# Fighting Hunger: The Cold War and US Foreign Aid

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**The Right Kind of Revolution: Modernization, Development, and U.S. Foreign Policy from the Cold War to the Present.** By Michael E. Latham. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010. 256p. $73.50 cloth, $22.95 paper.

**The Hungry World: America's Cold War Battle Against Poverty in Asia.** By Nick Cullather. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010. 368p. $36.50.

History holds important insights for political scientists concerned with contemporary international development issues. Michael E. Latham and Nick Cullather's recent historical accounts of US foreign policy toward developing countries provide excellent examples of the significance of understanding the past in order to interpret the present. Both books highlight the ways in which strategic concerns of the US government during the Cold War shaped its international aid policies.

In *The Right Kind of Revolution,* Latham shows how intellectual theories of modernization were used extensively to justify the aid policies of the United States during the Cold War, and demonstrates that the development of these theories was directly tied to US efforts to contain Communism in the 1950s and 60s. Cullather, in *The Hungry World,* makes the case that hunger and poverty in Asia were viewed by the US government as dangers to international stability, and that US foreign policies on development issues broadly and agriculture and food policies specifically were thus intricately connected to strategic considerations in the Cold War period.

After more than two decades since the end of the Cold War, US development policy is no longer centrally concerned with the task of containing communist expansion. But the international development and food policies pursued by the United States do not simply move forward with a blank slate in this new context. It is important to understand the historical roots and the impact of early development policies because we must still contend with their legacies.

This can be seen particularly clearly in two themes concerning US development and food security policy that are explored in detail by both Latham and Cullather. The first is the extent to which the US fear of the rural uptake of communist ideas influenced those policies. The second is the way in which linear assumptions and a technology-focused modernization approach drove the thinking and policies on development and food security in this era. In both of these cases, policies pursued in the past have shaped ideas about development and the practices of development assistance.

## The Peasant Problem: Concerns about the Food and Population Balance

Today, US assistance for food and agriculture in developing countries is mainly concerned with ensuring that people have access to an adequate diet and a sustainable livelihood. Ending hunger and eradicating poverty are aims of US foreign policy in their own right, corresponding to the UN Millennium Development Goals, in which the global community pledged to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger in the world by 2015. It is important to remember, however, that in its early days, US development assistance, especially for the rural sector, was primarily driven by aims other than just feeding people and making their lives better. As both books stress, the underlying rationale for aid for rural development assistance was the containment of Communism.

Cullather provides a rich and detailed discussion of the significance of the "peasant problem" for US development assistance policy. Theorists had warned that rural peasants, particularly in Asia where populations were rising and food supplies were limited, posed a challenge for US attempts to construct world order. These warnings dated back to the early 1900s, but took on new significance during the Cold War. In the 1950s and 60s, the United States was explicitly worried that hungry peasants in Asia would be susceptible to adopt communist ideas and join revolutionary forces that could threaten US strategic

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interests in the region. This concern undergirded US foreign policy, which sought to master the rural sphere in Asia through development policies.

Rural development in India became an important objective of US foreign policy, particularly in the decades after Mao Zedong had come to power in China in 1949. As Cullather notes, "India was not just an ally, but a surrogate in the Cold War's most decisive encounter" (p. 134). Latham also stresses the significance of India's rural development to US foreign policy at that time. Eager to ensure that India did not follow China's communist path, US policymakers actively sought to demonstrate that "free men eat better," in effect equating hunger with Communism. The rural areas were key because 85% of India's population lived in rural villages at the time of independence in 1947(p. 69). The US government and the Ford Foundation supported community development programs in India in the early 1950s as a way to transform the rural sphere. The aim of community development was to modernize different aspects of village life by bringing in external knowledge and organizational ideas, and convincing peasants to voluntarily participate in "self-help" improvement of rural areas to ensure their buy-in (*The Hungry World*, Chapter 3). Community development programs, however, disregarded larger and more structural problems, such as uneven landholdings. Despite massive funding for community development programs in over 120,000 Indian villages, they did not lead to any significant rural transformation.

