

**Actors in the history of development:  
Triangular relations between „East“,  
„West“, and „South“ in the Age of  
Development (1960-1990)**

**Veranstalter:** Berthold Unfried / Eric Burton, Department of Social and Economic History, University of Vienna; Department of African Studies, University of Vienna

**Datum, Ort:** 11.12.2015–12.12.2015, Vienna

**Bericht von:** Eric Burton, Institut für Wirtschafts- und Sozialgeschichte, Universität Wien; Alexandra Sindrestean, Institut für Kultur- und Sozialanthropologie, Universität Wien

The recent international workshop hosted by the University of Vienna and organized by Berthold Unfried and Eric Burton from the Department of Social and Economic History in cooperation with the Department of African Studies sought to bring together historians, social science researchers and practitioners in an effort to renew the conversation surrounding development. The event was the second held in connection with the main organizers' ongoing research project „Personal cooperation in 'development aid' and 'socialist aid' in the context of system competition“ (Austrian Science Fund/FWF); an international conference is still to follow in December 2016. The panels allowed ample time for both presentation and discussion which highly increased the scholarly exchanges between presenters.

In their introductory remarks, the host organizers underlined that the focus of their research project is development understood as practices and policies. BERTHOLD UNFRIED (Vienna) and ERIC BURTON (Vienna) gave an outline of their focus on development workers in a comparative perspective. They argued for a move away from development as a set of norms and discourses by investigating, on the basis of archival material and expert interviewing, how development practices materialized in interactions between states and various personal actors on the ground. What Unfried and Burton pinpointed to is that, within the framework of development as a specific Cold War phenomenon, there is a way to challenge *The Truman Doctrine* as the

foundational story by also looking more closely at practices which resulted from the interactions between COMECON socialist countries in Eastern Europe and African, Asian, and Latin American states.

Going one step further, JOSEPH HODGE (West Virginia University) proposed in his public evening lecture to destabilize development as strictly a Cold War affair in what he called a longer, deeper, and wider history of the phenomenon. In his lecture, Hodge delivered a critical analysis of the various waves in the historiography of development and discerned a trend to highlight earlier, colonial origins of developmental practices – hence, „longer“. Researchers tend to look „deeper“ in a shift towards practices on the ground. Their perspective goes „wider“, more global, with a growing interest in the trans-national. Hodge's tour de force through the debates that permeated this particular field of historiography emphasized how past as well as current geopolitical stakes continue to impact on the twists and turns scholarship takes in relation to development as an object of research. Therefore, it is not simply by chance that there is a tendency in historiography now to concentrate more on Cold War precursors and precedents of development practices.

Post-Cold War historical ethnography, however, has yet to come to terms with the 1989 periodization. In relation to this temporal benchmark in the history of the developmentalist state, JAMES MARK (Exeter) sought to de-center 1989 by showing how for reform-minded Hungarian economists the idea of a global economy transpired significantly before the downfall of the communist regime. In the 1970s, they abandoned the narrow notions of a bipolar world and, drawing on the world-systems theory, began to see Hungary as a semi-periphery whose most promising path was that of global integration through export-oriented development as exemplified by the rising Asian tigers. Beyond academic exchanges there were also practical steps taken in the 1970s and 1980s to restructure sectors like the garment industry and give it the competitive edge for the global market. ALEXANDRA SINDRESTEAN (Vienna) made a similar point regarding the need to de-center 1989 by looking at

---

socialist Romania's actual involvement in the globalizing economy in the 1970s and 1980s through the state's investments abroad in the developing south, and through the state's membership in international financial institutions such as IMF and WB. Thinking in relation to how the state sought to reposition itself globally, Sindrestean took discourses and practices of investment at home and abroad as an entry point to re-think the temporalities and spatialities of neoliberal restructuring. Both Mark and Sindrestean identified state enterprises as crucial actors in the global integration of Hungary and Romania well before 1989.

Berthold Unfried (Wien) investigated the triangular relationship between Cuba, the GDR and Ethiopia as embedded within the „Soviet world system“. Within this relationship, Cuba acted as a broker between the East European socialist countries and Ethiopia. Both Cuba and the GDR provided crucial assistance without which the Ethiopian revolution would have failed. Relations, particularly between Ethiopia and the GDR, deteriorated quickly, however. The GDR could not realize its expectations of „mutual benefit“ including commercial gains from the relations of Ethiopia, while Ethiopian leaders had hoped for „Western style development aid“ in the form of grants.

INGRID MIETHE (Gießen) discussed the global career of the educational institution of „workers faculties“, originally established in the Soviet Union. Presenting case studies from Cuba, Vietnam and Mozambique, she highlighted the multi-directionality of transfers within Eastern Europe, between the global North and the global South, as well as among countries of the global South. The local adaptations as well as global entanglements became particularly visible in the Mozambican example. Not only workers, but also former FRELIMO-fighters were to profit from the faculty, whose teaching staff consisted to more than half of non-Mozambican teachers from 29 different countries in „East“, „West“ and „South“.

East German advisors as agents of Syrian state-building were at the centre of the argument brought forward by MASSIMILIANO TRENTIN (Bologna). Describing the relations

between the GDR and Syria as a „marriage of convenience“, Trentin showed how the advisors had to de-politicize their activity and appear as neutral and technically oriented in order to appease critical factions in the state apparatus and survive the shifts in political elites and policy orientation. GDR advisors made an effort in state-building and national consolidation, and, as pointed out in the discussion of the paper, they might even be said to have contributed to a Syrian style of mixed market socialism.

