



The Routledge Handbook on the History of Development

Edited by Corinna R. Unger, Iris Borowy and
Corinne A. Pernet

THE ROUTLEDGE HANDBOOK ON THE HISTORY OF DEVELOPMENT

This bold and ambitious handbook is the first systematic overview of the history of development ideas, themes, and actors in the twentieth century. Taking stock of the field, the book reflects on blind spots, points out avenues for future research, and brings together a greater plurality of regions, actors, and approaches than other publications on the subject.

The book offers a critical reassessment of how historical experiences have shaped contemporary understandings of development, demonstrating that the seemingly self-evident concept of development has been contingent on a combination of material conditions, power structures, and policy choices at different times and in different places. Using a world history approach, the handbook highlights similarities in development challenges across time and space, and it pays attention to the meanings of ideological, cultural, and economic divides in shaping different understandings and practices of development. Taking a thematic approach, the book shows how different actors – governments, non-governmental organizations, individuals, corporations, and international organizations – have responded to concerns regarding the conditions in their own or other societies, such as the provision of education, health, or food; approaches to infrastructure development and industrialization; the adjustment of social conditions; population policies and migration; and the maintenance of stability and security.

Bringing together a range of voices from across the globe, this book will be perfect for advanced students and researchers of international development history.

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CONTENTS

<i>List of illustrations</i>	<i>viii</i>
<i>About the contributors</i>	<i>ix</i>
PART 1	
Introduction	1
1 The history of development: A critical overview <i>Corinna R. Unger, Iris Borowy, and Corinne A. Pernet</i>	3
PART 2	
Concepts and ideas of development	17
2 Economic growth and the object of development <i>Verena Halmayer and Daniel Speich Chassé</i>	19
3 Socialist approaches to development <i>Alessandro Iandolo</i>	34
4 Alternative development approaches: Utopias, co-options, transitions <i>Eija Ranta</i>	52
PART 3	
Themes	67
PART 3A	
Developing people	69
5 Unraveling the health-development nexus <i>Iris Borowy</i>	71

6	Education, development, and North–South relations in the 20th century <i>Damiano Matasci</i>	87
PART 3B		
Developing societies		103
7	Inequality <i>Michele Alacevich</i>	105
8	Industrialization <i>Gareth Austin</i>	120
9	Demographic concerns and interventions: The changing population–development nexus in the 20th century <i>Teresa Huhle</i>	134
10	Multiple faces of migration and development: Nation–building, neoliberalism, and multilateralism <i>Nicholas R. Micinski and Elaine Lebon-McGregor</i>	148
11	Infrastructure <i>Vincent Lagendijk</i>	161
PART 3C		
Developing the material world		175
12	Urban development <i>Nancy H. Kwak</i>	177
13	Agriculture and food production <i>Harro Maat</i>	190
14	Resource governance <i>Roger Merino</i>	204
PART 4		
Actors of development		219
15	Religion and development: Multiple voices in global context <i>LIUYi</i>	221
16	NGOs and development: Small is beautiful? <i>Kevin O’Sullivan</i>	234

Contents

17	International organizations and development <i>Verena Kröss, Corinne A. Pernet, and Corinna R. Unger</i>	250
18	State intervention for development: A historical perspective <i>Atul Kohli</i>	264
19	Multinational enterprises <i>Alex Gertschen and Olisa Godson Muojama</i>	278
PART 5		
Transversal perspectives		297
20	Gender and development <i>Karen Garner</i>	299
21	Development knowledge: A twentieth-century perspective <i>Corinna R. Unger</i>	315
22	Development and the security paradox: How development was born to grant security but failed to do so <i>Sara Lorenzini</i>	329
23	History of development assistance <i>Matthew Clarke</i>	344
	<i>Index</i>	363

ILLUSTRATIONS

Figures

- | | | |
|------|--|-----|
| 23.1 | Net ODA from DAC countries (USD 2018 constant millions).
Source: Authors' own work, OECD (2020), <i>Financing for Sustainable Development</i> , https://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=Table2A# , accessed 8 October 2020 | 351 |
| 23.2 | USA Net ODA as proportion of DAC total Net ODA. Source:
Authors' own work, OECD (2020) | 352 |
| 23.3 | Selected Muslim-majority aid donors (2018 USD constant millions).
Source: Authors' own work, OECD (2020) | 354 |
| 23.4 | Comparing DAC donors with four Muslim-majority donors (2018
USD constant millions). Source: Authors' own work, OECD (2020) | 354 |

Table

- | | | |
|-----|---|----|
| 6.1 | Adult literacy rates (15 years old and over) by geographical regions
around 1950 | 93 |
|-----|---|----|

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PART 1

Introduction



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1

THE HISTORY OF DEVELOPMENT

A critical overview

Corinna R. Unger, Iris Borowy, and Corinne A. Pernet

What is development?

What is development? Is it the effort to propel allegedly underdeveloped societies into modernity by means of technical assistance? Is it what happens in all societies at all times, as individuals and social groups react to political, economic, environmental, and cultural conditions around them and take deliberate steps to change them in ways they consider advantageous? Should we consider the construction of a production site for semiconductors in Switzerland or Canada the way we consider the building of a hydroelectric dam in Uganda or Colombia? Is the nation state a suitable category to use when we think about development? Don't all countries have some "more developed" and some "less developed" regions? Also, does it require a certain level of underdevelopment or non-development to allow for development to happen, and if so, how is that level determined, and does it matter in which sector it exists? Can a society be economically developed but socially or culturally underdeveloped? Does any society ever stop developing? If the answer is no, what does that mean for our understanding of "developing countries"? What is the threshold that separates developed countries from those that are, supposedly, less developed, undeveloped, underdeveloped, or least developed?

These are, to a degree, philosophical or, arguably, ideological questions. They touch on core considerations of how humans organize their relations with each other and with their environment. They are also crucial questions for historians, who are inevitably interested in change, and in how and why it happens. They want to know, for example, why some actors at a certain point in time believed that it was better to live in a planned economy than to give free reign to the market, why others made the opposite choice, and how these decisions affected social relations at the time and in later years. Some historians are interested in how leaders of formerly colonized and newly independent countries imagined the future, why they favored some visions over others, and how their decision to pursue one specific path of development translated into practical politics. Other colleagues investigate why some countries have been more successful in achieving economic prosperity than others, or whether "success" is even a useful concept for historians. Yet again others study the establishment of international organizations and the ways in which they complemented or challenged the development-related activities of national governments.

In doing so, historians do not necessarily endorse one specific definition of development. In fact, they rarely even define what they mean by “development” but keep some constructive ambiguity by working with whatever implicit or explicit definition the historical actors of their analyses have adopted. Similarly, there is little agreement about the starting point of the history of development. Is it the moment some unnamed person millennia ago built a wheel? Or is it the Enlightenment with its ideas of progress and improvement? Or Sun Yat-sen’s call for the establishment of an “international development organization” in 1922? Or the Point Four Speech by US President Harry Truman in 1949? Or an altogether different date?¹

All of these questions show that it is far from clear what “development” means, let alone its history. At this point, some readers may have begun wondering whether it makes sense to publish (or, for that matter, to read) a handbook on the history of development if the object of that volume is so eminently indistinct. We understand such doubts but obviously disagree. It is precisely the ambiguity of development that makes studying the concept and its practices so important. The fact that the term can mean so many different things to different actors is what makes the history of development such a fascinating and important field of research. After all, these various understandings shape not only our views about the record of past human efforts but also our perspectives on the central current and future challenges, what they are, who is responsible for their existence, what needs to be done to meet them, and who should accept the largest burden in implementing solutions. At a time when people across the globe are facing climate change, rampant biodiversity loss, socioeconomic polarization, and rising threats of pandemics, an awareness of the underlying decisions, long-term patterns, value systems, and path dependencies that have shaped our history so far seems indispensable for making informed choices about the future.

