

Review for *Historia Agraria* 2013 of

Nick Cullather THE HUNGRY WORLD: AMERICA'S COLD WAR BATTLE AGAINST POVERTY IN ASIA. 2010. Harvard University Press, Massachusetts 348pp ISBN 978-0674-05078-5

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Having been taught - and then teaching - the 'developmental state' for decades before discovering Japan's own theories of what it had been about in S.E. Asia (Kaname Akamatsu's 'Flying Geese', created in the 1930s)¹ this reviewer was unable afterwards to avoid the increasingly diverse meanings of development and its narratives. These are now shattered into hundreds of flowering subfields, theorised in many ways and told from so many perspectives that teaching development requires the gift of a 'rough guide' to the next generation of scholars. Nick Cullather is an established scholar with a life-time's intellectual project revealing how 'the United States uses aid, covert operations, diet, statistics, and technology to reconstruct the social reality of countries around the world'. His book, a refined guide to the 'war on hunger' and the 'battle against poverty' preceding the war on terror is an extraordinarily rich, well written and important contribution to the study of development. It tells - and interprets - the story of 20th century agriculture at the heart of the containment of communism in Asia and Africa - with help from US Presidential and foundation libraries, CIA and USAID files, archives in India, FAO and much more.

Development is seen to have been an American project grounded in the kind of politically construed logics that have interaction effects. While famine creates anarchy (p22) and villages are the breeding grounds for violent revolution (p79), communism brings hunger, while non-communist hunger carries the threats of communism and conflict.² To contain such threats, food and heavy-input, science-based approaches to food production were developed as tools of Cold War diplomacy. They had a hey-day as agents of demographic, political and social transformation and physical 'security'. For this to happen, as Truman is quoted as saying: 'political conflict [was redefined] as a technical matter' (p119-20). But technique has not triumphed and endemic and chronic hunger - malnutrition - remains the development scandal of the 21st century. Further, when technical fixes substitute for political management, they risk not only failure but also a string of unanticipated political effects including episodes of dictatorship, emergencies and conflict. While the book's ambiguously answered question

¹ K Akamatsu, 1935, 'Wagakumi yogo kogyohin no susei' *Shogyo Keizei Ronzo* 13, pp129-212

² J.K. King, 1953, 'Rice Politics' *Foreign Affairs* vol 31 no 3, April

is whether an entire century's good money has been thrown down rat-holes (p256),³ the originality of Cullather's approach is to explain how openly planned and yet how contingent and contentious, how far from a conspiracy and how more like a series of cock-ups, this development project was.

Cullather catalogues US interests in every new wave of development, with 'complex social formations [modelled] onto simplified forms' (p69). Models are depicted as rival ambitions for 'anti-communism' and the improvement of the human condition - including several that had been tried and failed in the USA itself. Rather unconcerned with the minutiae of nutrition policy *per se*, he contextualises and criticises the life cycles of the following un-exhaustive list⁴: 19th global botanical-cum-commercial plant collecting; models of vanguards and laggards; nitrogen as the problem and mechanised, fossil-fuel-dependent food production as the solution; water as the constraint countered by Tennessee valley style dams and irrigation systems;⁵ semi-successful international technocratic activism; village/neighbourhood development; development as self-help; community development; family planning; plantations; factory farming; land reform; peasant irrationality; peasant entrepreneurship; co-operatives; credit; sedentarisation; militarisation; development as a race; models of competitive comparison; the semi-planned, semi-commercial green revolution; innovation as a product – and as a disruptive process; population as a driver of development; population as a ball and chain; food as a precondition of development; food as an accompaniment of industrialisation; tied and untied food aid for development/for emergencies; food infrastructure; food subsidies; ecological sensibilities; good governance; the lifting of subsidies; structural adjustment; getting prices right and markets, celebritisation; development techno-aid as philanthro-capitalism (though Cullather doesn't call it that); culminating after the alarming food price spikes of 2008 in a selectively reinterpreted, geopolitically neutered, market-driven and romanticised green revolution (GR2.0) for the de-industrialised and re-agriculturalised Africa to come.

³ Kissinger's contemptuous verdict on 'development' is quoted as having been 'all procedure and no content' (p254).

