
REVIEW ESSAYS

THE DEVELOPMENT WARS: Analyzing Foreign Assistance Impact and Policy*

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NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS AND THE STATE IN LATIN AMERICA. By Anthony Bebbington and Graham Thiele, with Penelope Davies, Martin Prager, and Hernando Riveros. (London and New York: Routledge, 1993. Pp. 290. \$74.50 cloth, \$25.00 paper.)

A CAUTIONARY TALE: FAILED U.S. DEVELOPMENT POLICY IN CENTRAL AMERICA. By Michael E. Conroy, Douglas L. Murray, and Peter M. Rosset. (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 1996. Pp. 210. \$45.00 cloth.)

ENCOUNTERING DEVELOPMENT: THE MAKING AND UNMAKING OF THE THIRD WORLD. By Arturo Escobar. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995. Pp. 290. \$49.50 cloth, \$15.95 paper.)

INQUIRY AT THE GRASSROOTS. Edited by William Glade and Charles A. Reilly. (Arlington, Va.: Inter-American Foundation, 1993. Pp. 284.)

CULTURAL EXPRESSION AND GRASSROOTS DEVELOPMENT: CASES FROM LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN. Edited by Charles David Kleymeyer. (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 1994. Pp. 292. \$40.00 cloth, \$16.95 paper.)

SUPPORTING CIVIL SOCIETY: THE POLITICAL ROLE OF NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS IN CENTRAL AMERICA. By Laura Macdonald. (New York: St. Martin's, 1997. Pp. 195. \$59.95 cloth.)

*The views expressed here are those of the author, a former Democracy Fellow, and in no way reflect the position of USAID or her current employer, the World Bank.

DILEMMAS OF DEVELOPMENT ASSISTANCE: THE WHAT, WHY, AND WHO OF FOREIGN AID. By Sarah J. Tisch and Michael B. Wallace. (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1994. Pp. 182. \$49.95 cloth, \$13.95 paper.)

No hay nostalgia peor que
añorar lo que nunca, jamás sucedió.
Joaquín Sabina, "Con la cara marchita"¹

You can't stop the future. It's coming.
Earl K. Long²

Despite common membership in the development community and a virtual monopoly on shaping its discourse, practitioners, advocates, and academics working on third world themes hold notoriously jaundiced views of one another. When practitioners dismiss advocates and academics as unrealistic or irrelevant, they are in turn criticized as irresponsibly shortsighted and inattentive to the broader consequences of their actions. Nor has the cultural gap been narrowed visibly by assistance agencies' use of academics and advocates as consultants and project implementors or the declining significance of assistance policy as a research theme.³ While the authors of the seven books under review here have benefited from the first trend and may be signaling an end to the second, none of them indicate that a truce has yet been declared. These works were written by a mix of scholars, scholar-advocates, and scholar-practitioners (greater interaction has erased the neat distinctions). They focus for the most part on Latin America's lost decade of the 1980s,⁴ the neoliberal structural readjustment programs, and the impact of both on the region's poor. These books at-

1. *Mentiras piadosas* (New York: BMG Music, Ariola Eurodisc, 1990), CD copyrighted by Ed. Mus. Ripio S.A.

2. Attributed to Earl K. Long in *Blaze*, directed by Ron Shelton, 1989.

3. Specialized studies of discrete programs have proliferated, but they usually begin their analyses at a fairly low level in the policy chain. More global treatments of assistance policy and agencies seem to have temporarily disappeared. Contributing to this trend are the partial eclipse of dependency theory, the perception that assistance programs are not as influential as once portrayed (and perhaps never were), a tendency toward less grandiose research topics, and the exhaustion of once-popular themes. Many of the earlier overviews were fairly sympathetic to the assistance programs and agencies. For examples, see Caleb Rossiter, *The Bureaucratic Struggle for Control of U.S. Foreign Aid* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1985); Judith Tendler, *Inside AID* (New York: Praeger, 1970); and Elliott R. Morss and Victoria A. Morss, *U.S. Foreign Aid: An Assessment of New and Traditional Development Strategies* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1982). They were less widely read, however, and left less impression than works like Gerald Hancock's *The Lords of Poverty* (New York: Atlantic Monthly, 1989) or Teresa Hayter's *Aid as Imperialism* (Baltimore, Md.: Penguin, 1971). The latter two works remain far more influential in forming outsiders' views of development agencies and in shaping these agencies' perceptions as to how they are viewed by the rest of the development community.

4. Tisch and Wallace address the themes more broadly, as does Escobar to a lesser degree.

tempt to characterize the current state of development assistance and derive recommendations for its future role. Whether or not one agrees with their conclusions (I found a lot to dispute), the debate that they reintroduce is important and timely. In an era when development assistance may be in crisis, it becomes necessary to reexamine the premises informing it, to reassess its accomplishments and failures, and to attempt more constructive engagement among those concerned that such assistance has too often missed the mark. The works under review hardly accomplish this task, but they may constitute a start.

Although the books cover the themes with varying emphases and arrive at different conclusions and recommendations, certain areas of agreement mark them all. The authors and editors of these volumes would concur with the following five generalizations. First, since the 1980s, Latin America has suffered an economic decline that has impacted the poor most, and the structural adjustment programs introduced to reactivate the region's economies have tended to worsen inequities.⁵ Second, globalization—whether inevitable or not (considerable disagreement exists on that point, at least in its current form)—is having profound effects on national economies and requires adjustments that many national actors are not prepared to make. Third, the democratic opening has been less dramatic than often claimed, especially in including the poor majority. Fourth, external-assistance strategies have had a disappointing impact on these negative trends, signaling that further exploration of alternatives is necessary. Fifth, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have assumed a greater role in development assistance, but the rhetoric surrounding them obscures important variations in their performance and may overstate their real and potential contributions.

