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Review by **David Ekbladh**, Tufts University

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There is an irony that a forum on modernization as a global project encourages scholars to focus on the local. However, an ironic twinge is not always a signal of flaws. The contributors to the *Diplomatic History* forum, "Towards a Global History of Modernization" provide a set of engaging, original, and exciting new work that

illustrates how modernization must be explained as a global phenomenon. The collection, drawn from papers given at a March 2008 conference at the German Historical Institute, not only enhances our understanding of how modernization operated, it reframes the Cold War and international history generally.

Odd Arne Westad's defining *The Global Cold War* describes a struggle between two visions of modernity. The forum adds invaluable new dimensions to our understanding the struggle. In the mid-twentieth century multiple versions of modern life were vying for legitimacy, success, and power. Respective articles on Algeria's attempts to promote its own version of socialist modernity and the modernizing activities sponsored by the two Germanies in Syria provide insight in how modernization ideas emerged and were cultivated by the "Third World" as well as by clients of the great powers. They remind us that modernization was not something simply transmitted from the United States and other centers of power. It moved in a variety of overlapping directions. These works remind us there was a diverse modernization marketplace. It is not simply a case that regimes and constituencies in the "Third World" were resisting or negotiating the modernization agendas of the great powers, they were actively promoting their own. Algeria as well as Cuba, the People's Republic of China, Taiwan, and other countries extended a collection of approaches to global audiences draped in their own particular experiences and ideologies. Those regimes looking to promote the power and prosperity that modernization promised could draw on numerous models beyond the United States and the Soviet Union. This marketplace has changed since the end of the Cold War but still exists. Washington still frets that some might follow the heterodox ideas emerging from regimes like those led by Hugo Chávez and Evo Morales.

The articles cement the view that modernization programs drew in a host of nonstate actors, from academics to international institutions. Social scientists from Cornell ranged across the Andes to modernize the indigenous population. These anthropologists saw Peru's "Indian problem" as one to be solved with modernization spoken in a Cold War vernacular. It was not solely Westerners who utilized these concepts for political ends. Daniel Speich's keen piece describes how Kenyans appropriated aspects of modernization ideas from both the liberal and communist camps as part of their own version "African Socialism" and domestic power struggles. Daniel Maul's article on the International Labor Organization demonstrates the signal contributions of international bodies, particularly the UN's "specialized agencies." However, it might have explored how technical assistance done by the ILO and its partner the League of Nations in the interwar year was a basic foundation of its post-World War II modernization mission.<sup>1</sup>

All the articles remind us of the importance of the state in modernization's framing and implementation. Like other governments, Indonesia's military regime turned aid offered

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<sup>1</sup> Margherita Zanasi, "Exporting Development: The League of Nations and Republican China" *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 49 (January 2009), 143-169; Antony Evelyn Alcock, *History of the International Labor Organization* (New York, Octagon Books, 1971).

by the United States and a collection of other agents, as well as the rhetoric of developmentalism itself, into a means for extending state power across the archipelago in the 1960s and early 1970s.

Taken as a whole, the contributors show us that any history of modernization must be placed in a global context while maintaining a firm grounding in the local dynamics that shaped its application. But what actually constitutes modernization is sometimes unclear. The forum introduction assures readers that “we have a clear sense of what modernization was” but then fails to clearly articulate what constitutes modernization either as an era, a set of theories, or a conglomeration of approaches for development (or all of the above).<sup>2</sup> The forum oscillates between seeing modernization as a discreet approach or period and equating it with the larger concept of development. This is not to fetishize definitions — broad topics and the wide-ranging symposia they inspire sometimes require loose tolerances — rather it is to get at what is actually meant historically by modernization.

Presently, sociologists and those within the international development community would see them as separate, if interrelated themes. Modernization was typically an extensive set of intensive interventions meant to propel peoples into the present. This present was often defined by the technologically advanced West with its faith in progress, against the fatalism and passivity of “traditional” societies. “Modernization” was attached to new methods to achieve this change that began to emerge in the 1930s and 1940s. It supplanted or replaced other terms that had described earlier processes, like “reconstruction” or “civilize.”

Development is a more amorphous concept and has no single agreed upon definition. Nevertheless, it does imply a “far-reaching, continuous, and positively evaluated process of social, economic and political change which involves the totality of human experience.”<sup>3</sup> At its core, it implies a process to guide what is defined as progress—a “development” leading to a set of new occurrences or relationships. For much of the twentieth century it was used almost synonymously with modernization. However, modernization as both a theoretical framework and a set of practices began to fall out of favor in the late 1960s and 1970s (where most of the works in the forum trail off).<sup>4</sup> Advocates increasingly fell back on development to describe processes of global change. They set this apart from the now retrograde concept modernization with modifiers like “sustainable” to connote the way they believed development had changed.

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<sup>2</sup> David C. Engerman and Corinna R. Unger, “Introduction: Toward a Global History of Modernization” *Diplomatic History* 33 (June 2009), 377.

