

BOOK REVIEW

**Thomas B. Robertson and Jenny Leigh Smith (eds.),
*Transplanting Modernity: The Environmental Legacy of
International Development***

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The hubris of twentieth-century development planners' core conceit of remaking the world, the editors of this rich volume remind us, has been a central theme in the recent historiography of global politics. Less often, they add, has that historiography attended to the literal remaking of the world, and the ecological transformations that large development projects wrought. *Transplanting Modernity* – its title suggestive of the grafting of new tissue onto old rootstock – offers nine varied and strong interventions aimed at reintroducing the environment into a historiography that has often treated questions of political ecology as an afterthought.

The project, its editors offer, is twofold: to understand how nature has transformed or impeded twentieth-century development projects, and to examine how development projects, in turn, transformed the natural world. This approach is not as new as its authors sometimes contend; non-human actors, both animal and environmental, have long been core variables in accounts of modern developmental schemes gone bad. Students of development are intimately familiar with the capacity of Egyptian mosquitos, South African cattle, Prussian forests and Sulawesi highlands to foil the modernizing plans of states. This volume nonetheless offers a particularly evocative collection of essays that push back in varied ways against a broadly declensionist framework that has cast environmental degradation and destruction as the inherent outcome of developmental projects. These interventions, by contrast, are largely attentive to the pluripotent and varied ways in which developmental projects alter landscapes, environments and ecologies, often attentive to the complex trade-offs between environmental stewardship and the alleviation of poverty and want.

Transplanting Modernity offers four balanced and well-considered thematic sections that would lend themselves organically to teaching in advanced courses on the historiography of development and in political ecology. A first section on 'Developmental landscapes and the circulation of knowledge' foregrounds two case studies – Linda Nash's account of dam building in Afghanistan and Amrys Williams's investigation of the American 4-H youth farming organization's efforts in India – as bellwether investigations linking together the transformation of knowledge and landscapes in twentieth-century development.

The book's second section, 'Development before and during World War II', offers two excellent revisionist accounts of the new global developmental order wrought, respectively, by decolonization and the United States' expanding purview. Megan Black and

Thomas Robertson's account of the expanding purview of US interventions in Latin American strategic resources into the domain of health and infrastructure offers a persuasive alternative genealogy of international development attuned to questions of natural resources. Admire Mseba's chapter on agrarian development in Zimbabwe offers a provocative rethinking of Zimbabwean agriculturalists' role in modernizing schemes, demonstrating their broad preference for the British colonial programmes that often bear the brunt of critiques of imperial development.

These first two sections offer important revisions to and complication of earlier accounts of development attentive to questions of landscapes and resources, though on more conceptually familiar terrain. It is in the third section of the book, 'State actors in the development era', that the book's core themes are advanced. Siddhartha Krishnan's account of a West German project in India to modernize potato farming through chemical pesticides; Amanda McVety's chapter on the introduction of American cattle in Ethiopia and a concomitant need to eradicate rinderpest; and Elena Kochetkova, David Damtar, Polina Sliusarchuk and Julia Lajus's account of Soviet developmental work in Africa all foreground the ways in which biological, animal and chemical ecologies were brought into the purview, and reshaped the trajectory, of Cold War development.

In a final section, two skilled chapters wrestle with the roles of international organizations in transforming idioms of environmental conservation and rural hygiene. Stephen Macekura confronts the World Wildlife Fund's 1980s efforts to twin the ends of human and non-human welfare, while Corinna Unger charts concordances between the World Bank's work on sanitation in Mumbai and the domestic rural-hygiene programmes which had preceded it. If further from the book's core themes, this section effectively links an earlier moment of Cold War development with a complex later era of global environmental governance and liberalization in much of the global South.

Like all collections of this sort, the essays within this volume occasionally exceed its purview. The landscapes in question – rural India and southern Africa, Afghanistan's Helmand river, mines across Central and South America – sometimes give ground to more commonplace reckonings with the bureaucracies and political lives of development. The editors' eight 'lessons' outlined in its introduction offer more of a schema for assessing the material consequences and success of development programmes, rather than a fundamental rethinking of historiographic approaches. But for readers of this journal, the contributors' broad focus on questions of technology and its application in the context of development offers a set of useful case studies which remain largely attentive to the physicality and ecological moorings of development schemes.

Those wrestling with the historiography of development now have several excellent edited volumes produced over the last quarter-century, as the earliest 'post-development' critiques in anthropology and political science led to a flowering of historical work on late colonial and Cold War development. Frederick Cooper and Randall Packard's *International Development and the Social Sciences* (1997), David C. Engerman's *Staging Growth* (2003), and Stephen J. Macekura and Erez Manela's *The Development Century* (2018) all offer fulsome accounts of twentieth-century development in action; each has offered enduring value to students and scholars of development in Asia, Africa and Latin America. *Transplanting Modernity* is an offering of similar calibre, and responds enthusiastically, if not entirely consistently, to the clear imperative of braiding together histories of developmental thought and practice, and the landscapes and ecologies in which they were forged and which they in turn remade.