It is on these last two points that the works under review reveal most variation. All call for a better fit with local needs, especially those of the poor, but their interpretations and explanations of events to date differ markedly. The studies also diverge in the importance they assign to economic as opposed to political change, how they define and prioritize the goals of each, and their specific recommendations. None of the works under review argue that foreign assistance is useless, but they often depict it as wrongheaded and sometimes as benefiting donors more than recipients.

Variations on the Conventional Development-Assistance Model

Virtually all these authors agree that the early development-assistance programs arising after World War II took an unrealistically optimistic and

5. For summaries of trends and recent works on these developments, see Albert Berry, "The Income Distribution Threat in Latin America," *LARR* 32, no. 2 (1997):3–40; and Clarence Zuvekas Jr., "Latin America's Struggle for Equitable Economic Adjustment," *LARR* 32, no. 2 (1997):152–69.

culturally arrogant view of their ability to reshape the third world. While generally acknowledging that the development community has learned from its past mistakes, none of these analyses is uncritical of present-day programs. Of the group, Sarah Tisch and Michael Wallace come closest to accepting the new conventional view. The title itself, *Dilemmas of Development Assistance: The What, Why, and Who of Foreign Aid*, indicates that the authors recognize problems implicit in the undertaking. But they are least judgmental regarding the goals pursued and their congruence with the desires of the poor, who “do not debate the fine points of development definitions or models . . . [but] want to grow more food, have more clothes . . . [and] fulfill their family and social obligations” (p. 3). This book is essentially an overview of the issues and attempts with some degree of success to present a variety of viewpoints and summarize the major conflicting interpretations. Even so, many readers and the other authors under review will find some of Tisch and Wallace’s statements highly debatable. Examples include the acceptance of what Arturo Escobar calls “the development discourse” and a primarily socioeconomic definition of development; their hasty dismissal of the cultural imperialism model (pp. 21–22, 134);⁶ their emphasis on projects; the tendency to attribute interventions that benefit the wealthy or harm the poor to oversights or misguided priorities (p. 87) rather than to vested interests; and their blanket statement that NGOs have primarily humanitarian motivations, are more in touch with local conditions, and consequently are “often the best vehicles for fostering local socioeconomic development” (p. 80). Notwithstanding these blind spots, as an introduction intended primarily for students, *Dilemmas of Development Assistance* provides a useful and highly accessible inventory of the main actors, the evolving theoretical positions, and present-day conflicts.

Tisch and Wallace divide their book and the dilemmas they discuss into economic, political, and individual categories, but their understanding of the purpose of development assistance is essentially socioeconomic. They view such assistance as intended to increase production through technological and structural change (although not always through adoption of the most modern technologies) and thereby to enhance the quality of human life and that of the poor majorities in particular. That view is not uncontested, as will be discussed. But even with the qualifications that Tisch and Wallace add—a respect for cultural values and variations, sustainability, and equity—their perspective still represents the conventional understanding of most practitioners and of many academics and advocates. By speaking in terms of dilemmas rather than a crisis, they highlight the complexity of the goal, the uncertainties as to how best to further it,

6. According to Tisch and Wallace, “The influence of Western civilization will likely increase because people want the material goods and services western capitalist societies have provided for themselves” (p. 134).

and the variety of political and individual agendas competing for control of the process. Tisch and Wallace discuss, but hardly embrace, the simple, linear, missionary conception of past decades. Yet they also endorse growth, technical change, and the adoption of certain modern values (ranging from efficiency to participation and equity). They discuss the economic and political dilemmas, the evolving understanding of how economic change occurs, and the alternative theoretical explanations for the provision and acceptance of assistance. Their discussion provides little that is new but succeeds in summarizing the basics.

Tisch and Wallace's treatment of individual dilemmas is more novel, a relatively personalized survey of the conflicting agendas shaping development programs, internally and externally. As one who also has enjoyed the worm's-eye view, I appreciate the shift in *Dilemmas of Development Assistance* from discussing states, bureaucracies, and other aggregate actors to examining individuals' strategies and incentives, the microeconomics of development. Such a shift counters the tendency (evident in other portions of Tisch and Wallace's work) to reify institutions, demonizing some and sanctifying others. The discussion is visibly shaped by the authors' own frustrations. They clearly found working with the USAID bureaucracy increasingly confining and had disappointing experiences with national counterparts less interested in the substance of programs than in what they personally could get out of them (like trips, training, and career advancement). Although Tisch and Wallace's analysis is insightful, it is far from complete. They might have examined the motives of NGO members or other international and bilateral agencies.⁷ In the end, their conclusions are more explicit but not inconsistent with those of the other authors. Development may be about changing the world, but whether one is examining transnational corporations, national elites, peasant farmers, or "mercenaries" (their infelicitous term for for-profit consulting firms), self-interest always enters the equation. A further conclusion (which Tisch and Wallace do not reach) is that a successful assistance strategy, rather than attempting to eliminate individual agendas, will have to channel self-interest into positive ends.