⁴ The post harvest system receives less attention marginalising all the foundation reports on stores and mills, growth poles and growth centres, though – complete with interventions from Russian scholars and Ford Foundation consultants – while corroborating Cullather's themes, they might have challenged his trope of war. See (ed) M Raza, 1988 *Regional Development*, Delhi, Heritage and A. Pacey and P Payne, 1985 *Agricultural Development and Nutrition*, London, Hutchinson, FAO and UNICEF

⁵ The Depression and Mexico are introduced as 'laboratories'; and the 1950s irrigation systems in the Hindu Kush are in no small measure 'TVA lessons' for America's luxury karakul/asktrakhan/Persian lamb market - failed schemes mentioned as of more than passing interest to the US in Helmand since 2001 where opium has become the rural development success (see Cullather's brilliant chapter 4 and Pain, 2010). A. Pain, 2010, The Opium Revolution: Continuity or Change in Rural Afghanistan? ch 11 in (eds) B. Harriss-White and J. Heyer, *The comparative political economy of development: Africa and South Asia*, London, Routledge

Rather than being driven by former imperial powers, the United Nations' institutions or the aspirations of post-colonial domestic social forces, 'development' is an America-led clash of ideas about modernity. Cullather's argument is that this maelstrom was let loose without developing appropriate institutional matrices, without the capacity to enforce laws and policies, ultimately without much humility of purpose. He concludes that hunger and the revisionist 'GR2.0' is shaking-off donor fatigue, only to be immobilized by theory fatigue and 'creeping nihilism in policy' (p269).

The book is a valuable resource for many reasons. First it is a scholarly tour de force. Not confined to hunger as a condition, or hunger as a bridge between applied sciences and the mass of cultivating humanity, or even hunger as an enduring symbol of scarcity amid plenty, it is also about the industrialisation that was necessary for increased food production and for effective mass demand for food. It also explores the construction of hunger through new sciences and data (in demography, nutrition and agriculture) with attempts to integrate the new disciplines obstructed by 'erudite over-isolationism' (p48). Into this it weaves the politics by means of which the international epistemic policy community that bridges politics, science, (temporary) bureaucratic vocations and aid has been constructed. It presents a convincing if unfashionable case for technology's not being politically embedded, but instead a vehicle for 'several myths of modernity' (p130). It pursues the aesthetics of representation of hunger in development politics, the arrivals of the 'world food problem' as an idea, of economics as a policy language and of the shift in plant breeding from the 'beauty of the grain' to maximum yield (p193). 'IR8's real achievement was literary' Cullather even writes (p179): a parable for irrigation, markets, new state-peasant relations and developmentalism. In so doing it exposes a hornets' nest of both depoliticised and geo-politicised policy processes – the very antithesis of the technocratic triumphalism that characterises the food policy community now.⁶ A last achievement of the book for this reader was that it contrives to trace the legacy of Cold War food political themes into the present and future.

Consistent with Cullather's governing subject, this history of ideas shows each to have been heavily contested from their eureka moments to their discrediting or abandonment - sometimes after years of what we know call 'practice', sometimes when fraudulent statistics and claims are exposed (p172), occasionally in a shower of bombs (p131).

Then Cullather excavates the surprisingly long tap roots of the aid-driven fads of post-war development, in some cases back to the start of the 20th century. The Rockefeller foundation was at work on agriculture in 1913; HYVs go back to the 1920s; participation propagated itself in the 1950s, not waiting until Robert Chambers invented it (p-86); the elements of integrated rural development were all integrated 30-40 years before the World bank discovered and branded them in 1974 (p120); aid for allies (the precursor of George Bush Jr's Millennium Challenge Account), well embedded in politics of the 1950s (p149).

⁶ D. J. Spielman and R. Pandya-Lorch, 2009, *Millions Fed: Proven Successes in Agricultural Development*, Washington, IFPRI

Jigsaw pieces of comparative case material reveal the inside stories of key beneficiaries of US hunger politics. India threads its way throughout the book in a statistical and political counter-narrative to the widespread contemporary condemnation of the Hindu rate of growth (p180). The account of the science and politics of India's green revolution is outstanding. Vietnam illustrates HYVs as an unintended tool of war and Afghanistan exemplifies a stew of irrigation, sedentarisation and land reform – where peasants met the developmental bulldozers with cocked guns (ch4).

A book with this degree of ambition is not without problems. As a history it is coy about method. Underlying the narrative is an implicit realist theory from international relations combined with constructivist approaches to its portraits of ideas, their bearers and practitioners (e.g., archetypically, Norman Borlaug: a forester working on a precursor to napalm during WW2, deployed in Mexico as 'a reasonable use of military assets' (p59) and later honoured as the father of the green revolution). History is told as a combination of concatenation events and contingency: 'seeming unrelated issues were linked through personalities and timing' (p213). The transfer of technology for India's green revolution for instance resulted from the colliding of Eli Nino droughts in 1960s, the Indo-Chinese and Indo-Pakistan wars, food shortages politicised as famine, the ambitions of the Foundations, Barbara Ward's internationalist morality, technology, track two diplomatic channels and so on. Contingency is never far away: Borlaug's practical gifts as a plant breeder, for example, with the 'skills of a master jeweller' (p60); Indira Gandhi's surprisingly firm hand and charm (p223) to which later on Nixon proved immune (p256). In this world, the big theories sweeping 20th century development economics are backcloth. With his analytical tool-kit, Cullather wages his own covert operation on such theory but the implication is that it is hard to square it with the competition of development fads and fashions so populating this book that even the hegemonic discipline led its own practitioners to concede to them.