Approaching the history of development

We are not alone in our interest in development. The field of development history has been exceptionally productive in recent years, providing theoretical and conceptual analyses, intellectual histories as well as a growing body of empirical studies.² However, as of now there is no volume on the history of development that takes stock of the state of the field, reflects on its blind spots, and points out avenues for future research. This is what our handbook aims to do. By bringing together a range of perspectives and interpretations of development in its various forms and spaces, the volume offers the basis for a critical reassessment of how historical experiences have shaped contemporary understandings of development. Reviewing these historical processes reveals how the current, predominantly economic, understanding of development has been contingent on a combination of material conditions, power structures, and policy choices at different times and in different places. Despite such contingencies, specific notions of development have at times made it difficult to imagine alternative pathways, much less pursue them against established interests and path dependencies.

Using a world history approach, the handbook highlights similarities in development challenges across time and space. The contributions pay attention to the roles of ideological, cultural, and economic divides in shaping different understandings and practices of development. Probing into parallels as well as differences in varying contexts allows us to break up hardened (if limited) notions of development and to see their position in a historical context. Moreover, the volume takes into consideration global and regional entanglements, as development-related decisions and initiatives in one place often had (unexpected) repercussions in different parts of the world, at times decades or even centuries later.

When conceptualizing the volume, we decided not to impose any specific definition of development on the authors, leaving it up to them which concept to adopt as a working

definition, be it implicitly or explicitly. We considered such constructive ambiguity the only workable approach for a handbook that is designed to incorporate a broad spectrum of views. Nevertheless, our decisions regarding which topics to include and which to leave out were necessarily based on an underlying understanding of the subject matter. As readers of this volume will easily recognize, we have approached the topic with a conception of development as a multi-dimensional phenomenon, of which the economy is merely one component among many, though an important one. We have also acted on the assumption that development is a global experience, of which, again, the North-South dimension is only one, albeit important, component. Finally, we have assumed that, regardless of whether development has been a modern invention or a human ambition at work since time immemorial (or something in between), the form it has taken since the twentieth century has been sufficiently distinctive to justify focusing on that time period. Within this general frame, we have tried to give room to a variety of perspectives, voices, and approaches.

Furthermore, we have avoided structuring the handbook according to periods, ideologies, or political blocks, opting instead for a thematic approach. This choice reflects our premise that most (or all?) actors involved in development efforts in some form or another responded to a series of perceived concerns about which there was remarkably little disagreement: They involved health and living conditions; resources and the infrastructures required for making use of them; population sizes; education; problems resulting from environmental degradation; the emerging urban-rural divide; migration; excessive inequality; as well as political stability, security, and effective governance. However, while the perceived challenges and goals were similar, the cultural and economic circumstances, the political interests involved, and the mindsets with which people approached them often differed substantially, sometimes leading to radically different policies. By structuring the volume around themes, we hope to reveal the rich diversity of how various people, organizations, and groups have come to understand and “do” development at different times and in different places in world history from the late nineteenth century until the present.

Writing the history of development

Scholars working in the field of the history of development are continuously faced with the challenge of how to avoid reproducing the categories that have shaped development thinking and practice for so long. Existing research, for all its merits, mirrors the fact that it has been predominantly produced by scholars in industrial countries in the Global North who have eloquently written about concepts and manifestations of development, including and especially in so-called developing countries in the Global South. The authors all face the challenge of writing critical histories on the basis of sources that, by and large, provide more insight into the perspectives of the “providers” of development assistance (colonial administrations, missionary and humanitarian organizations, national governments, international organizations) than into the viewpoints of those considered in need of assistance. Archives, by and large, are organized in ways that privilege the perspectives of those in power. It is much easier to find sources that document how a national government in Western Europe in the 1960s used development assistance as a foreign policy instrument vis-à-vis a country that used to be its former colony than it is to find documents that speak to the experiences of the inhabitants of that country. Frequently, what these people considered their most important development goals, and how they felt about financial or technical support coming from the former colonial power remain vague.

Apart from the archival situation, the imbalance in terms of perspectives is also a result of the way in which the history of development came to be a field of research. In our reading, this

process involved the merging of originally separate but increasingly overlapping and intersecting strands of research in other fields. These crucial fields include global economic history, the history of empire and colonialism, and the history of development assistance. Each of these strands brought its own perspectives and sources to the table.

Global economic history

The first strand – global economic history – is often not included in overviews of development history, and publications in this field do not usually reference development in their titles or even in their texts. Yet they try to explain a core question of development: Why and how Northwestern Europe came to experience a socioeconomic development that set it apart from the rest of the world, substantially improving the living standards of its population and dramatically changing global power relations.

This separation of historiographies reflects popular constructions of the world that assign the term “development” to “developing” countries only and categorize similar topics in the Global North as “economy.” Furthermore, early studies by scholars from the Global South who pointed out how much economic modernization in Europe was built on contributions from the Global South were slow in gaining acceptance in (Northern) mainstream academia. Crucially, they portrayed capitalism not as a source of wealth but as a driver of regional impoverishment. A case in point is Eric Williams’ *Capitalism and Slavery*, an expansion of his 1938 Oxford PhD thesis. Williams, a black student from the crown colony of Trinidad, argued, among other points, that the profits from slave labor in Caribbean sugar plantations had been a major, possibly a necessary factor for British industrialization.³ Soon after, Williams went into politics to become the first Prime Minister of independent Trinidad, but his argument kept being extensively debated for decades, with conferences and edited volumes marking the 50th and 60th anniversaries of the original publication.⁴ By the 1990s, a broad consensus had emerged that colonial slavery had indeed fueled industrialization in Britain, though the precise extent was still debated.

A similar case was made in the 1969 article on “The Development of Underdevelopment” by André Gunder Frank. A German-American economist and sociologist who spent more than ten years teaching in Brazil and Chile, Frank took up long-standing Latin American critiques of capitalist economic development to pioneer the world systems approach: He argued that Latin America’s forced integration into global capitalist structures that began during the colonial period led to its underdevelopment. The “core” countries exploited both the inexpensive labor as well as the natural resources of the “peripheries,” undermining their prospect of autonomous economic development.⁵ While Frank revised his work considerably in later years, he established the notion that underdevelopment in certain world regions was not to be understood as lack of capitalist development, but rather a consequence thereof. These ideas were taken up and developed into an elaborate world systems theory by US sociologist Immanuel Wallerstein.⁶ The theory retained an important Southern basis with authors like Enzo Faletto and Fernando Henrique Cardoso, whose *Dependency and Development in Latin America* was published in Spanish in 1969 – the same year as Frank’s essay – but was not translated into English until 1979.⁷ The radical anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist politics of Frank and other world systems thinkers might explain why it took decades for economic history to explore more deeply such links between development in one region and underdevelopment in others.