Tisch and Wallace's upbeat approach to the dilemmas that they identify and their apparent faith that better understanding can produce consensual improvements are shared only by Anthony Bebbington and Graham Thiele and their team. The other economic treatment, *A Cautionary Tale: Failed U.S. Development Policy in Central America*, offers a considerably less benign view of the motives and content of the past decades of de-

7. Neither they nor the other authors even begin to suggest the disparate interests among U.S. government actors or the various assistance agencies. Anyone who thinks that the United Nations, the European donors, or the multilateral development banks operate according to a single institutional vision should spend some time reviewing the internal politics of these organizations. Actors in recipient countries have learned to manipulate these conflicts, sometimes exacerbating them.

velopment assistance. Michael Conroy, Douglas Murray, and Peter Rosset target their argument more generally but derive it from an analysis of U.S. efforts to promote nontraditional agricultural exports in Central America. Their primary thesis is simple: contrary to official objectives, the nontraditional-agricultural-export program has worsened the situation of Latin America's rural poor and increased inequalities nationally and internationally. To the extent that the programs have promoted growth, it has benefited larger holders, middlemen, and agro-industry (often internationally based). The authors find the explanation partly in the implicit agenda of U.S. policy, partly in the structure of the industry, and partly in inadequate implementation. Their discussion of U.S. policy is standard if controversial.⁸ Their treatment of the other two areas, although not entirely novel, bears more attention.

Working with case studies and national statistics, Conroy, Murray, and Rosset conclude that the highest value added and greatest income from agricultural exports accrue to processors, transporters, and retailers (the beyond-farm portion). The effect is aggravated when the producers are small and numerous and thus unable to negotiate better terms with those purchasing their crops. In addition, most nontraditional agriculture is a high-risk venture favoring those with an ability to "learn through the school of hard knocks": those who can weather political, economic, and natural setbacks and move their operations elsewhere if necessary. Small farmers are more likely to be wiped out by a few years of adverse conditions. Their few intrinsic assets, such as access to family labor, hardly compensate for their generally disadvantageous situation.

Aside from the structural biases, program implementation has worked against the small-farmer participants. Access to credit has often been difficult, training in new technologies inadequate, and inappropriate and counterproductive use of inputs like chemical fertilizers and pesticides rampant. The two chapters of *A Cautionary Tale* on the environmental and health consequences of pesticide use offer dramatic illustrations of predictably negative health impacts as well as the attendant problems of

8. This discussion also rests on some questionable inferences, such as their finding that the Bumpers Amendment to the Foreign Assistance Act precluded USAID's focus on "domestically oriented food crops" because they competed with U.S. exports (p. 23). Here Conroy, Murray, and Rosset overlook the more direct influence of the Chilean experience, which had many convinced that nontraditional agricultural exports were the solution to Latin American poverty. Another example is their contention that USAID's creation of CINDE was "in a sense" financed by expanding the Costa Rican public debt (pp. 81–82). The funds in question were local-currency (not dollar) generations of interest from a grant of Economic Support Funds. The nominal interest rate was 21 percent, but the authors neglect to mention that at the time, Costa Rican inflation averaged 18.5 percent. Based on negative experiences in Costa Rica and elsewhere, USAID required interest payments on the unexpended balance to encourage the rapid disbursement of funds and to preclude their diversion to what the agency considered to be less productive ends.

increased pesticide resistance, negative effects on other crops, and rejection by buyers. The larger growers, because of their greater sophistication, have been quicker to respond to these dangers, whereas smaller farmers often continue overuse, even extending it to traditional crops.

Establishing a secondary theme, Conroy, Murray, and Rosset criticize the programs' tendency to circumvent and consequently weaken traditional state institutions, reinforcing the impact of public-sector cutbacks imposed with structural readjustment. They are especially critical of USAID's creation of parallel "governments" via the establishment of NGOs like Costa Rica's CINDE (Coalición de Iniciativas de Desarrollo) and El Salvador's FUSADES (Fundación Salvadoreña para el Desarrollo Económico y Social). The authors' preference for state institutions takes them into more controversial territory, however. Donor-instigated budgetary cutbacks may have reduced basic services and, in some cases, agricultural extension. But the situation is more complex than the authors paint it. The first question is the efficacy of the displaced services in assisting the poor. Traditionally, these services were rarely targeted and were often enjoyed disproportionately by higher-income groups.⁹ Second, large public organizations were typically composed of armies of underemployed bureaucrats. As Conroy et al. note, when faced with budgetary cutbacks, ministries often continued to increase staffing, preferring to decrease the operating funds for each employee (p. 76). When proponents of structural readjustment recommend reduced government expenditures, the primary targets are excess employment and untargeted subsidies. Most now advocate a more efficient provision of basic services to marginalized groups.¹⁰ Finally, if organizations like CINDE and FUSADES have not benefited the poor, they have contributed to economic growth and expansion of nontraditional agricultural exports, aims already being pursued (if not very effectively) by government agencies. One may question, as the authors do, the wisdom of the effort, but once undertaken, the parallel governments were the most efficient way of achieving it.¹¹

Several of the other works under review also recognize the inadequacy of traditional public bureaucracies for pursuing these and other

9. See David Kaimowitz's contribution to Bebbington and Thiele (p. 193). Interviews with USAID personnel working in Costa Rica and my own experience there suggest that Conroy, Murray, and Rosset's defense of the national banking system and other traditional state entities warrants examination in this light. Personal and partisan contacts were reputedly a major determinant of who got services and on what terms. Access to credit and repayment of loans were especially vulnerable to abuses.

10. See for example, Shahid Javek Burki and Sebastian Edwards, *Dismantling the Populist State: The Unfinished Revolution in Latin America* (Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 1996); and the Bank's 1997 World Development Report, *The State in a Changing World*.

