

Nevertheless, the blurb on the jacket of Cullather's book promises that his findings hold "lessons" for today. Besides a generalized caution against technological hubris and against the kind of "seeing like a state" that James Scott has already well debunked, I am left pretty unclear about what those "lessons" might be. Although Cullather has tried to make his book relevant to present concerns, his own suspicion of abstract "lessons" leaks through. After all, a major concern has been to show the limitations of the decontextualized solutions that outside experts, often very well-intentioned, advance. Writing almost against his book jacket, he thus understandably raises vital questions without, it seems to me, presuming to be confident about answers as to how to feed a "hungry world."

Buried in the middle of a paragraph on page 183 is, perhaps, a more interesting focus that could have been further highlighted and elaborated. "Development should be analyzed not as a process or an outcome but as a narrative strategy." This task, it seems, the book takes on very well.

*The Hungry World* does successfully examine "development" as an embedded narrative strategy (rather than as a problem of statistics amenable to extracting "lessons"). For this reason, the book can be appreciated by historians of all kinds—not just historians interested in the Cold War, or food policy, or development, but historians concerned with larger issues of history-writing -- framing, narrative, and the construction of historical memory. Contrary to the dust jacket, I doubt that this book "reveals" lessons about missions to feed the hungry in our day. But it might offer rich perspectives and well-drawn stories that encourage the raising of more insightful, contextual, and skeptical questions about efforts to frame the "hungry world" as a drama of (their) crisis-and-(our) rescue.

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

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

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

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<sup>1</sup> Kristin L. Ahlberg, "'Machiavelli with a Heart': The Johnson Administration's Food for Peace Program in India, 1965-1966," *Diplomatic History* 31:4 (September 2007): 665-701; Matthew Connelly, *Fatal Misconception: The Struggle to Control World Population* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008); David Engerman, "West Meets East: The Center for International Studies and Indian Economic Development" in David Engerman et al, *Staging Growth: Modernization, Development and the Global Cold War* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003), 199-223; Dennis Merrill, *Bread and the Ballot: The United States and India's Economic Development* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1990); John H. Perkins, *Geopolitics and the Green Revolution: Wheat, Genes, and the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Nicole Sackley, "Passage to Modernity: American Social Scientists, India, and the Pursuit of Development, 1945-1961" PhD dissertation, Princeton University, 2004; Corinna Unger, "Industrialization or Agrarian Reform? West German Modernization Policies in India in the 1950s and 1960s," *Journal of Modern European History* 8:1 (2010): 47-65.

development practice, but also about the roles of calculability, models, spectacles, and narratives in the larger history of U.S. foreign relations.

Like Matthew Connelly, David Ekbladh, and other scholars who have published recently on the history of development, Cullather locates the “birth” of U.S. development policies not with the onset of the Cold War but in the early decades of the twentieth century.<sup>2</sup> What is new in Cullather’s account is his conception of development as a “new style of diplomacy,” one that involved the construction of new subjects and the entrance of new actors and institutions into international politics between the 1920s and 1940s (3). The problems of development—hunger and poverty, world economic integration, international agricultural policies, and national and international control over rural people—all of these topics lay outside the traditional purview of diplomatic relations. To explain their incorporation into the field of diplomacy, Cullather stresses, in part, the ways in which the crises of World War I and the Great Depression generated within the U.S. foreign policy establishment a new alarm about the strategic consequences of hunger and international economic autarchy.

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

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

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



agriculture rather than indicators of social advancement or local ownership, helped to erase social welfare and peasant autonomy as national and international goals.

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

My own favorite example of this is famine modeling. In the mid-1960s, U.S. and Indian policymakers clashed over agricultural policy in India, in part because they appealed to different models for how to identify and define famine. One of the essential components of the conventional green revolution story is that a famine crisis precipitated and justified the application of new agricultural technology. Cullather argues that U.S. policymakers hyped a crisis by relying on new U.S. statistical models that assumed a causal relationship between population growth and food availability and increased the latitude of forecasters to identify “famine.” Indian policymakers, on the other hand, used British colonial models of famine that privileged local reporting and came to the conclusion that no such famine existed. In such ways, Cullather shows that the very creation of facts and events in the green revolution depended on the nature of the models used to discern them.