Both books point out that by the late 1950s, poverty and hunger were on the rise in India. As the Cold War intensified, some US policy makers pushed for an increase in foreign aid to India as a way to dissuade any potential alliance between India and the Soviet Union. Despite debate within the United States over this move, US assistance to India increased more than threefold between 1956 and 1957, from $92.8 million to $364.8 million (*The Right Kind of Revolution*, p. 70). Part of this assistance was in the form of food aid, provided under the US Public Law (P.L.) 480 program, Food for Peace. The P.L. 480 food aid program began in 1954 as a means by which to dispose of large US grown grain surpluses. Between 1954 and 1960, India's imports of American wheat increased from 200,000 tons to 4 million tons (*The Hungry World*, p. 144). As India became increasingly reliant on US food aid to feed its growing population, its own agricultural output began to stagnate.

Latham and Cullather both note that the Indian government did not necessarily share the view that rural development was the most important policy to pursue. Instead, it prioritized the promotion of industrial development, and the receipt of US food aid freed up funds and enabled the Indian government to provide more support to the industrial sector. By the early 1960s, the US government became concerned about India's neglect of its rural sector, as well as its reliance on imported food, even though the latter was in large part the product of American enthusiasm for providing food aid in the first place. The United States stepped up its emphasis on the importance of rural development and stressed that India should pursue policies that enabled it to become self-sufficient in food.

Today, strategic concerns about the spread of Communism are no longer the main driver of US policy towards developing countries. In this context, it is perhaps not surprising that US support for food aid and rural development is faltering. Yet at the same time, two decades after the end of the Cold War, important legacies remain from this earlier historical period. Community development is still one of the main frameworks for US rural development assistance, and structural issues such as land reform remain largely off the agenda. And despite the lack of large government surpluses of grain, the United States continues to give its food assistance in the form of US grown grain, even as other donors have moved to untie their aid and move toward other forms of food assistance such as local and regional procurement, vouchers, and cash transfers. The United States has been very reluctant to adopt these new forms of food assistance, even in the face of growing recognition that they are much more efficient and effective than tied food aid.

## Linear Thinking: Modernization and Technological Fixes

A second key theme that ties the two books together is the way in which theories of modernization undergirded US development and food security policy during the Cold War. Theories of modernization, promoted by scholars such as Talcott Parsons, Gabriel Almond, Lucian Pye, and Walt Rostow, were drawn upon extensively by policymakers. This approach was based on a core assumption that development would occur in a similar way in all countries according to a universal pattern that could be mapped and understood scientifically. Adherents of this approach saw the United States as the epitome of a developed society and a model that other countries were striving to replicate. While modernization theorists believed in a sequence of "stages of growth," they also believe that the development process could be facilitated with outside assistance, which could foster a kind of "take off" that would eventually lead to self-sustained social and economic transformation.

Both authors highlight the role that numerical indicators and statistics played in encouraging this kind of linear thinking about development processes. Cullather, for example, tells the fascinating story about the discovery and measurement of the calorie in the late 1800s, which allowed for a conceptualization of hunger on a national, and even global scale (Chapter 1). Once it was known how many calories people needed to eat daily to survive, analysis could be undertaken to measure whether countries were producing enough food to feed their populations adequately. Previously, this had been difficult to assess in a universal way due to the fact that the types of food eaten around the world varied significantly. Once food energy could be reduced to a single unit, comparisons across different countries could be undertaken. Similarly, Latham (p. 50) discusses how new national accounting systems put in place in the 1940s transformed development thinking. Rather than looking at the various complex dimensions of development processes, economists began to fixate on a single measure, the gross national product, using it as a shorthand indicator for progress that enabled comparisons across different countries.