11. For an interesting contrast applauding CINDE's successes, see Mary A. Clark, "Transnational Alliances and Development Policy in Latin America: Nontraditional Export Promotion in Costa Rica," *LARR* 32, no. 2 (1997):71-97.

goals because of their inefficiency, poorly trained and mismanaged personnel, wrongheaded policies, and especially their use to create jobs and patronage. All the analyses, however, understate the problem of corruption, especially kickbacks, pilferage of goods, and general misuse of funds. These facts of life make donors reluctant to channel programs through existing public-sector entities, partly explaining the turn to NGOs. In countries where corruption and patronage are rampant, NGOs are equally susceptible. But donors find it is easier to impose new practices on nongovernmental actors than to grapple with protected government elites. Whether the results are any different is another question.

A Cautionary Tale is hardly the final word on nontraditional agricultural export strategies. Using different examples or a different time line or just taking a longer-range vision might yield more positive conclusions. USAID continues to regard the endeavors as successful inasmuch as their primary aims were not direct “poverty alleviation” but rather economic stabilization through diversifying the export base and creating jobs (harvesting and processing crops) in the export sector.¹² The real questions, addressed neither by the authors nor by USAID personnel interviewed after the fact, are how to balance out the evident losses sustained by small farmers drawn into the program against the macro-level improvements, or whether a program might have been designed to benefit small farmers as well. Conroy, Murray, and Rosset’s suggestions on alternatives—working through state institutions and organic agriculture—are not very convincing. But then neither is USAID’s unofficial explanation that the agency could not prevent individuals from taking advice that was clearly not in their best interests. I suspect, and Conroy et al.’s examples indicate, that for some agency and NGO staff members, rhetoric overtook reality, and the program came to be seen as a viable and direct means for combating rural poverty.

A Noneconomic Approach

Whatever their differences, Conroy et al. coincide with Tisch and Wallace in defining development assistance’s role as improving the economic situation of the poor. Although they acknowledge the importance of political and social factors in reaching that goal and as values in their own right, these authors’ primary concern remains with increasing incomes and production. Except for Bebbington and Thiele et al., the remaining authors dispute the economic emphasis. One approach, best typified by that of Laura Macdonald, does not reject economic change but rather prioritizes the political, depicting what she calls the “instrumental” or “developmentalist” approach to aid as intended to fend off threats to the power struc-

12. Interviews with USAID staff formerly assigned to Costa Rica, conducted in July and October 1997.

ture by making incremental improvements in the lot of the poor. I will return to Macdonald's discussion in the next section.

The other line of argument shares some of Macdonald's assumptions but is characterized by a more fundamental questioning of the pursuit of economic change, especially the emphasis on increased production, however equitable or redistributive in nature. The two volumes sponsored by the Inter-American Foundation (those edited by William Glade and Charles Reilly and by Charles David Kley Meyer) and Arturo Escobar's *Encountering Development* share this viewpoint, although they develop it differently and to divergent ends.¹³

Of the IAF works, Glade and Reilly's edited collection, *Inquiry at the Grassroots*, is the least consistent and lacks good introductory and concluding essays to pull together its disparate contents. The individual contributions vary in quality and apparent relevance to the general themes of the importance of alternative perspectives, interdisciplinary approaches, and organizational capital (p. xi). Philippe Bourgois's essay on the different role of ethnic identification for two indigenous groups in Panama (the Guaymi and Kuna) provides a particularly innovative exploration of the three themes. One possible conclusion (not the one reached by Bourgois) is that assimilation is ultimately inevitable but can be effected more advantageously (at a higher level in the social pyramid) with the protection of a cohesive ethnic community. More conventional but comparable treatments are offered by several other contributors to *Inquiry at the Grassroots*: Peter May (on subsistence economics in Brazil); Luz Graciela Joly (on subsistence economics in Panama); Faith Mitchell (on Jamaican folk medicine); and David Griffith (on cultural obstacles to capital accumulation in Jamaica). They are interesting demonstrations of the problems confronting traditional populations faced with changing socioeconomic circumstances. But aside from the contributors' evident appreciation of indigenous practices, their conclusions or recommendations are sketchy. For example, Mitchell's discussion does not demonstrate the value of popular medicine but simply suggests that doctors dealing with traditional cultures are no better than their counterparts elsewhere in explaining medical technology to their patients. The remaining contributions deal mostly with programs for small farmers and parallel many of Conroy et al.'s findings. The focus of the contributors to the Glade and Reilly collection on the grassroots, however, produces explanations linked to cultural incompatibility and nonparticipatory methods as opposed to donors' hidden agendas.

Kley Meyer's collection, *Cultural Expression and Grassroots Development: Cases from Latin America and the Caribbean*, also suffers from variations

13. Although the Kley Meyer volume was published independently, the essays were written by "employees, grantees, and other colleagues" of the IAF and compiled with assistance from the foundation.

in quality and relevance to the general theme. It is improved considerably by two strong essays by the editor that clarify the underlying arguments. Kleymeyer is nevertheless conspicuously defensive about the predictable objections to his contention that cultural identity and self-esteem are as important as economic growth to improving the lot of the poor. Both his essays and the other contributions seem uncertain as to whether "cultural rescue" is a goal in its own right or a means to sustainable development in its more conventional sense. Several of the essayists (Kleymeyer, Carlos Moreno, Patrick Breslin, Mac Chapin, Juan García Salazar, and Paula Palmer) tend more toward the first thesis, emphasizing the maintenance of cultural identity as a means of establishing self-worth. But as even the authors admit, the question remains of whether the effort constitutes a justifiable use of ever-scarcer donor resources or an appropriate area of donor activity.