While numerical charts and abstract models may have helped to convince policymakers, development practitioners recognized that development was no mere process but a deliberate effort at social control and political persuasion that required compelling, vivid illustrations of its own efficacy. *The Hungry World* is one of the first books on the history of development, and in the larger field of diplomatic history, to capture the importance of the politics of spectacle in international policymaking.<sup>4</sup> From the Rockefeller Foundation’s hookworm campaign to the Etawah village development project in India, would-be modernizers designed targeted initiatives and field sites as “carefully staged spectacles

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

dramatizing the fruits of modernity” (5). The logic of development privileged the act of witnessing and participating in demonstration projects as critical to converting “underdeveloped” people to modern practices. Cullather best captures this propensity toward “showcasing” in his work on the Rockefeller- and Ford-funded International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) at Los Baños in the Philippines. He gives us an indelible image of IRRI’s modernist, suburban-style campus, “[l]ooking like an Ohio consolidated high school perched on a volcano” and its attached eighty-hectare farm with “[s]oil imported from Java, the Mekong Delta, and the Plain of Jars.” The farm was “laid out in separate national paddies, making the farm a miniature Asia, an agricultural war room where scenarios could be gamed out in virtual space” (165, 163). The contrast between acres planted with IR-8, the “miracle” seed strain developed at IRRI and ordinary seeds, offered stark, “visible boundaries between tradition and modernity” (160).

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

Calculations, models, and spectacles—all of these are, for Cullather, variations of a critical mechanism that produces and justifies development: the act of storytelling. Earlier scholars of development took their theoretical cues from Foucault and plumbed the discursive power of terms like “progress” and “underdevelopment.” The very utterance of particular words seemed, at times in these accounts, to hold enormous transformative power. Cullather, although he does not cite him explicitly, seems instead to derive his inspiration from Hayden White and his explorations of the power of narrative form to shape content of meaning.<sup>5</sup> Cullather’s most original and exciting contribution to the history of development is to trace how the “narratives” of development got written by particular people in particular places and contexts. Competing policymakers pursued different “narrative strateg[ies],” or to use Cullather’s other metaphor, wrote different “script[s]” for how modernization should unfold (183, 5). Yet Cullather shows that only some become naturalized as models or parables whose ascendance obscured the more contested and diverse origins from which they arose. Cullather’s methodology invites other diplomatic historians to consider investigating the role of narrative in a wide range of other topics and time periods.

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

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

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

By emphasizing the New Deal origins of U.S. international development efforts, Cullather often skirts the ways in which the New Deal and supposedly "American" visions of development were themselves built from transnational interchanges. The New Deal's rural reform efforts played out at the same time as European colonial administrators and experts confronted what they saw as an increasingly restive colonial world. U.S. policymakers and experts, from American Indian commissioner John Collier to experts on the Anglo-American Caribbean commission, observed and contributed to new efforts at colonial and nationalist "rural reconstruction" (7). Cullather only briefly mentions the colonial context of this interwar story. At the same time, he misses an opportunity, afforded by his own discussion of émigré economists Paul Rosenstein-Rodan, Ragnar Nurkse, and Albert

Hirschman, to explain how the making of U.S. development expertise involved not only the projection outward of American models but also the absorption into the postwar United States of international ideas and expertise.

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

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

Author's Response by Nick Cullather, Indiana University

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Now that doleful images of famine again dominate the news--this time from Somalia--*Foreign Policy* magazine warns in a recent cover story that the global system has turned a corner. High food prices, droughts, water wars and heat waves will all be part of the new normal. "Get ready," writes Lester Brown, an international hunger expert, "for a new era in which world food scarcity increasingly shapes global politics."<sup>1</sup>

Brown chooses words remarkably similar to the ones he used in his *Foreign Policy* cover story in 1974 when we were "entering a period of frequent, more or less chronic scarcity." The world economy was turning that corner in the 1990s, too, ("one third of the world is heading into a demographic nightmare") and also in the 1960s, when Brown was a young economic adviser to President Lyndon Johnson.<sup>2</sup> Casting hunger as a purely technical problem, a problem of irrigation, birth rates, and genetics, Brown offers a story of enduring, or at least recurring, appeal. The key ingredient is American know-how, always arriving just in time to avert an impending collision between rising birth rates and diminishing food stocks. As the reviewers point out, *The Hungry World* is about the power of such narratives. In the 1950s and 1960s, this urgent, compelling story motivated agronomists to take genetic sciences to the limit and offered reassurance that American strategic and commercial interests were backed by humanitarian imperatives. It justified emergency, dictatorial measures in those countries passing through the dangerous transition from scarcity to abundance.

*The Hungry World* suggests that the most dangerous illusions may not be the ones that are obviously wrong, but the ones that continue to seem true for decades, the ones that conform to our most deeply-held hopes for human progress. Historical investigation can expose the origins of these fables, and show how John F. Kennedy or Indira Gandhi used them for political ends, but it cannot "debunk" them, because their appeal has nothing to do with truth. They are maintained, as Warren Belasco observes, by Western culture's "long-standing romantic fascination with extravagant technology alongside a rich tradition of skepticism and alarm."<sup>3</sup> Lester Brown is bound to retire someday but, we can be sure someone else will be writing that same article for *Foreign Policy* in 2020.