Meanwhile, the Western mainstream historiography of the Industrial Revolution postulated a reverse causality, with development and industrialization beginning in Europe, which then led to ideas of European superiority and rapid colonial expansion culminating during the nineteenth century.⁸ Over time, historians of industrialization have largely replaced this Eurocentric

perspective with more global approaches. Whereas Joel Mokyr called his 1993 edited volume *The British Industrial Revolution*, subsequent studies challenged this perspective by linking events in Britain to those in regions outside of Europe and North America.⁹ A massive, three-volume encyclopedia of the Industrial Revolution published in 2014 explicitly conceptualizes it as part and parcel of world history.¹⁰ One offshoot of this global turn in the history of industrialization was a series of publications that explored why some European countries rather than China became so rich and powerful that they could rule much of the world in the nineteenth century. This development would have struck most observers as implausible around 1800, when China was clearly wealthier and technologically more advanced than Europe in general and Britain in particular. This debate on “The Great Divergence” (the title of Kenneth Pomeranz’s magisterial study) and the “Rise of the West” likewise shifted from national perspectives that emphasized European idiosyncrasies to global perspectives that highlighted connections and contingencies. While Eric Jones, musing about the “European Miracle,” could still claim European exceptionalism in 1981, biologist and anthropologist Jared Diamond argued in 1997 that the geographic distribution of domesticable plants and animals was a crucial factor in determining which areas developed agriculture, urbanized, and, eventually, industrialized.¹¹

Though some historians have criticized Diamond’s interpretation as overly deterministic, overall environmental factors such as the location of coal reserves or differential productivities of staple crops have gained traction to explain divergent development paths.¹² To explain the rise of Britain, for instance, historians have studied how the higher yields of rice, as compared to wheat, made food cheaper and workers’ wages lower in India than in Britain. While these conditions made British products internationally uncompetitive for a long time, they encouraged investments in labor-saving technologies after the invention of steam power. Consequently, the British took the lead on a path that would generally revolutionize production and substantially underwrite the rise of Britain to a major (colonial) power.¹³

Histories of empire and colonialism

As a second strand, the histories of empire and colonialism stand out for their direct entanglements with the history of development, especially regarding the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries: Post-World War II development work was deeply rooted in colonial programs and approaches (an issue we will return to below), and the assessment of colonialism is in large part based on the question of how it affected the socioeconomic development of colonies as well as colonial powers. This tends to be a sensitive issue, in some cases entangling historians in questions of ideology, perceived guilt, and national identity. In Belgium, for instance, unapologetic research into the Belgian Congo emerged only with a generation of historians who had been born after Congolese independence.¹⁴ Today, most historians of colonialism agree that European colonialism disrupted existing economic and trade structures in the societies that came under colonial rule, and that the colonial powers engaged in colonialism primarily to promote their economic and power interests. Their efforts to secure access to raw materials, labor supplies, and export markets were coupled with attempts to strengthen their respective countries’ prestige and political position in the world. However, beyond this basis, interpretations differ.

The argument that the economically difficult and politically unstable situation of many so-called developing countries is, at least in part, the result of colonialism mirrors the understanding that a causal nexus exists between colonial rule and current underdevelopment. This, in turn, builds on the notion that colonial rule was predominantly extractive and destructive, creating structures that turned the colonized societies into dependent entities that lost the

ability to develop on their own. Critics of this interpretation tend to argue that the influence of colonial rule is overstated and that it ignores other relevant factors such as environmental conditions or existing interethnic and regional tensions. They also point out that neither European nor non-European societies were either static or homogeneous but that different societal groups engaged in dynamic processes of negotiations for power and economic status. Therefore, a simplistic picture of active aggressors versus passive victims overlooks crucial ambiguities and the important role of African, Latin American, and Asian agency before, during, and after colonialism.¹⁵

These different views have been borne out in passionate, sometimes bitter academic debates, among which a few pivotal publications stand out, especially with regard to the British Empire. Among those who argue that the exploitation of colonies unilaterally benefited the colonizers and actively impoverished countries that had or otherwise could have been prosperous is Walter Rodney, whose 1972 *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* became a frequently cited classic.¹⁶ Thirty years later, Marxist historian Mike Davis, in his book *Late Victorian Holocausts*, argued along the lines of Frank and Rodney that the humanitarian rhetoric of colonial development covered up much more pragmatic and, in many cases, violent and racist positions.¹⁷

By contrast, followers of historian Niall Ferguson have maintained that for all the violence that European imperialism and colonialism entailed, it did more good than bad.¹⁸ Similarly, Bruce Gilley, then professor of political science at Portland State University, in a 2017 article in the *Third World Quarterly*, defended “the civilising mission without scare quotes – that led to improvements in living conditions for most Third World peoples during most episodes of Western colonialism,” and called for governments to take up consensual colonialism as a policy.¹⁹ In reaction, 15 of 34 members of the journal’s editorial board resigned in protest.²⁰ In the same year, Indian member of parliament and prolific writer Shashi Tharoor argued in *An Era of Darkness* (later also published as *Inglorious Empire*) that British colonialism had destroyed a formerly prosperous India.²¹ Other historians have challenged Tharoor’s interpretation as simplistic and one-sided.²² For example, London School of Economics professor Tirthankar Roy argued that the

statistic that India produced 25% of world output in 1800 and 2–4% of it in 1900 does not prove that India was once rich and became poor. It only tells us that industrial productivity in the West increased four to six times during this period.²³

The debate is not merely academic but is tied to discussions of reparations. While Tharoor had only demanded a symbolic payment from Great Britain, Indian economist Utsa Patnaik made headlines by calculating that Britain drained GBP 9.184 billion from India between 1765 and 1938, which, assuming a compound interest rate of 5%, would amount to reparations of USD 45 trillion today.²⁴

The second reason why the history of empire and colonialism is so important to the history of development is the continuity between colonial and postcolonial approaches to development. The colonial powers in the late 19th and early 20th centuries began to promote, slowly but surely, the development of their colonies. To legitimize colonial rule and to increase their income from the colonies, they made small but, over time, not insignificant investments in the colonies. For example, they built additional roads and railway lines, upgraded schools and clinics, and introduced new, “modern” agricultural technologies. All of this was done in the interest of colonial power and income. In many cases, these interventions came at the cost of the indigenous populations. In other cases, colonial subjects found ways of benefiting from them or of using them in ways that, while not intended by the colonial administrators, had empowering

effects. In any case, these initiatives set the tone for future mainstream understandings of what development should and could be.²⁵

The League of Nations was a central player in this context, and one of the first spaces in which a new type of development thinking was formulated and tested. Upon its founding in 1919, the League established a mandate system in which some Allied countries were put in charge of administering the territories that had formed part of the Ottoman Empire or that had been colonies of Germany. Historian Susan Pedersen has shown how the League, while upholding the principle of colonial rule, provided representatives of the mandate areas with an arena large and open enough to challenge the colonial powers. Consequently, colonial powers began exploring alternative means of retaining their positions of dominance, with so-called colonial development programs as a particularly prominent tool.²⁶ At the same time, the League pioneered programs of assistance to “least advanced” countries. Such efforts have been the object of the third strand of research that has shaped the history of development: The history of development assistance.

History of development assistance

Individual publications on the history of development assistance already appeared in the 1980s and early 1990s, but they were few and focused mostly on the realm of ideas.²⁷ In the 1990s and 2000s, historians of European and American foreign relations began to turn to the use of development assistance as a foreign policy tool more systematically, especially in the context of the Cold War. The United States’ initiatives with regards to Latin America figured prominently, but were analyzed mostly as political history.²⁸ Nick Cullather’s article “Development: It’s History,” published in 2000, inspired many historians to investigate the history of development aid in the post-1945 period.²⁹ Some of them did so from the angle of foreign trade and military relations, others with a focus on the ways in which social scientists formulated modernization theories and development models that inspired foreign policy.³⁰ Meanwhile, historians of European colonialism and imperialism had begun to study the ways in which the colonial powers began to use developmental measures to maintain or increase control over their overseas possessions after World War I.³¹ One emphasis of this research was the role of expert knowledge, specifically relating to the social sciences, in shaping colonial policies and approaches and in preparing the ground for what would later become the field of development studies.³²