The remaining contributions tend to stress the role of culture as a means of securing participation in programs or as a source of more appropriate technologies. As Kleymeyer notes, "the indigenous people may be the most effective stewards of the fragile ecosystems they often inhabit" (p. 197). Kleymeyer and many of the contributors offer an array of suggestions and examples of how the cultural variable can be incorporated into donor programs. But in the end, their discussion is hardly the stuff of a global strategy. As the essays in *Cultural Expressions and Grassroots Development* also suggest, cultural preservation contains its own contradictions and dilemmas. They range from the question of who should decide what is worth preserving, sharing with outsiders, or adopting to the conspicuously fleeting inference that while traditional cultures offer a source of identity and security, they are also hard on dissidents. In short, the two IAF works raise some important issues but pose as many questions as they answer. Both leave the sense, as Kleymeyer himself admits, that this cause may be a hopelessly romantic one—or at least one in which the best external donors can do is tread cautiously and assume that not all tradition is bad.

The final volume in the trio using a noneconomic approach is Arturo Escobar's *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World*. It attempts, not entirely successfully, to reinforce the cultural argument by combining it with a global political economy perspective. As though elaborating on Kleymeyer's remark that the critical question is who controls the process (p. 203), Escobar portrays the "development discourse" as a means of exercising power over the third world—politically, culturally, and economically. He characterizes his approach as "poststructuralist," an effort to deconstruct the discourse and demonstrate how its categories of "poverty," "starvation," and "landless poor" objectify the "problem" and thereby take the solutions out of the hands of the presumed "beneficiaries." For a non-poststructuralist, this prose is hard going and is complicated by the verbose jargon that Escobar adopts in his analytic sections. The most accessible portions are the intellectual and institutional

histories (chapters 3 and 4) and a series of examples drawn largely from Colombia. The examples echo the other works under review in demonstrating how programs have often worsened the situation of the rural poor by employing inappropriate technology, destroying traditional communal relations, and exposing community members to predatory economic forces. The case studies also contain a remarkably rich iteration of the political, institutional, and disciplinary conflicts surrounding the programs and within them, a subject that Escobar unfortunately does not pursue. He provides the strongest statement of the development crisis, a consequence of the dominant model's failure but also of the resistance provoked by its negative impacts on unprivileged groups. Escobar's optimism that the various examples of opposition are coalescing into a successful countermovement is one of the more debatable elements of his thesis. But this idea, like his book, evidently has a substantial following.

Escobar's argument in *Encountering Development* goes further in attempting to synthesize themes developed by those questioning the conventional approaches to development and the neoliberal paradigm in its applications in the first and third worlds. His effort to link the various strands of neo-Marxist and poststructural criticism falls short. It is marked by a maddening tendency to start down one line of argument only to find that one should not reach the apparently obvious conclusion—that program impact cannot be measured (pp. 142, 186), or that an interest-driven interpretation of donor actions must be rejected in favor of an emphasis on culturally constructed reality, albeit one mediated by “materialities” (pp. 130, 83–85). Escobar's caution on these central points is atypical of his usual treatment. Elsewhere, he notes almost in passing that World Bank policies are “largely responsible for the Sahelian famines of the last three decades” (p. 164); that “massive poverty in the modern sense” is the direct result of the spread of the market economy (p. 22); and that the green revolution was “called upon to neutralize social upheaval, demobilize politicized peasantries, and increase production” (p. 128). Although Escobar often cites other sources to bolster these arguments, claims this debatable deserve fuller explanation and substantiation.

Escobar is least cautious and most controversial in *Encountering Development* in his insistence that development and modernization are intended to advance control, governmentalization, and the imposition of a “normalized social environment” (p. 156) driven by a “worldwide axiomatic” (p. 99). Intent is a tricky concept. Escobar often hedges his bets by emphasizing the intervening role of “the discourse” or substituting the word *about* to indicate a causally ambiguous covariance—as in “development is about growth” (p. 162). While any discourse imposes categories, it can be asked whether those accompanying economic modernization are any more confining than the categories that they replace. Perhaps the “intent” is not to transform peasants into homo oeconomicus but only to deal

with the economic facet of their lives. Moreover, globalization has scarcely been dependent on development programs and has already produced extensive cultural hybridization, as Escobar admits. Current academic and popular debate evinces far less consensus about the content, reach, and overall significance of globalizing trends.

As Alex Callinicos has elaborated in his critique of postmodernism, participants in the so-called postmodern culture continue to represent only a small portion of the population even in the industrialized world.¹⁴ Paul Abramson and Ronald Inglehart have found its influence to be more widespread. But they are more positive about the trend, identifying in the new outlooks (as does Callinicos) many of the values that Escobar believes are being eclipsed, including a concern with “self-expression and the quality of life,” as opposed to economic and political security.¹⁵ The consequences of external contact—the experience of heterogeneity, the expansion of uncertainty, and the loss of life scripts—pose indisputable threats to local traditions, and not just in the third world. Yet they can also be seen as liberating, although inevitably introducing a host of new dilemmas. In any case, here again Escobar gives the discourse more credit than it is due, confuses intent with impact, and conflates two sets of simultaneous trends. The development discourse, rather than driving the process, is one of many competing responses to what non-poststructuralists call “problems.” As a means of defining (let alone resolving) those problems, development discourse is undeniably flawed. But because humans cannot act without discourses, theories, or points of view and because even Escobar rejects inaction, the remedy is to improve or to replace the existing interpretive framework. The question is how.