Policy discussions, even today, remain steeped in the clichés of modernization theory. If, for a moment, we could put them aside and view the problem of hunger without the tropes of development and the "world food problem" getting in the way, how might we structure

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<sup>1</sup> Lester R. Brown, "The New Geopolitics of Food," *Foreign Policy*, May/June 2011 at [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/04/25/the\\_new\\_geopolitics\\_of\\_food?page=full](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/04/25/the_new_geopolitics_of_food?page=full)

<sup>2</sup> Lester Brown, "The Next Crisis? Food," *Foreign Policy* 13 (Winter 1973/74): 26; Lester Brown, "Life Support Fails," *The World Today* 55 (June 1999), 23.

<sup>3</sup> Warren Belasco, *Meals to Come: A History of the Future of Food* (Berkeley: University of California, 2002), viii.

policy differently? Professor Krige is right to press this question, but it is a difficult one to answer because it would require an outlook and a global consensus vastly different from anything that prevailed in the past or would be possible now. But here are a few of the alternatives that *The Hungry World* suggests:

1) We might stop trying to cure rurality. For more than a century, economic theory has held agriculture to be a separate sector with aberrant behaviors and rules. Where the industrial sector had to be nurtured and liberated, the rural sector had to be disciplined and subordinated. The policy response amounted to a systematic effort to evacuate the countryside. While planners in the 1950s and 1960s were more explicit about removing all the “sons, cousins, uncles and aunts who live on a farm” and add them to an urban “reservoir of labor,” policy continues to encourage migration. Respected economists such as Paul Collier want government to put more pressure on smallholders to “head to the cities” and find “local wage jobs.”<sup>4</sup> In the vein of Samuel Huntington, commentators extol the urban slum as a “key instrument in creating a new middle class, abolishing the horrors of rural poverty and ending inequality.”<sup>5</sup>

These policies are worsening the current food crisis. While demand grows, the cultivated acreage is actually shrinking as the countryside is depopulated. We might consider what kinds of policies might make it appealing for Chinese or Indian peasants to leave the sweatshops and go back to their villages. Imagine what kind of an agricultural revolution that would take. Which brings us to a second suggestion:

2) We might assign food something like its true value. *The Hungry World* begins with the invention of the calorie, a device for separating food from the value people actually attach to it. Those practices have been elaborated over a century to the point where we no longer have much sense of what food might be worth. For the last six months, news reports have been claiming that commodity prices are at an all time high. In fact, they are relatively high only if one goes back only to 2002. Global commodity prices have been falling for the past fifty years under pressure from subsidies, quotas, and price controls, the policy formulas the United States pushed in Asia in the 1960s. This is not an appeal to market fundamentalism. As *The Hungry World* relates, agricultural markets have been thoroughly structured to devalue agricultural knowledge and enterprise. Liberalizing such markets, as has happened in Africa, only intensifies the problem.

Behind this is a set of ideas about the crucial importance of food and the responsibility of the farmer to the state. In the manufacturing sector, rising prices are a sign of dynamism and creativity. In the rural sector, they are a sign that farmers are hoarding or profiteering. In Europe and the United States farm profits are simply regulated, but in much of the world

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<sup>4</sup> *The Hungry World*, pp. 147-148; 269.

<sup>5</sup> Doug Saunders, “Arrival Cities,” *Foreign Policy*, March 23, 2011, [www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/03/23/arrival\\_cities](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/03/23/arrival_cities)

they are criminalized. It will be difficult to remedy the chronic underinvestment in agriculture worldwide until such attitudes are reversed.

3) Hunger isn't a problem, it's an indicator. From Herbert Hoover to Barack Obama, policymakers have defined food scarcity, and particularly famine, as an underlying cause of economic and political instability. Hoover saw it as the root of Bolshevism; Harry Truman as the motivating force behind Communist expansion. Consequently, policy responses isolate hunger and address it directly without reference to surrounding conditions, such as injustice, dictatorship, war, inequity, etc. Malthusian assumptions support this approach; hunger is supposedly a problem of too many people with too little food.

Even a cursory look at the current situation in Somalia, however, might lead us to conclude the opposite. The collapse of the Cold War-era dictatorship, invasion by neighboring powers, the rise of islamism, piracy, sanctions, and drone attacks all came first; famine was the outcome. In the 1980s, Amartya Sen demonstrated in a Nobel-prizewinning study that famine was not caused by either scarcity or overpopulation, but was the end product of a thorough social collapse. When people are excluded from rights, work, and information, when institutions cease to be responsive, famine results. Chronic hunger (a far more prevalent problem than famine) is a sensitive leading indicator of the decaying health of a society.<sup>6</sup>

The issue of hunger is always framed within discussions of droughts, yields, fertility rates, and genetics, but if Sen is right it may not have anything to do with those things. An alternate discourse that links hunger to wages, rights, land ownership, free speech, and accountability might be just as utopian, but it would lead toward a different utopia than the one we've been trying and failing to reach for the past 100 years.

I am grateful to the reviewers and to H-Diplo for this stimulating discussion.

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<sup>6</sup> *The Hungry World*, pp. 251, 269.