A related arm of historical research that produced important insight into the origins of development assistance was the history of international organizations that experienced a boom in the 2000s and 2010s. Beyond the mandate system, already mentioned, the League of Nations took an active role in this field through its work on economics, health, transportation, and agriculture. Historians like Sunil Amrith, Patricia Clavin, and Carolyn Biltoft analyzed how the League of Nations provided conceptual and practical assistance in the economic sector, thereby establishing blueprints for activities that would be termed “development” after 1945. At the same time, these initiatives offered platforms to negotiate various alternative visions of development.³³ The League’s sizable program in China, established at the invitation of the Nationalist Government, set a new precedent. According to Margherita Zanasi, the League’s representatives believed “that these countries all suffered the same problems of underdevelopment and that the cure was the adoption of Western modernity.”³⁴ This League mission foreshadowed the approaches of post-war organizations. After World War II, a growing body of international organizations began to take responsibility for international development assistance. The UN Intellectual History Project, with the participation of many former UN officials, has pioneered the examination of such efforts in considerable detail, with a focus on the UN Development Program.³⁵ Historians

independent of the UN have expanded these analyses to discuss the development activities of other UN technical organizations (WHO, FAO, UNESCO). Recent studies have explored the development programs of other international organizations, such as the International Labour Organization, the OECD, GATT, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund, but much remains to be done.³⁶

Over the course of the 2010s, a number of edited volumes reflected the rise in interest among historians in development assistance efforts by national governments, international organizations, and non-governmental actors across the globe. Together, these studies have demonstrated the richness of historical experiences with different forms of development under various political conditions and in different world regions.³⁷ Initially, most of the research on the history of development assistance focused on Western actors, even though their Eastern counterparts were always present in the Cold War setting. Yet due to the historiographical and political legacies of the end of the Cold War, the fact that the socialist countries and many experts from the socialist world had been active and highly influential in international development remained relatively obscure for a long time. This has changed dramatically in recent years, with many publications on the history of development-related connections and interactions between the Soviet Union and other socialist countries and African, Asian, and Latin American countries.³⁸

Based on this growing body of individual studies, historians like Corinna Unger and Sara Lorenzini have presented comprehensive overviews of the ways in which development concepts and practices evolved in the twentieth century, usually with a focus on the period after 1945, when the term came to denote a specific field of policy and international relations.³⁹

Towards a history of development

Taken together, the studies of development from these different angles helped to create a foundation for the field of the history of development. One of the most notable trends has been the shift of focus from government policies and expert debate to investigations into the practice of development projects.⁴⁰ This kind of research has increased historians' awareness that development ideas always existed at various levels of society and were not confined to international expert circles. Another issue that has attracted historians' attention is the question of the personnel engaged in development work. Several studies have emphasized the continuity in terms of personnel and approaches between colonial offices and the newly established international organizations. Many experts and administrators in colonial offices continued their work beyond World War II and beyond decolonization. Some of them became advisors to the new international organizations, others joined newly established development consultancies or companies.⁴¹ Their knowledge was valuable, not least because many of them had spent time in the colonies and thus had a better sense of the specific localities and societies than their domestic counterparts. In the United States, the Bureau of Indian Affairs and academic institutions like Cornell University provided a great number of personnel to development work.⁴² Other studies have shown how women and men engaged in humanitarian and religious organizations moved into development work. Tracing the ways in which development experts adapted their knowledge to changing political conditions and structures has sharpened historians' understanding of the long history of development thinking and served as a counterpoint to the long-standing assumption that development was invented by American actors in the late 1940s.⁴³

Still largely missing from the field is a history of development that puts the individuals and social groups who are usually considered the "recipients" of development at the center of analysis. Anthropologists have studied development projects in different locations in great depth, investigating the ways in which development interventions produce change, problems,

and opportunities for the individuals involved.⁴⁴ By and large, few historical accounts have been written at a comparable level of analysis.⁴⁵ While a few micro-historical studies have started to fill this gap, many historians agree that more systematic efforts are needed to move beyond the view of planners, experts, and policy-makers and toward the experiences of those who, nominally, stood at the center of the development enterprise but are usually left without a voice. It is here that we identify one of the most important avenues for future research.

Dealing with the critique of development

Criticism of the negative sides of socioeconomic changes has been a constant feature of development. We have no record of how contemporaries of the Neolithic Revolution may have discussed the pros and cons of sedentary and nomadic lifestyles. But there is ample evidence that not everyone happily embraced industrialization. The Luddites, wool workers who engaged in machine breaking riots in late eighteenth-century Britain, were sufficiently notorious for their name to become synonymous – somewhat misleadingly – with anti-technology attitudes.⁴⁶ Throughout Europe and beyond, industrialization gave rise to various forms of opposition, ranging from spontaneous and individual to organized mass movements.⁴⁷ They rejected the existing direction of world development either because it worked to the disadvantage of (large) parts of societies or because it destroyed the long-term basis of all development or both. To varying degrees, the leaders of such critical movements have proposed alternative theories of development and challenged dominant development paradigms. This process of criticism has intensified in the latter part of the twentieth century.⁴⁸

Inevitably, scholars embracing these alternative perspectives have re-written more mainstream histories of development. Very roughly, they can be categorized into the following strands: First, Marxism has informed postcolonialism, dependency theory, and world system analysis. Historians of this school often view development as a ruse for power politics. Authors such as political scientist Gilbert Rist, sociologist Wolfgang Sachs, and anthropologist Arturo Escobar have denounced development as an imperialist project that served to reproduce unequal power structures, using knowledge as power to maintain control over populations and resources situated in the periphery.⁴⁹ Other scholars have been very active in questioning mainstream development models but have not (yet) provided historical accounts analyzing the origins of their critiques. For example, some scholars and activists concerned with environmental challenges promote sustainable development and degrowth as alternatives to forms of development based on mass consumption and high growth. However, there are only very few historical studies so far that look into the history of these ideas and movements.⁵⁰ The same is true for feminist critiques and concepts positioning themselves as indigenous or non-Western alternatives to development, such as *Buen Vivir* or *Ubuntu*.⁵¹ Recently, scholars of the extreme right, notably Alexander Dugin, have attacked Western forms of development as well as the above-mentioned critical approaches as manifestations of cultural decay. Using terminology reminiscent of fascism, they call for approaches that reject liberalism and individualism.⁵²

What was particular about the development critiques of the 1990s, which since have been associated with the term post-development, is the connection with post-structuralist arguments.⁵³ Portraying concepts like development, progress, and improvement as products of Eurocentric Enlightenment thinking that allegedly relied on the violent exclusion of alternative, non-white voices, this critique negates any political potential of those concepts. These critics of development adopted methods and findings from discourse analysis. This has been very valuable in sharpening historians' understandings of the ways in which development discourses served to both obscure and strengthen power relations. However, a preponderant concern with the

discursive level leaves little room for the experiences of those who could not make themselves heard, those who were the objects of development interventions or who were hoping to experience development as improvement in their own lives.

However, the debates about the obvious shortcomings of development thinking and practices have not led to a general rejection of the concept. Indeed, some of the fiercest critics of development have recently had to acknowledge, with some consternation, that the allure of conventional development and the related aspiration to higher material living standards have remained remarkably intact.⁵⁴ Therefore, critics of development are facing two formidable challenges: How to provide visions of better lives that capture the imagination of a critical number of people and, arguably even more difficult, what to call these alternative forms of better lives and the pathways to get there if the term “development” is taboo. Without clear alternatives, rejecting development as an option risks canceling out the hope for improvement. Hence, representatives of the anti-development community, such as Ashish Khotari, Federico Demaria, Giorgos Kallis, and many others, are trying to devise such alternative imaginaries.⁵⁵ It remains to be seen when – or whether – their visions will break out of their niche and become the new mainstream.