Alternative Models

All the authors surveyed call for modifications to the current development-assistance paradigm, and most recommend alternative models. Generally, their suggestions are the weakest element in their books. Escobar’s concluding chapter offers little more than the suggestion that grassroots movements, cultural hybridization, local ethnographies, and the “de-territorialized information economy” may provide ways to create a new

14. *Against Postmodernism: A Marxist Critique* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1993). For a critique of postmodernist approaches to development and Escobar’s earlier work, see A. Douglas Kincaid and Alejandro Portes, “Sociology and Development in the 1990s: Critical Challenges and Empirical Trends,” in *Comparative National Development: Society and Economy in the New Global Order*, edited by Kincaid and Portes (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 1–25.

15. Paul R. Abramson and Ronald Inglehart, *Value Change in Global Perspective* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995). A less pessimistic approach to cultural globalization and hybridization is also found in Nestor García Canclini, *Culturas híbridas: Estrategias para entrar y salir de la modernidad* (Mexico City: Grijalbo, 1989).

vision. Tisch and Wallace's suggestions match those included in most current USAID and World Bank documents: prioritizing structural readjustment, with development assistance offered as a means of alleviating the hardships that it produces; and helping the poor overcome their political and economic disadvantages. While the IAF volumes provide positive as well as negative examples of local interventions, they hardly comprise a new model, as even the authors admit. Where all find some sign of hope is in the role of new social actors, especially social movements (Escobar), grassroots groups (the Glade and Reilly and the Kley Meyer collections), and the more formal nongovernmental organizations that have increasingly become vehicles for implementing assistance.

Significantly, the two works that explore this last alternative most explicitly (Macdonald and Bebbington and Thiele) are the ones least willing to embrace it without qualifications. Although differing on many other major assumptions (from the role accorded to economic objectives to their faith in the good intentions of major international actors), these two analyses agree that not all NGOs are equal and that their utility in assistance programs is contingent on donors' ability to distinguish among their strengths and motives. Both works recognize that the growth of NGOs in Latin America has resulted in part from cutbacks in government employment (as a refuge for displaced middle-class professionals), that opportunistic NGOs are certainly present, and that even those with "pure intentions" may be incapable of understanding, let alone representing, the interests of the poor rural groups that they purport to serve.

Of the two, Bebbington and Thiele et al.'s *Non-Governmental Organizations and the State in Latin America* is the most narrowly focused, exploring the ways that NGOs may be incorporated into agricultural assistance programs. It is grounded in a series of contracted case studies of South American examples (with an additional invited survey of Central American cases). Unlike Macdonald (or Conroy et al.), Bebbington and Thiele argue that real improvements in current programs are possible through adopting appropriate technology, participatory techniques, and a systems approach that looks beyond the farm gate to more effective marketing mechanisms. These authors, and probably the NGOs, are weakest in developing ideas on marketing mechanisms, a major oversight in light of Conroy, Murray, and Rosset's arguments about the disadvantaged small producers.

Recalling Tisch and Wallace, Bebbington and Thiele also claim that this is what farmers ultimately want: "higher incomes and more productive and secure food production systems" (p. 101). This point may be less debatable than the question as to whether farmers' desires will be satisfied without the more fundamental political change called for by Macdonald or the improved macroeconomic policies advocated by the World Bank. But Bebbington and Thiele break through the rhetoric about NGO motives and strengths to note that a source of more immediate failures has been the mis-

match between NGO pretensions and their actual abilities. Elaborating on a point made in passing by several others, Bebbington and Thiele et al. dismiss opportunistic and overly intellectual organizations and suggest that a practical approach to problems calls for specific technical skills. While NGOs' "prior roles of policy critic, popular educators and grassroots educators benefited from the skills of anthropologists and sociologists, their new roles as programme implementors and policy advisers . . . will require far higher levels of expertise in, for instance, agronomy, economics, animal sciences and small business administration" (p. 141). Bebbington and Thiele also suggest that cutbacks in government extension services be compensated by linking NGOs to state-supported or privately supported agricultural research, with the NGOs addressing both conventional extension and research applications.

Intended more for practitioners than for general readers, *Non-Governmental Organizations and the State in Latin America* is cluttered with the acronyms and the boxed summaries and case studies that World Bank and USAID publications seem to prefer to footnotes. These distractions are unfortunate because the approach and the effort to derive empirically based recommendations are important, as is their insistence on more technical expertise but of different kinds. Experience amply demonstrates that resources can be wasted by highly motivated but technically inexperienced NGOs whose members are also out of touch with their presumed local partners. The problem is compounded when donors push NGOs beyond their capabilities or simply fail to assess them (a problem for many European donors, who lack the staff to make on-site inspections). The emphasis on establishing partnership (or accompaniment) and on developing civil society may justify the existence of some gap to let institutions grow into their role or to avoid paternalism. But if no attention is paid to capabilities, the poor may pay the cost of technically unsound schemes.

For Laura Macdonald, Bebbington and Thiele's approach resolves the wrong problem. Like Conroy, Murray, and Rosset, she contends that the poor are hindered more by structural obstacles rather than by technological ones. Efforts to help them increase agricultural productivity are pointless until these higher-order impediments are addressed. The difference is Macdonald's emphasis on political as opposed to economic constraints and her consequent conclusion that the proper role for NGOs is to promote grassroots organizational and participatory skills and to help local groups form national political movements capable of demanding policies addressing their members' concerns. In *Supporting Civil Society: The Political Role of Non-Governmental Organizations in Central America*, Macdonald draws on case studies of NGO-donor collaboration in Costa Rica and Nicaragua. These are more illustrative than evidentiary, however, serving as a means of demonstrating rather than testing her arguments. As she admits, the cases selected for analysis may overrepresent program failures as mea-

sured by the immediate impact on production or income. They are nonetheless useful in developing her secondary themes: the impossibility of neatly separating civil society from the state because of the historical interactions and interdependence of public and private entities; the variety of interests and ideologies reflected in both state and civil-society organizations and thus in the programs they promote; and the fact that organizations in civil society are still at least one step removed from representing real grassroots perceptions and interests (a point mentioned by most of the authors).