<sup>3</sup> David Harrison, *The Sociology of Modernization and Development* (London: Routledge, 1988), 154-155.

<sup>4</sup> Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth About History* (New York: Norton, 1994), 87-88.

Most doing development today would view modernization as a particular set of development approaches whose time has passed. In the present-day hives of development activity such as the UN Development Program, Grameen Bank, and the Gates Foundation there are few drones that would label themselves “modernizers.” What is important is that such terms are historical and the rise and fall of their usage reflects significant changes in theory, practice, and policy. As we move toward a global history of modernization (or the much larger and longer history of development) there is a need to continually problematize what we are discussing.

In the service of such problematizing, Nick Cullather provides incisive commentary on issues raised by the forum. He rightly notes that implementation comes before theory. Many were out in the field before the Ford Foundation, W. Arthur Lewis, or Walt Rostow began to propound their theories. He also asks where’s the *mêtis*? Drawing from the ubiquitous James Scott, he calls for attention to how these schemes to improve the human condition clashed with local knowledge, institutions, and interests, something none of the papers systematically address. His point that the Cold War matters when we discuss development activity in the twentieth century should sensitize us to how external forces can shape programs on the ground. Cullather suggests there is much to explore beyond modernization’s halcyon days in the 1950s and 1960s. He is undeniably correct. While the forum’s center of gravity lies firmly within the Cold War, many of the issues discussed straddle the period. Numerous players in the Cold War found modernization indispensable to their agendas and the struggle undoubtedly skewed the process around the world. However, the Cold War did not create modernization and it is only one phase in the longer history of international development. If the journey toward a global history means historians investigate the broader issue of development they will find that their questions will force them beyond the limited confines of the Cold War.

Cullather sees a “consensus” emerging between modernizers in the East Bloc and the West and elsewhere after modernization fell into crisis in the 1960s. He notes that the thrill of the “horserace” to demonstrate the validity of particular systems of modernization dissipated. He characterizes the participants leaving the track “heading to the clubhouse for mint juleps while the horses headed to pasture.”<sup>5</sup>

While the Soviets along with their Western and Third World counterparts could agree on particular issues, such as population control, that had been figures in various modernization equations, real differences remained. Gigantism that was a characteristic much mid-twentieth century development still had its boosters. Marxist programs of development remained partial to programs that promised extensive social, environmental, and political transformation even after these approaches were loudly questioned in international development discourse. In the late 1970s, the ruling Derg in Ethiopia attempted a thoroughgoing statist collectivization of that nation’s agricultural sector with considerable East Bloc aid. The result was man-made famine of grotesque

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<sup>5</sup> Nick Cullather, “The Third Race” *Diplomatic History* 33 (June 2009), 512

proportions that “never needed to have happened.”<sup>6</sup> In East Germany decades of state industrial and agricultural policy ground down the nation’s forests, leaving deep marks on the landscape and those who inhabited it. Massive programs that would have done Stalin’s Five Year Plans proud were hammered down within the Soviet Union itself. Even as Gorbachev struggled to stitch together a fraying empire, ambitious development programs like the Baikal-Amur Mainline railway, a vast effort to bring cotton cultivation to the republics of Central Asia by diverting water from the Aral Sea, and even a fantastic plan for reversing the flow of Siberia’s rivers were considered or implemented. All had enormous environmental, social, and economic costs, some of which continue to be paid today.<sup>7</sup> Juleps there may have been, but some were still drinking straight from the bottle.

This is not to say that there were not programs outside the communist world that did not have negative, indeed, appalling impacts. The World Bank’s chequered record of development aid was demonstrated by the human, environmental, and economic agonies experienced by Polonoeste region in Brazil. This came after its crusading chief, Robert McNamara, absorbed the rhetoric of sustainability and poverty reduction that displaced the modernization lexicon during the 1970s.<sup>8</sup> However, the discourse of international development had at least made a place for talk of poverty alleviation and sustainability. In the West, the large projects that been a staple of modernization efforts were regularly subject to scrutiny, debate, and criticism in the press, from advocates, intellectuals, and nongovernmental groups mobilized against them. East Bloc projects seemed to escape the same sort of interrogation. This is not to say that development programs elsewhere were necessarily “better” but it is to suggest that historians must consider the larger political, cultural, and social milieus that shape their perception and implementation.

Collectively, the articles offer fresh perspectives on a complicated topic. They demonstrate that serious research on particular locales can yield exciting results. However, within the articles there are often appeals to “global discourse” or larger international imperatives, yet what these might be too often remain nebulous. To be sure, even if the international trends regarding development at a particular moment were laid out they would undoubtedly be large, differentiated, and fuzzy at the edges. Authors seem certain that their particular local study is connected to the global, but often seem unable to make a firm, clear connection.