Latham shows that US ideas about development and modernization were grounded in long-standing liberal assumptions that came to the fore during the Cold War because of their relationship to US foreign policy goals. Indeed, one of the most important contributions of his book is its analysis of the complex interplay between US foreign policy and the intellectual evolution of modernization theory within American universities. Although it was (sometimes explicitly) driven by an anti-communist agenda, the theory was portrayed by many academics as a form of objective science.

The linear and scientific orientation of modernization theory lent itself particularly well to the idea that technology could solve problems in a universal manner without the need to pay much attention to local culture or history. The United States latched onto this approach to modernization and, with the help of private funders such as the Ford and Rockefeller Foundations, sought to spread universal technological fixes to the developing world.

Both Cullather and Latham discuss the Green Revolution as an example of the dominant technological approach to hunger advocated by the United States. Cullather illustrates the deep roots of this approach, tracing its origins to the US use of Mexico as a staging ground for modern crop science in the 1940s. Norman Borlaug, then a young scientist, was a key figure in the scientific development of high yielding varieties of wheat in Mexico that were subsequently brought to India in the 1960s. The technological approach to agriculture in Mexico, Cullather argues, was a solution in search of a problem, as the country's agricultural sector was not in crisis at the time. He points out the irony that in the 1940s Mexico was exporting non-food cash crops to the United States, which the latter needed for the war effort. Had it focused on its own food needs, Mexico would have produced plenty of food (Chapter 2). When the Green Revolution crop varieties were brought to India, there were also questions about their usefulness. The United States, however, pressed India to adopt the new agricultural methods and even threatened to cut off food aid unless the Indian government actively promoted them (Chapter 8).

Latham's account of the Green Revolution as a technological fix to hunger is presented alongside a history of the US pursuit of technological approaches to population control, illustrating the complex interplay between these issues in US development policies (Chapter 4). The United States, for example, provided India with assistance for the distribution of contraceptive devices. Indeed, as Latham points out, Borlaug himself saw food and population issues as deeply intertwined. Borlaug often expressed his pride in improving crop yields because the production of more food meant that the world had bought a bit more time with which to bring under control what he called the "population monster."

These technological solutions, similar to the community development approach noted above, allowed the United States to avoid deeply complex and political issues like social inequality and land reform in its development assistance policies. The strategic imperatives of the Cold War and the dominance of linear thinking about development processes encouraged this type of technical approach that promised quick results. But as both Cullather and Latham explain, the technological fixes largely resulted in failure. For example, although the amount of grain produced in India after the adoption of the Green Revolution may have increased, so too did social inequality and environmental degradation associated with the new agricultural technologies.

Modernization thinking and technology-focused development tools have become less prominent in US development policy after the end of the Cold War. But, as both authors note, some legacies of this earlier era remain. For example, although US agricultural aid programs today explicitly seek to incorporate ecological and social equity dimensions, they often simultaneously promote technology-focused agricultural solutions.

Latham and Cullather's excellent books remind political scientists about the importance of history for understanding US development approaches, policies, and outcomes today. US foreign policy interests may have changed, but the legacies of these earlier policies continue to shape both the ideas and the practices of US development assistance. Both authors conclude their books with an overview of current developments, stressing these continuities.

In their enthusiasm to emphasize continuities between the past and the present, both authors perhaps downplay the extent to which US development policy has also changed over time. For example, nongovernmental organizations, which do not receive much attention in the books, have taken on a much greater role in shaping and carrying out US development policies. There is also a much more active academic and policy debate today about the meaning of development and how to promote it through development assistance than was the case in the past. And although the vast majority of US food aid is still tied, the United States is experimenting with other forms of food assistance through various pilot projects that may eventually result in a wider policy shift. Political scientists today devote much of their time to the analysis of these subtle but important policy shifts and their broader implications. But they can still learn valuable lessons from these books, which provide readers with a deep historical understanding of the slow evolution of US international development and food security policies.