The irritating outcome of the need to set concatenation events and contingencies against themes, regions and chronology is a narrative that moves backwards and forwards, that decelerates to intimate detail and then accelerates - especially after the Cold War – to leap over big spans of history. The reader repeatedly loses track of time. And so sometimes does the writer: Naxalites are dated to 1952 rather than 1967 (p79); structural adjustment was already conceived in the late 70s (I happened to be there) not as a result of the famines of the 1980s (p258-9).

The subtitle is unfortunate. If the book is about a war and battle, then it should have been more even handed about the strategy and tactics, the ideas, money, technology and politics of the enemies. In an acknowledged cold war of loans, grants and technicians, the Soviet grain elevators erected in Afghanistan don't appear in *Hungry World*; the Communist projects are treated more as threat and shadow (p23). ⁷ And if hunger is such a battle-ground why did the US sell 19 m tons of grain to the USSR in 1972?

⁷ C. Wolf, 1957, 'Soviet Economic Aid in Southeast Asia: Threat or Windfall?' *World Politics* Vol.10, No 1, pp 91-101; M.I. Goldman, 1964, 'The Balance Sheet of Soviet Foreign Aid' *Foreign Affairs*

Capitalism with its own momentum and increasingly global interests is awarded a bit part, acknowledging the key roles of the Foundations but not acknowledging the bellicose significance of private American companies and corporations from which the foundations were hatched.⁸ With this coyness about capitalism and with ('fatigued') theory there is no mention of the decidedly un-fatigued agrarian question, of the transitions to, and transformations of, capitalism, of the roles agriculture must play for the rest of the economy while this transformation takes place⁹ and the legacy of the intellectual exchanges in the first part of the century between the US agricultural economics establishment and their Russian counterparts. (Did none of it survive McCarthy?) Let alone non-aid-related development in agricultural and food sciences,¹⁰ or domestic power struggles and debates in the hungry regions. India's are the exception because of its importance for the anti-communist project.

There is also scant textual mention of those who told this story a generation earlier,¹¹ little acknowledgement of how European, pre- and post-colonial scholarship, research and development interacted with the massed intellectual forces of America¹² and (while acknowledging the development problem of lack of enforcement capacities for laws and policies) no homage paid to the fine critical analysis of the American law and development fiasco by Trubek and Galanter.¹³ Having asserted this, all Cullather's references are deeply and scrupulously buried in some 60 pages of footnotes, not listed at the end and unindexed.

But this exceptional book is beautifully crafted, written with the irony of hindsight, at points hilarious, its huge scholarship worn lightly.¹⁴ It should be read by all students of

⁸ See J.R. Kloppenberg, 2004 (2nd edn), *First the seed: the political economy of plant biotechnology*, University of Wisconsin Press; K Sunder Rajan, 2006, *Biocapital: the Constitution of Post-Genomic Life*, Duke University Press; and L. Panitch and S. Gindin, 2012, *The Making of Global Capitalism: The Political Economy of American Empire* Verso, for antidotes.

⁹ With the exception of fertiliser and power. For the significance of the agrarian question see T.J. Byres, 1977, Agrarian transition and the Agrarian question *Journal of Peasant Studies* vol 4, no 3 pp 258-274

¹⁰ V.K.R.V. Rao, 1952, 'India's First Five Year Plan: A Descriptive Analysis' *Pacific Affairs* vol 25, no 1 pp 3-23; B. Chattopadhyay and P. Spitz, 1987, *Food Systems and Society in Eastern India*, Geneva UNRISD; S. Chakravarty 1987 *Development Planning: the Indian Experience*, Oxford, Clarendon Press

¹¹ (eds) R. S. Anderson; P. R. Brass; E. Levy; and B. M. Morrison, 1982, *Science, Politics, and the Agricultural Revolution in Asia*. Westview Press

¹² (ed) B.H. Farmer, 1977, *Green Revolution?* London, Macmillan; M. Cowen and R.W. Shenton, 1996, *Doctrines of Development* London, Routledge,

¹³ D.M. Trubek and M. Gallanter 1974 'Scholars in Self-Estrangement; some reflections on the crisis in law and development studies in the United States' *Wisconsin Law Review*, pp 1062 -1104

¹⁴ There are very occasional proofreading glitches e.g. 'climactic zones' (p62) (or the concept is worth further explanation).

development at whatever stage of their careers. After 271 pages however, the final sentence is awkward: 'Free of these preconceptions [nostalgic ones] we might find a way forward.' WE?