While it should not be privileged academics who tell people around the world what their aspirations should be, we do think that historians should take an active part in societal debates and contribute their perspectives and expertise to the discussion of development problems and possible solutions. In this vein, we position ourselves by widening the understanding of development. Our approach to the volume has been shaped by the conviction that development, in whatever shape or form its proponents wish to understand it, necessarily and legitimately forms part of current debates and policies. To declare development dead or irresponsible because of its close historical connections to colonialism and imperialism means denying agency to those who might, in fact, have the most persuasive case of why development, however defined, is their choice and their right. This is not just a matter of development history but concerns contemporary and future developments, too. If scholars interpret all development initiatives from the Global North as part of a campaign or even conspiracy against the Global South, how can they evaluate the decisions of millions of people in China, India, Brazil, and elsewhere who eagerly pursue and in part have adopted the lifestyles of the middle classes of the Global North? In this context, historians can contribute a deeper understanding of the diversity of development ideas and experiences and their various, often ambiguous short-term and long-term outcomes.

We do not consider the history of development to be solely the history of Western or Northern interventions into the Global South but include all those processes that relate to efforts to remake societies and economies in ways designed to bring social improvements, broadly conceived. We do acknowledge that development programs and development assistance policies have played a crucial role in historical thinking about development. The same is true of the organizations that were set up throughout the twentieth century to support and carry out the various activities needed for development. These organizations – from the League of Nations to the United Nations Organizations, from the World Bank to the International Monetary Fund, from COMECON’s Commission for Technical Assistance to the African and the Asian Development Banks, from missionary organizations to humanitarian NGOs, from research institutes to university programs in development – have contributed to creating professional development workers whose daily activities shape the understanding of what development is. Yet development, in our view, is also the challenge of dealing with deindustrialization in industrialized countries; of responding to the effects of climate change by adapting infrastructures and social habits; and of considering in what kind of society we want to live.

In designing the handbook, we have made an effort to incorporate a variety of perspectives but have to acknowledge the limits of our success. As much as we share the critique of the academic North-South divide and are aware of the epistemological consequences it has for our field, we have encountered difficulties in recruiting a larger number of authors who identify with the Global South. This is a structural matter we consider problematic but cannot solve in this volume. All we can do is to encourage scholars to engage in discussion across disciplinary, linguistic, and geographical divides. It is a valuable and enriching effort that allows us to do what scholars, ideally, do: Talk with each other, question established assumptions, and develop new approaches. We hope that our volume provides a basis for such initiatives.

Furthermore, we acknowledge that there are some notable absences in our volume. Ideally, we would have wanted to include a chapter on “race,” seeing that notions of “racial” and ethnic difference have, for a long time, been central to thinking about developmental differences. However, while more historians have started to consider the concept of “race” as an important theme to incorporate in their research, it is not an established research topic in relation to development yet. As a result, we were not able to find an author who could write an overview on research dealing with the history of development as seen through the lens of “race.” Similarly, it is only in recent years that the concept of “the environment” is being taken more seriously in development histories, but the number of studies that focus on this interrelation is still very limited. We thus lack a chapter on the environment and development but would like to urge all of our colleagues to consider working on this crucial nexus in the future.

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PART 2

Concepts and ideas of development



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2

ECONOMIC GROWTH AND THE OBJECT OF DEVELOPMENT

Verena Halsmayer and Daniel Speich Chassé

Reasoning in terms of international development has privileged economic growth as its major vehicle, frequently equating growth with social, economic, and political progress. This is a relatively recent phenomenon: Only in the course of the twentieth century did the concept of economic growth turn into a clear-cut and compact quantitative object of governance. Combined with Western-centric narratives of modernity, progress, and prosperity, it presented a new way of interpreting the past and linking it to a manageable future for all social collectives. While accompanied by sharp criticism and lurking doubt from the outset, securing growth is one of the core foci in political communication, diplomatic practice, and national and international policymaking to the present day, both in high- and in low-income countries, the Global North and South. The ways in which the politics of growth materialized at specific times and places, however, were heterogenous – as were the hopes, fears, and critiques linked to the enigmatic concept.

This chapter sketches the history of the rather tricky relations between development reasoning, the economics of growth, and the global politics of productivity. In the first section, we will trace the idea of development before growth, in particular in colonial settings and the associated doctrines of “improvement.” The second section links the spread of a specific concept of growth that went along with the measurement of the economy in terms of gross domestic product (GDP) with the increasing relevance of economic argument, especially in the form of mathematical models. The third section provides a glimpse of the manifold relations between the economics of growth and the exercise of power. Growth stood at the center of postwar global relations. Post-development and de-growth notwithstanding, its political legacy lingers on.

Historians have long focused on the influence of theories on development policies. In contrast, we wish to suggest a closer look at the practices of model usage that could shed light on the heterogenous trajectories by which these artifacts fed into political discourse and policymaking. Due to the fact that the idea of economic growth is intrinsically connected to the global postwar development endeavor in a multitude of ways, this contribution must remain on a rather abstract level. As a matter of fact, abstraction is a crucial element of the phenomenon to be observed. It is our aim to substantiate to a certain degree the globalization of what historian Charles S. Maier hammered out as early as 1977 as “the politics of productivity.”¹ We do this by taking a closer look at the historical unfolding of epistemic practices in the discipline of economics and substantiate our claims very selectively, predominantly with examples from African economic development policies. We sketch the historical roots of the growth-idea, its

methodical operationalization, and its local manifestations, entangled with imperial connections and their postcolonial legacies.

Development before growth

While today international development is conceptually and practically closely intertwined with economic growth, each of the two concepts has its own historical trajectory.² An important reading of the history of development sets its beginnings in the interwar period, when the notion of colonial development as a state-led socio-economic process took hold more strongly.³

After World War I and the dissolution of some European empires (notably the German and the Ottoman), the system of colonial governance changed. Both the French and the British Empires adopted new bills and earmarked considerable budgetary sums to be invested abroad in order to increase material returns, promote imperial security, and limit anti-colonial discontent. Colonial administrations designed new policies that went under the labels of a “dual mandate” and a “mise en valeur.” The English term had already been popularized in the mid-nineteenth century in the context of organizing and legitimizing imperial rule; the French term was used in debates as of the 1880s, when it was argued that increasing international competition required French colonial expansion to increase production and acquire new sources of raw materials. Accompanied by the belief in European superiority, these early notions of development heavily drew on racialized narratives of difference and progress. Colonial development related to the civilizing mission, the *mission civilisatrice*, the *Zivilisierungsmission*, allegedly improving the situation of the “primitive” while expanding colonial rule and intensifying governmental power.⁴ From the early twentieth century on, difference was increasingly perceived in terms of temporal cultural phases. Now, the language of development supported both imperial and national authorities to guide and control the transformation of “backward” into “modern” societies based on large-scale state intervention, scientific knowledge, and technical expertise: From new methods of managing local economies and planning infrastructures to colonial policies that fostered rural reforms, public works, and local education (such as the Dutch Ethical Policy) to the United States’ experimentation in the acculturation of Native peoples and imperial undertakings in the Philippines.⁵

Interwar development discourse harked back to such notions of development but more strongly pushed the idea that the social welfare and economic interests of the colonized needed to be taken seriously. However, just as twentieth-century “constructive imperialism” and “constructive exploitation” had tied improvement schemes to the accumulation of wealth in the European centers and imperial power over rural colonial economies, these newer ideas were never fully realized. The colonies’ production remained aligned with the needs of the metropolitan economies; British, French, Belgian, Dutch, and Portuguese interwar colonial efforts were hardly more than a rhetoric of improvement for local people outside Europe. While late colonial rule did connect productivity and efficiency increases with welfare issues, workers’ rights, and ecological concerns, it was still largely characterized by forced labor, displacing populations, levying hut and poll taxes, forcing the cultivation of cash crops, etc.⁶ Moreover, *mise en valeur* and related policies were not as easily put into action as imperial powers might have expected. Struggles over land, strikes, and other acts of resistance against resettlement abounded. What Europeans and North Americans considered to be the “rest” of the world was not as malleable and amenable to colonial forms as imagined by contemporaries and historical observers in those metropolises.⁷