Although Macdonald is critical of the rhetorical, oversimplistic treatment usually given to NGOs, she does not escape the problem. Many of her general conclusions appear more deductive than inductive, a product of her ideological perspective rather than the weight of her cases. This is particularly true of Macdonald's constant characterization of USAID policy in Costa Rica as an effort to reduce social tensions provoked by structural readjustment policies and thus a means to "avoid modifications in the power structure" (p. 67). This is one interpretation and may be the ultimate consequence of the events described. But Macdonald far exceeds her evidence in ascribing these intentions to the programs' designers and implementors. In fact, her entire analytic framework, essentially a typology of development strategies with corresponding approaches to participation and donor-NGO roles (pp. 22–28), would be more useful if she had dropped the axiomatic assumption that U.S. assistance policy is dominated by an effort to prevent political change. Even strategies driven by structural adjustment need not take an instrumentalist and paternalistic approach to participation. And as her Nicaraguan case demonstrates, the Marxist or post-Marxist paradigm can be highly directive and nonparticipatory. By delinking Macdonald's categories and generating nine rather than three strategic approaches, future analysts may find a productive source of additional hypotheses about the impact of micro- and macro-level interventions on grassroots movements and on broader political and economic change.

Looking beyond the Studies

Despite the frequent announcements that development is in crisis, the dominant paradigm appears very healthy. A much-publicized recent World Bank study emphasizing the importance of policy change as the key to growth suggests that development assistance is in trouble, but only because it is trying to do the impossible.¹⁶ If the World Bank is correct, the search for alternatives must be restated. The role of assistance may be, as

16. Craig Burnside and David Dollar, "Aid, Policies, and Growth," World Bank Working Paper no. 1,777 (Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 1997).

the bank suggests, not that of driving development but that of helping those most adversely affected adjust to the new world. Ironically, the works included here may unintentionally support the bank's argument. These works catalogue the failures of conventional programs and the structural difficulties behind them. Yet the analysts' own inability to provide realistic alternatives (not counting calls for "fundamental political change" or the victory of grassroots resistance) in combination with program failures demonstrate the limits rather than the broader potential of external assistance. Successfully targeted efforts (including those working with state institutions) may protect populations from the worst consequences of structural readjustment, help them incorporate themselves or creatively adjust to the new settings, or even foster pockets of cultural resistance. But there is little indication that such efforts can reverse globalization, eliminate inequities, or foment political utopias.

This general conclusion does not invalidate the lessons provided in the seven studies. For those interested in incremental improvements, the works together suggest that programs require more technical input,¹⁷ a broader, more systemic vision, and a better fit with their human and physical environments. Contrary to Escobar's and Macdonald's theses, apparently wide agreement exists on the need to recognize and incorporate different values and perspectives and to find more participatory approaches, tap local knowledge, build organizational capacity, and let participants make informed choices about their own fate. It is also evident that faster and more fundamental change inevitably brings higher degrees of risk and affects more adversely those already living on the margins. Although no one argues that risk and uncertainty can be eliminated,¹⁸ the authors differ as to how they believe risks should be handled. These truths seem to hold whether one is following a structural readjustment model or a redistributive and transformational one. Strategic or technical error is still error, whether promoted by neoliberal economists or political revolutionaries. To varying degrees, the authors also admit that good intentions are no substitute for knowledge and skills and that despite their frequent bias in favor of NGOs, such organizations can fall short on both counts.

While the authors reviewed rarely acknowledge it, many of their empirical findings and conclusions would not surprise participants in the programs being criticized. The real questions are not how programs failed, but why and what can be done to prevent recurrence. Here the works are

17. Macdonald is the conspicuous dissenter, a product of her lesser interest in economic goals and perhaps of complaints voiced by NGOs about donor requirements that they document and justify their programs.

18. Reinhardt's contribution to the Glade and Reilly volume is the one exception in calling for the elimination of risk and uncertainty, although without indicating how this step would be accomplished (pp. 213–49).

hampered by their focus and terms of analysis. Attempting to reconstruct policy making from its consequences is always risky, especially when the analytic framework does not adequately capture the policy milieu. Although a reading of recent World Bank or USAID policy papers might cause optimism about the potential for change, that milieu has become more difficult than either the sympathetic or unsympathetic critics recognize. This truth emerges from several trends demonstrated (but otherwise ignored) by the analyses: the changing nature of development assistance politics, both in the receiving countries and in those where the programs originate; the association of arguments about assistance with more fundamental fin-de-siècle ideological conflicts; and the uncertain survival of assistance programs in the post-cold war era.

Development assistance has always had a strong missionary component, but in the past, it was more unidirectional and consensual. Today, much of that has changed. On the aid-giving end, the number of actors has multiplied significantly, internationally and within nations. Those actively involved in shaping assistance programs are still a small portion of their respective national populations. But they represent a far wider variety of partisan, institutional, disciplinary, and personal viewpoints ("stakeholders," in the new USAID parlance), all competing to define programs and obtain the resources to implement them. These divisions affect even the core practitioners or technical experts, whether from governmental bureaucracies, international organizations, private firms, or NGOs. They frequently find that to capture a program and resources, objective technical assessments (including appraisals of their own abilities) are less important than political alliances and salesmanship. Decades of experience with assistance programs and the proliferation of sources of assistance has expanded the options of an equally diverse group of third world participants. Moreover, they increasingly shape the programs at the source by taking their cause directly into the political arenas of the donor organizations and countries. This tactic is not limited to those wealthy enough to hire a well-placed Washington lobbyist—Escobar's deterritorialized information economy makes it available to anyone with a phone line, a computer, and a modem.