This is not to devalue these exceptional efforts. Yet, to fully grasp the human impact of this powerful historical theme rigorous research on the local will have to go hand-in-hand with the global. To take just one example, there is a need to comprehend wider trends in

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<sup>6</sup> Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), 287.

<sup>7</sup> Arvid Nelson, *Cold War Ecology: Forests, Farms, and People in the East German Landscape, 1945-1989* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005); J.R. McNeill, *Something New Under the Sun: An Environmental History of the Twentieth Century World* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001), 163-166.

<sup>8</sup> Bruce Rich, *Mortgaging the Earth: The World Bank, Environmental Impoverishment, and the Crisis of Development* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 112-115.

political economy that often create the discursive and political boundaries that shape development. All of the programs discussed in the forum occurred in a period where state-led aid and interventions were accepted as the preferred means of pushing progress. However, and perhaps unsurprisingly, after modernization ideas dissolved into crisis in the 1960s, “neo-liberal” ideas ascended internationally. Emphasis on free markets and private enterprise ruled the discourse in key institutions internationally for over a generation. This reshaped how development was conceptualized and done. Even the UN diminished the role of economic growth and state intervention in its 1994 *Agenda for Development* and its later Millennium Development goals.<sup>9</sup> It helps explain why there is such emphasis on entrepreneurship and private enterprise in quadrants of the global development community today. The point is not to drive inquiry away from the sort of fruitful local studies that populate the forum but to suggest the broad topic of development will reward (and perhaps demands) an interconnected spectrum of inquiry. There is no lack of work to be done on the history of modernization and development at all levels.

Such a substantial task will require not just extended historical vision but also an awareness of the ideas and research relevant to development that emerge from a crowd of disciplines across the social sciences, humanities, and the hard sciences. There is also the need to franchise the constellation of institutions—international, governmental, and nongovernmental—that comprises the international development community. The forum suggests that historians explore questions of development’s impact on the environment, the status of women, and the place of religion. These are undoubtedly critical to any fully-fledged analysis. But we should acknowledge that if historians take up these topics they will likely be following paths marked by various disciplines and groups directly involved in development that have been wrestling with these concerns for decades. It might even be useful to dredge up and acknowledge the feet of clay the academy has in regards to modernization. In the West, and particularly the United States, it was not just social scientists that were in modernization theory’s thrall. Historians across various fields were as well.<sup>10</sup> This is not to encourage navel gazing but to suggest that we might consider some of the ways these elements continue to shape the contours of our present discussion of the issue.

Movement toward the global history sketched by the forum will pay dividends. Considerable work still remains to be done on the Cold War era but it appears that after some time in the wilderness, modernization ideas are again finding an outsized role in world affairs. This renewed significance is accompanied by some old assumptions that appear to be creeping back into global discourse. Recent books by the economist Jeffrey Sachs promote applied technology as the essential catalyst for the massive change

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<sup>9</sup> *An Agenda for Development: Report of the Secretary General*, May 6, 1994, UN Doc. A/48/935; Millennium Development Goals, <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/>, accessed June 18, 2009.

<sup>10</sup> Appleby et. al., *Telling the Truth About History*, 84-86.

societies require to make them buoyant enough to sail out of their “poverty traps.”<sup>11</sup> Those who have their hands directly on the levers of policy and power speak of broad transformations to serve strategic ends. Take, for example, the U.S. proconsul for Afghanistan and Pakistan, Richard Holbrooke, who began his career in the mid-1960s as local representative for USAID in the Mekong Delta. Holbrooke has spoken of the need to do “basically what Roosevelt did with the farmers in America in the 1930s... a massive multibillion dollar program, that involved seeds, water, fertilizer, roads, markets” for the United States to achieve its goals in Afghanistan.<sup>12</sup> Modernizers of an era gone by would have found these visions agreeable. The new global history outlined by the forum can not only provide an awareness of the origins of the development ideas the Americans are deploying, it can also provide lenses to see the agency and agendas of the Afghans and the other groups caught up in that conflict-torn region. It all suggests, for good or ill, this history might have limitless chapters.

**David Ekbladh** is assistant professor of history at Tufts University. His first book, *The Great American Mission: Modernization and the Construction of an American World Order*, will be published by Princeton University Press in January 2010. This fall he will be a Research Fellow at the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government. He is currently working on a study of American globalism in the 1930s.

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—Commissioned for H-Diplo by Thomas Maddux

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<sup>11</sup> See Jeffery Sachs, *The End of Poverty: Economic Possibilities for Our Time* (New York: Penguin Press, 2005) and Jeffery Sachs, *Common Wealth: Economics for a Crowded Planet* (New York: Penguin Press, 2008).

<sup>12</sup> “Afghanistan and Pakistan: Uneasy Neighbors” Panel Discussion at the Asia Society, February 14, 2008, [www.asiasociety.org/resources/uneasy\\_neighbors\\_021408.html](http://www.asiasociety.org/resources/uneasy_neighbors_021408.html), accessed February 3, 2009.