The science-based reconfiguration of colonial intervention prominently referred to ecological research, agricultural technologies, demographic studies, administrative techniques, censuses,

and ethnographic scholarship. While numbers were certainly essential for colonial rule, the term “economic growth” did not play a central role in the relevant historical sources as a closer look at the British African experience illustrates.⁸ The beginning of systematic knowledge production by British colonial administrators on their African territories was a project called the *African Survey* that took place in the 1930s. During the intensification of colonial rule, the administrators faced increasing resistance by the local population and felt it helpful to know more about their cultures in order to exercise power more smoothly. The epistemic basis of this endeavor was the qualitative inquiry of anthropologists who invented a “practical anthropology” – practical for rule.⁹ The Hailey volume thus included descriptions of different African languages, popular cultures, religions, and regions but only very few quantitative data and very little insight on African economical interaction. None of the statistical techniques that were being hotly debated during the 1930s among social scientists in view of the British, US, French, Dutch, Belgian, fascist Italian, Soviet, and Nazi-German domestic social situations left an imprint on the Hailey Project. As Helen Tilley has shown, the main idea in the *African Survey* was to record assumedly ancient forms of collective life that were thought to have vanished in the course of the European civilizing mission.¹⁰ The *African Survey* exemplifies that the dominant discourse in interwar colonial development focused not on economic growth but on cultural superiority. The object of increasing financial returns from overseas possessions was connected both to “improving” subaltern mentality and to developing the capitalist extraction of their natural resources (also in Asia but less so in Latin America). Authorities did not invest considerable sums in computing comprehensive statistical assessments that, for instance, included abstract values of economic productivity and could meaningfully refer to the category of economic growth for any geographically consigned socio-economic entities at the periphery. From the metropolitan perspective before 1945, it did not seem necessary to undertake such studies in order to profit economically from the overseas possessions.

The interwar era saw all kinds of development programs, also in non-colonial settings. Social engineering and planning endeavors from Egypt to Greece, from India to Yugoslavia and Austria, from Romania to Brazil, and from China to the United States, frequently with financial backing by the League of Nations or the American Rockefeller Foundation, aimed at raising productivity, especially in agriculture, energy production, mining, and forestry. Drawing on the methods of scientific management, such projects also pushed the development of techniques and tools for social and economic measurement. In the 1930s, statistical renditions of the national economy emerged in relation to the economic and social modernization endeavors of democratic, authoritarian, and fascist regimes alike. Aiming to settle regional inequalities and national imbalances, these development endeavors focused primarily on large infrastructural projects, industrial facilities, and rural development schemes and hereby included some of the tenets that were to become central in postwar international development.¹¹

Post-1945 quantifying of the economy and its temporal behavior in terms of aggregate statistics nurtured a shift in discourse, which turned “international development” and “economic growth” into basically synonymous concepts. Concepts of imperial rule gradually lost plausibility while the “nation” gained the status of a core category, the overall productivity of which rose to chief political prominence.

The growing economy as an object of research and intervention

The advancement of the wealth of nations was already a crucial topic of economic analysis long before the interwar period. In the course of the eighteenth century, the economy emerged as an encyclopedic, organic, mechanic, hydraulic, or accounting, in any case, self-regulating system.¹²

Most prominently, political economists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, witnessing a boost of capitalist practices and expanding productivity, were mainly occupied with the idea of increasing material provisions and thereby populations' welfare over time. Their theoretical concerns stretched from capital accumulation to free trade, from population dynamics to material progress, from the visions of a good society to the questions of how to best administrate colonial possessions, hereby pushing, legitimizing, or – rarely – rejecting imperial rule.¹³ The object observed, however, differed considerably from later growth reasoning in the realm of international development.¹⁴ Portraying a sometimes geographically wide-reaching whole composed of the actions of social groups (landowners, capitalists, workers) and featuring its own laws, classical political economy did not allude to “the economy” as a statistical entity amenable to scientific measurement and governance. Moreover, consonant with its opposition to mercantilist beliefs, British political economy, as it unfolded in the nineteenth century, hardly saw “growth” as an essential goal of government intervention. Neither did French physiocracy. And earlier tools for governmental intervention – such as “political arithmetick” in seventeenth-century Elizabethan and Cromwellian England – had never devised a separate, money-based entity of the economy featuring growth dynamics.¹⁵

It took the invention and the proliferation of national income accounting, the theoretical framing of economics of growth, and the design of development models in order for economic growth to become an object of development.

National income accounting

The specific notion of the national economy that gave rise to today's concept of economic growth was thoroughly bound to the rise of nation states. Their bureaucratic management involved securing wide-spread prosperity through continually auditing the economic sphere. In the nineteenth century, relatively rich nations established massive apparatuses for the collection of data that inscribed their economic capabilities and the distribution of wealth within, especially urged by depression and the crises of the interwar period.¹⁶ An increasingly coherent statistical basis emerged, the inter-national compatibility of which then became subject to debate. This knowledge did evolve clearly separate from all imperial administrators' development goals for the colonies that had been designed up to the year 1945. Quite contrary to *imperial* conceptions of the economic realm, it made the *national* economy a distinct and assumedly manageable thing.¹⁷

At the heart of the new analytical entity of the national economy stood the practice of national income accounting. This statistical method of measurement reflected, as Timothy Mitchell argued, “the collapse of a colonial organization of power, knowledge, and exchange, and the rise of the national state as producer of statistical knowledge and custodian of the economic.”¹⁸ This regime fostered a set of institutions, practices, and technologies with an aggregated national economy at its center, in which efficiency and rising consumption figured as the primary goals of economic management.¹⁹

In contrast to earlier practices, this method of measurement consisted of a coherent accounting system that mirrored the rules of double entry book-keeping. The variables were thus related to each other in an unambiguous way, which provided a means to cross-check the consistency of the data and impute missing variables where the relevant data did not exist in archives or almanacs.²⁰ This overarching accounting framework created the first well-defined and comprehensive numerical visualization of a national economic system as a single entity that – if all nations' economic potential were computed – theoretically could amount to a global total in the terms of a “world economy.”²¹ Decisively, the metric framed the national economy as a

concept through using markets as arbiters of value. It included activities that accrued market value and excluded those that did not. Unpaid reproduction work, for instance, was not part of the national income, while it included the paid services of a housekeeper. Car accidents and environmental pollution increased national income if they involved repair work – despite the fact that such incidents reduced general welfare.²²

Economics of growth

It took the push to planning during and after World War II as well as the breakdown of the colonial world for the national GDP to become what has been called the most powerful number there ever was. In 1953, the United Nations (UN) established the GDP as an international standard. By the end of the 1960s, about 60 nations reported their data to the UN.²³

There have been different ways of calculating and interpreting economic data. Also the resulting numbers have been contested from the outset, in particular when it came to cross-national comparison in a global framework that had yet to be designed.²⁴ As of 1945, the GDP turned into *the* gauge for regional, national, and global differences and became the sole starting point for all kinds of economic studies of industrialization, growth, and development.

In the United States, the Employment Act of 1946 established productivity growth and maximum employment (not full employment) as primary policy goals, hereby strengthening the link between access to welfare, work, and labor productivity.²⁵ Government, business, and labor were supposed to act side-by-side in order to further the interests of the economy, the new statistical object. Over the next decades, pushed by domestic social struggles as well as geopolitical antagonisms, growth figures turned into essential guiding devices and yardsticks for decision-making processes. Governmental strategies that aimed at growth were now much more easily enforced than those with other primary goals.²⁶ The statistical and mathematical refinement of the growing economy was part of a larger shift in the history of academic economic knowledge-making: Economics turned into a modeling endeavor, a transformation that fully played out in the 1960s.²⁷ From then on, other approaches for fabricating economic knowledge, such as institutionalist, Marxist, or evolutionary problematizations, were pushed to the boundaries of the discipline.