Over the short run, these phenomena have not improved the impact of assistance programs. They have visibly affected their distribution, within and among countries, their content, and the selection of organizations to implement them. In an era of diminishing resources, the individual stakes remain small, and the aid-givers still make the ultimate determinations. But potential beneficiaries lucky or skillful enough to pick the right audience, allies, and message can influence what is eventually delivered and the perceptions of its effects. In this sense, the works that perceive the process as dominated by the deliberations of an ideologically monolithic technocracy linked to an international capitalist class (the majority of

those reviewed) are behind the times. The political (interest-based) decisions, once limited to determining which nations received assistance,¹⁹ now encompass the most minute details of programs and projects, which were formerly determined by the practicing technicians. The technicians meanwhile are divided among themselves, proportionately fewer,²⁰ and their input is increasingly eclipsed by partisan and institutional concerns. It is now commonplace for studies and proposals to be dismissed as “too technical.” This verdict sometimes signals an overly narrow vision. But equally often, it denotes the opposite: the specification of risks, uncertainties, and sociopolitical considerations that other actors would just as soon ignore, at least until an activity has been approved and funded.

The purely political negotiation is further complicated by its connection to an essentially modernist ongoing debate among neoliberal, neo-Marxist, and communitarian visions of the ideal society. This division, introduced by advocates and academics, is now reflected in the discourse of practitioners, politicians, and bureaucrats. For better or worse, the debate has further weakened efforts to privilege technical criteria, to analyze the “real consequences” of programs, or to explore the most likely ones of new proposals. The discussion often seems informed less by knowledge of what the poor “want” than by proponents’ attachment to a past that never was or their rejection of an imagined global future. The debate is important, but its frequently ahistorical and anti-empirical thrust is a poor guide for specific programs, leading to recommendations (from all three ideological camps) based more on wishful thinking than on consideration of what worked elsewhere or is likely to work in a new environment. While the impact on assistance activities is often rhetorical or cosmetic, it is still time-consuming and diverts attention further from real outcomes.

This pluralization of inputs comes at an inauspicious time, as less-friendly critics are questioning the benefits of assistance in any form. In this atmosphere, the short-term struggle for survival among “stakeholders” has produced a curious mix of reactions. Despite the emphasis on grassroots participation, as budgets and staff are being cut, more rather

19. See Rossiter, *Bureaucratic Struggle*, for a discussion in the context of Southern Africa in the 1970s.

20. This claim is impressionistic but frequently made. To the extent it is valid, the claim has several sources: personnel cutbacks and reorganizations, the reassignment of permanent staff to new technical areas, and perhaps the unrecognized need for different skills (much as Bebbington et al. argue for NGOs). A related phenomenon that partially accounts for the disjuncture between policy analysis and what happens on the ground is the increasing specialization and consequent separation of the groups responsible for each. While the blame usually accrues to the field staff for being too set in their ways, those providing high-level guidance are often no better versed than outsiders in the realities of implementation. It is easy to call for “participatory planning.” Putting it into practice is another matter. The dilemma was concisely expressed by a USAID employee lamenting the days when the agency had “more technicians than policy developers and abstract thinkers.”

than less effort has gone into managing relations with the ultimate “customer,” the domestic groups who pay the bills. This trend has exacerbated the ever-present tension between field and home offices and inspired a series of not entirely felicitous “reengineered” reorganizations, beginning with USAID and the World Bank but presumably extending beyond them. The competitive environment has also encouraged agencies to overstate their ability to change the world.²¹ Finally, inasmuch as the pressure to demonstrate cost-utility extends to all agencies depending on public funds, it has increased competition among those traditionally engaged in development assistance and brought in new public and private-sector actors who see expansion into international programs as a means of protecting their own budgets and personnel. In short, despite the post-cold war opportunity for a more dispassionate examination of programs, survival issues have taken precedence, turning potential allies against each other and discouraging more reflective debate.

These observations do not imply that criticisms are misplaced or warrant temporary suppression. Rather, it is to be hoped that they will continue. But I would invite prospective analysts to reexamine their assumptions and biases regarding how assistance policy is made and what it can be expected to accomplish. The design and thus the impact of assistance programs are both more benign and more awful than currently portrayed: more benign because they are not now (if they ever were) directed by a single set of goals and interests; more awful because this lack of direction encourages waste, error, and disinclination (if not inability) to assess results. The situation will not be improved by focusing only on failed outcomes. What is needed is the same detailed attention to the entire policy process, starting with a consideration of its objectives and extending to an analysis of how these are translated into specific programs. The past forty years have generated a good deal of knowledge about what assistance programs do. Sadly, our capacity to use this knowledge constructively remains limited by an insufficiently explicit debate over their aims and potential and by the unresolved conflicts that flourish in the resulting confusion and ambiguity.

21. One example may be USAID’s new mandate to fix “broken states.” The impact indicators that it has developed (in response to the Government Performance and Results Act) may provide still others. Although agencies develop their own indicators, performance against them will be used by the Office of Management and Budget in recommending budgetary allocations among and within agencies. Obvious problems include the setting of unrealistically optimistic goals or those that distort an agency’s operations (as suggested in recent U.S. Congressional reviews of the operations of the Internal Revenue Service).