Similarly focussing on actors, but with the objective of unsettling the colonial-postcolonial divide, JOSEPH HODGE (West Virginia University) traced the life trajectories of British colonial officials who often found positions in national and international development institutions. As these careers spanned across places and periods (from the colonial to the post-colonial), they can be called both trans-national and trans-historical, Hodge claimed. By means of two dissimilar case studies – the life-story of a colonial official coming from a communist background on the one hand, and the World Bank's Agricultural Development Service on the other – Hodge substantiated claims about the existence of an imperial afterlife in development, but at the same time showed how complex and heterogeneous these continuities were.

Returning to the context of East-West competition, Berthold Unfried and Eric Burton presented their comparative approach to development workers from East Germany and West Germany. The comparative categories referred to institutional arrangements, such as organizational structure and types of development workers, but also included practical aspects like living and working conditions. At the centre of interest are interactions with different kinds of counterparts on the ground. Questions of identity and self-development were also touched upon. The comparison unearthed both similarities and differences between practitioners from the competing political systems.

The two presentations in the panel on Western development practices dealt with personal relations in more detail. Eric Burton analysed the relations between West German development workers and their Tanzanian coun-

terparts in a regional development programme in Tanzania during the 1980s. Drawing on anthropological approaches to development practices, he showed specific constraints the various actors were facing, but also the strategies and resources they employed to reach their objectives, both personal and institutional. According to Burton, only for certain kinds of Tanzanian counterparts and seconded experts, the development intervention temporarily opened up possibilities to appropriate capital, knowledge and practical experiences.

Coming from a critical feminist perspective, SARA DE JONG (Vienna) presented a case study about female NGO workers in contemporary Western Europe and demonstrated how they negotiated the distance to their partners in the global South. In doing so, she made the often forgotten point that North-South encounters in development also took place in the global North. Still, de Jong found that field visits were crucial to fulfil emotional needs of the NGO workers. Partner organizations, theoretically meant to serve as a „bridge“ to the beneficiaries, even seemed to replace the beneficiaries in that sense.

The final panel sought to overcome the abyss that usually divides research about development and contemporary practices in the aid sector. THOMAS VOGEL (Wien) from the Austrian development NGO „Horizont 3000“ gave an input concerning possible cross-fertilizations between practitioners and academia. He emphasized the value of historical accounts to put one's own work into a larger perspective and argued that practitioners should not shy away from facing critical perspectives on development work, especially where that would mean to admit engaging in discriminatory practices.

For the final discussion, Berthold Unfried rounded up several topical strands of the workshop. He highlighted the agency and interests of „counterparts“, a group probably representing the majority of development workers of the world. Researchers should, he urged, not be treating them as mere recipients, but rather look at them as individuals grounded within the solid frame of the development business.

An important insight from the workshop

was that the focus on actors in development did not lead to a neglect of larger issues of the world economy or shifts in development discourses. Quite the opposite, it became clear that through the investigation of actors and practices, we are able to challenge on an empirical basis taken-for-granted ruptures such as the colonial-postcolonial divide or the implosion of state-socialism in 1989 as the beginning of Eastern Europe's integration into the global capitalist economy. The difficulty for historians of development is how to articulate these arguments, based on individuals' life stories and careers, with overarching structural contexts. The workshop contributions illustrated the multitude and variety of interactions which resulted from cross-governmental or trans-national development interventions. More often than not, actors from the global South had a decisive role in shaping these encounters and their outcomes. It remains a challenging task to investigate the circulations and flows of funds, goods, ideas and persons in the history of development.

### Conference Overview:

#### *Introduction*

Berthold Unfried/Eric Burton (Wien): Our project: What is new about our approach?

#### *Panel 1: Development Policies in the Socialist World System*

Berthold Unfried (Wien): Triangular Relations: The GDR, Cuba and Ethiopia

Ingrid Miethe (Gießen): Globalization of an educational idea: Workers' Faculties in Cuba, Mozambique and Vietnam

Massimiliano Trentin (Bologna): GDR advisors in Syria

Alexandra Sindrestean (Wien): The developing country as developer: Socialist Romania's investments abroad and the quest for markets in the South

#### *Panel 2: Ongoing comparative research projects*

James Mark (Exeter): Socialist World System to Semi-Periphery: Changes in Development Models and Practices in Late Socialism

Joseph Hodge (West Virginia): From colonial

---

to post-colonial development workers

Berthold Unfried/Eric Burton (Wien): Tentative elements of an East-West-comparison of development workers

*Public Evening Lecture*

Joseph Hodge (West Virginia): Writing the History of Development: Longer, Deeper, Wider

*Panel 3: New Research on Western Development Practices*

Eric Burton (Wien): TIRDEP, West German development workers & their Tanzanian counterparts in Regional Development

Sara de Jong (Wien): Bridging the Distance to the Global South? European Female NGO workers' Field Visits, Stories and Partners

*Panel 4: Development Policies in Practice and how to communicate them with research*

Thomas Vogel (Wien): The sending of development experts: practitioners' experiences. What may the history of development practices say to a practitioner and how can practitioners' experiences be fed into research?

*Final discussion*

Tagungsbericht *Actors in the history of development: Triangular relations between „East“, „West“, and „South“ in the Age of Development (1960-1990)*. 11.12.2015–12.12.2015, Vienna, in: H-Soz-Kult 08.03.2016.