Nevertheless, this resulted in various approaches for the modeling of economic growth at the crossroads of academic research, the institutions of economic expertise, and policymaking in terms of a growing national – not imperial – politics of productivity.²⁸ Between the 1950s and 1970s, macroeconomic forecasting and planning models mushroomed in East and West, being thought of as tools to bring the economic whole into balance and for sustaining this balance over time. European and US-American expertise then were thought to help in accommodating the cost of imperial dissolution after World War II.

An early example was the construction of an input–output table for Italy, financed under the Marshall Plan and organized by Hollis B. Chenery, later the World Bank’s vice president for development policy. The project’s objective was to analyze the inter-industrial relations of “the entire Italian economy,” especially of the “relatively underdeveloped Italian South.”²⁹ Depicting a regional economy in terms of a system of capital flows exemplified growth-related ways of seeing not only in the context of the Marshall Plan. Poor regions such as the Italian Mezzogiorno, Romania, Greece, Turkey, or Spain turned into pilot zones for a “catch-up,” where the Organization for European Economic Co-operation (OEEC) tested methods for increasing economic growth.³⁰ These projects soon turned into blueprints for the postcolonial world and were one of the prime instances in which the notion of development was equated with that of growth – the latter turning into one of the stated aims of the Organization for

Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, as of 1961). Increasing overall productivity was the essential goal to be achieved through the adoption of specific production methods and management techniques to create a “productivity-mindedness” of populations and through further standardizing an arsenal of economic measurement techniques.³¹

The mentioned planning models were constructed in direct contact with interventionist programs. They provided glimpses into forecasted or simulated futures on the basis of calculated pasts, offered numerical answers to “what-happens-if”-questions, and aligned policy decisions with imaginaries of long-run growth, however fantastic.

Modeling development

The field of development economics began to take shape with its first journals, textbooks, and research centers as modeling started to become the dominant way of doing economics. While growth theory moved to the center of the discipline, the study of development remained at its margins. Both growth modelers and development economists alike focused on economic dynamics. Their research, however, often enough diverged considerably. On the one side was the exploration of mathematical model worlds, which, if at all, spoke to the growth of industrialized economies. On the other side was the empirical study of growth performances in poor countries and the search for approaches on how to deal with what was denoted to be “backwardness” or “underdevelopment.” While the subfields did not intermingle at large, specific techniques and research objects circulated in both fields.³²

The so-called “Harrod–Domar model” serves as an example. Commonly cited as the origin of the field of growth theory, the Harrod–Domar model portrayed an economy with a GDP growth rate depending on the savings rate and the (fixed) ratio between capital and output.³³ While it was quickly dismissed in the field of growth theory, it struck a chord with what has been called the “capital-fundamentalist” view of economic development. Permeating diverse lines of reasoning, that view basically amounted to the idea that increasing capital investments would nurture higher growth rates.³⁴ The model could be used as a rather simple calculation device to establish the rate of capital that was needed to achieve a certain desired growth rate.³⁵ At the basis of this kind of model reasoning was the economy as an entity, sometimes divided into industries or sectors, which were taken to work as one well-organized enterprise and grew at the same pace in the form of the often-critiqued assumption of “balanced growth.” The reasoning perfectly matched what economists denoted a “big push” of capital investment, exemplified by the World Bank’s promotion of large-scale capital projects. Against earlier liberal paradigms promoting free trade, this was a stronger interventionist stance aiming for rapid industrialization in the emerging “Third World.”

With the publication of Walt W. Rostow’s *The Stages of Economic Growth*, the catchy wording of a “take-off” became more widely used. This conceptualization related to modernizing blueprints for how the new decolonized nations could kick-start development in terms of aggregate indices – based on the United States’ own past, the historical dynamics of which were now re-imagined according to the new tools. The use of the Harrod–Domar model and Rostow’s simplified view was legitimized through arguing that it would eventually be revised, extended, and supplanted by more policy- and country-specific expertise.³⁶

Models entered development advising in various ways: As frameworks for reasoning about development in terms of growth, as devices to calculate policy targets like the financing gap, as providers of concepts to be transplanted into other contexts (the balanced growth path or the take-off), and as technologies organizing political decision-making. There is much to be said about the power of models and the prestige they provided to expertise on economic develop-

ment. We simply highlight the fact that modeling economists did not all share the same epistemologies.

Growth in world politics

Models were hardly ever simply applied, in the sense of pushing the same template to different countries. Rather, they became objects of political struggles globally in local contexts as they fed into complex interactions between local notions of development, specific approaches to planning, and the procedures of policymaking. Often enough, they were applied as seemingly simple manuals for the exercise of national power, alluding to the specific power of universalism in global communication.

This move apparently depoliticized grand partisan challenges – but then again allowed for the articulation of political quests in a new language. In the postwar era, utopian aspirations of decolonial elites meshed with the belief in the capabilities of economic knowledge and expertise to design the newly independent economies.³⁷

The power of universalism

It is a long-standing key interest of scholars to better understand why some human communities achieve relatively high levels of collective wealth while others seemingly fail. One way to accommodate observations of difference among human collectives had, since the eighteenth century, been the assumption of racial difference. In contrast, during the late 1940s and the early 1950s, macroeconomic analysis rapidly achieved global importance, among other reasons, for its focus on the social organization of collective wealth-creation in which the biological features of individual persons played no role. After 1945, it was hardly possible for metropolitan powers to ground colonial rule in the terms of white supremacy.³⁸ This had consequences for the economics of growth. Both blocs in the emerging Cold War formally agreed upon universal legal values as a new basis for world political order. A new universalism gained ground.

In 1948, the UN approved a declaration of human rights and UNESCO (the UN special body on science and culture) subsequently issued a declaration on race that forbade any references to physical appearance within the human species in order to secure political rule. A UN Resolution that declared colonialism a crime followed.³⁹ Instead of physical anthropology, economic growth became the key component of global political discourse in the decolonization era against the background of the Cold War. It was by the mid-1960s that international development and growth were basically used interchangeably.⁴⁰ The rise of economics finely dove-tailed with the debunking of racial prejudice. Economic measurement, economic object-creation, modeling, and economic policy advice focused on a single worldview in which all people and all economic collectives were assumedly equal – at least in their potential.

As of the 1960s, technical economic speak gained ever more importance in global politics. Latin American states had so far connected easily to world economic exchange. But, after 1945, they found themselves located in a new global economic topography towards the bottom end. Meanwhile, the United States designed a world development program of an “Alliance for Progress.” And the World Bank sent enquiring missions to countries like Colombia in order to better understand local conditions of growth and to more easily include those economies in their model of world economical dynamics.⁴¹

A chief source in this discursive connection was the rise of “dependency theory” that grew out of Latin American connections. With the UN setting the basis for local expertise in Asia, Latin America, Africa, and the Near East and through the creation of Regional Economic

Commissions in Santiago de Chile, under the leadership of Raul Prebisch, this new theory of world economic development gained ground.⁴² In the new discourse, no differences were substantial, but all of them could assumedly be overcome through the economics of growth and the political power of productivity. Academic knowledge strongly contributed to making plausible the new vision of a “world society,” which sociologists like John Meyer later on framed theoretically.⁴³

Political uses of growth in the Global South

However, growth was an intrinsically political issue. Its very specific universalism made economic knowledge an instrument of both capitalist extraction at the periphery and anticolonial political struggle. The powerful claim associated with macroeconomic knowledge was that if organized correctly, all social collectives and all people irrespective of their physical appearance could achieve higher levels of income and wealth through economic growth. This promise was well rooted in political debates in Asia, Latin America, and Africa.⁴⁴

One economist to realize the global post-racist communicative potential of the economics discipline was Caribbean-born W. Arthur Lewis, the first (and only) Nobel laureate of color in economics. He had biographically experienced the very inadequacy of racial prejudice in the general task of advancing the economic welfare of the people. To him, the abstract form of knowledge creation in economics seemed promising. In 1955, Lewis authored the first textbook on development economics. The title was *The Theory of Economic Growth*. The book started with a general statement:

The subject matter of this book is the growth of output per head of population ... The definition of output we leave to the theorists ... for our concern is not with the measurement of output, but with its growth ... Growth of output per head of the population is rather a long phrase ... Most often we shall refer only to “growth” or to “output”, or even occasionally, for the sake of variety, to “progress” or to “development”.⁴⁵

Lewis’ problem in the early 1950s was not in defining economic growth, which seemed to him self-evident. His attention focused on the obstacles in mentalities and social structures that hampered the unleashing of the capitalist machine of progress in the Global South.

In 1955, newly emerging nations in Asia like India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka (Ceylon), and Indonesia convened in Bandung, Indonesia, in order to voice a Global Southern standpoint, making ample use of economic knowledge and expertise. China observed the event. The Bandung declaration contained ten points of which many referred to the political economy of growth as an issue of global justice and equity. Most importantly, the delegates agreed on the need to have financial flows from the North to the South. Inflows of foreign investment capital from the highly industrialized countries were sought of about 10–15% GDP in order to trigger self-sustaining growth locally. A massive flow of investment funds was to be institutionalized through the UN system under the name of the Special UN Fund for Economic Development (SUNFED) but was halted by the US government in the late 1950s. Instead, the World Bank became the moderator of these capital flows.⁴⁶

During the 1950s and the 1960s, growth discourse opened up new political spheres, both domestically and internationally. Following the Bandung Conference and the creation of UNCTAD, the new states were quick to make socio-economic difference a political quest. Much to the surprise of Northern diplomats, the Geneva Conference of 1964 and the subsequent

articulation of growth demands at one UN Conference in the 1970s on a “New International Economic Order” made the analysis of the world economy a highly political task.⁴⁷

The economics of growth functioned as both colonial and anti-colonial interventionist knowledge. This ambivalence of growth economics and the political dynamics of productivity connected to it in terms of global development are as yet historically not very well understood. Northern state-led and private actors as well as new Southern elites became advocates and profiteers of globally connected economic interaction by controlling, for example, the transaction of natural resources like rubber, coffee, or uranium.⁴⁸ The growth in volume of this trade was in their interest.

Growth criticism

Pushed by colonial, national, and international actors, political strategies of growth often enough clashed with the interests and demands of workers and the labor movement. In Nasser’s Egypt in the early 1960s, for example, national planners, who strove for an “Arab socialism,” cooperated with UN officials who saw the Middle East as one of the regions in need of modernization. Planners and foreign experts sent on productivity missions shared ideas about the ways to reach industrial modernity.⁴⁹

With the ever-stronger presence of tax-collecting bureaucracies also in rural areas at the periphery and with most economic practices turning gradually into a monetized form, the fundamental divide between a monetized world-economically oriented sector and a more “primitive” local economic life was reduced to a fluid state in all new nations of the Global South. The more “modern” even remote social collectives became, the more adequate seemed their description in Western terms to global scholars and local bureaucrats. And the more adequate seemed models of growth. But a fundamental divide remained. In the early 1970s, the ILO discovered the “informal sector” of labor that had never been accounted for in any growth statistics before.⁵⁰ The petty trade of hustlers, prostitutes, and farmers directly marketing their produce and female reproduction work was never important in the statistics of national income accounting nor in the respective theories and models but still makes up for a substantial part of economic life anywhere in the world. Such criticism of growth numbers was part of a larger wave of growth criticism from the 1960s onwards.

One narrative holds that the 1970s brought an end to growth optimism. Indeed, questioning the concept of growth and the kinds of national and international politics that it fed then gained ground. It became evident that the high growth rates, which some countries worldwide had experienced since World War II, did not lead to peace and prosperity nor did they relieve poverty, reduce unemployment, or diminish inequality, and certainly nowhere did they foster democracy.⁵¹

In the 1960s and the 1970s, anti-growth stances were found in parts of both the traditional and the New Left but also in the mindset of a New Right, tied in with the environmental movement. Frequently, critiques of growth were accompanied by a skepticism of the promises and capabilities of economic knowledge and expertise. The most famous environmental critique, the Club of Rome’s *The Limits to Growth* (1972), used a “world model,” as it were, based on system dynamics to argue that the physical limits to growth would be reached within a century.⁵²

Growth critique was also uttered within the discipline of economics. Several economists who had contributed to developing GDP statistics turned into critics of growth as a major policy aim because of their insight into the shortcomings of statistical growth accountancy. Other economists took ecological reasoning into consideration and opposed the belief in the possibility of limitless growth. In the 1960s, Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen made the case that both economic

growth theory and the politics of growth went awry as they simply ignored scientific knowledge of the planetary dimensions of human life. Barbara Ward and Kenneth Boulding promoted the metaphor of a “spaceship earth”; Herman Daly coined economic growth as a “paradigm” and built an alternative model of a steady-state economy.⁵³ Others linked environmental issues with poverty, in particular, in the so-called “underdeveloped” countries.⁵⁴ After waves of criticism that set out in the early 1970s, growth clearly no longer worked as an unquestioned object of development. Meanwhile, from a Global Southern perspective, raising general income levels in terms of macroeconomic growth still remains a quest.

Conclusion

In a triple jump, our contribution showed that there are no simple mappings between development reasoning, the economics of growth, and the global politics of productivity.

Our analysis raises two sets of questions: The first is that of the contingency of numerical facts. GDP figures do not represent any reality of local economic life but create an abstract realm of political communication and governmental intervention that enhances power structures. The literature on the quantification of the social has frequently emphasized the failures of measurement in bringing about bureaucratic order.⁵⁵ The second is the plurality of development experiences in poor countries. Even for the discussed decades, which were characterized by a rather compact growth paradigm, there was a wide variety of ways in which growth models and measurements fed into development planning and policymaking.

With the establishment of cross-section studies of growth and development, the rise of a so-called “endogenous growth theory,” and a newly found interest in the role of institutions for growth processes, the fields of growth economics and development economics have moved closer together since the 1980s. Development economics, once a clear-cut disciplinary field, vanished into the mainstream of economic knowledge production and policy advice. The political power of economic growth became a hotly debated topic worldwide towards the turn of the century. Quite obviously, most recent changes in political economy do not mean that the topic of growth has decreased in political importance for development. GDP was complemented but not supplanted by a variety of new indicators especially in the context of the new IMF-led policy of “structural adjustment.” And words like “the economy,” “managing,” and “growth” were not unlearned but might have acquired new and more pronounced “antistatist” conceptual contents. Also, surprisingly long-lasting is the assumption of a fundamental divide between economies of the Global North and the Global South. In this respect, economic growth has had an enduring impact on political communication.

Notes

- 1 Charles Maier, “The Politics of Productivity. Foundations of an American International Economic Policy after World War II”, *International Organization* 31, no. 4 (1977): 607–33.
- 2 Two of the most widely referenced accounts in the intellectual history of growth and development as policy ideas are Heinz W. Arndt’s *The Rise and Fall of Economic Growth: A Study in Contemporary Thought* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1978) and *Economic Development: The History of an Idea* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).
- 3 Frederick Cooper, “Writing the History of Development,” *Journal of Modern European History* 8, no. 1 (2010): 5–23; Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, “La mise en dépendance de l’Afrique noire: essai de périodisation, 1800–1970,” *Cahiers d’Études Africaines* 16, no. 61 (1976): 7–58. For reflections on periodization in the history of development, see the introductions to Corinna Unger, *International Development: A Postwar History* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), Stephen J. Macekura and Erez Manela, ed. *The Development Century: A Global History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), and Joseph M. Hodge, Gerald