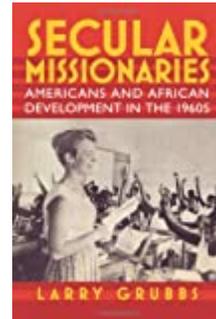




Larry Grubbs. *Secular Missionaries: Americans and African Development in the 1960s.* Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2009. viii + 243 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-55849-734-4.



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Discourses of Development

This interesting and well-written book charts the rise and fall of the Decade of Development, exposing the dark underbelly of its aspirations and language of improvement, and the racist, neocolonial, and above all patronizing picture of Africa that it created. Through a series of chapters looking at the rise of modernization theory in relation to Africa, the rewriting (indeed, the erasing) of its history, the growing disillusionment with U.S. efforts to promote development, and the rise of a discourse of African incompatibility with modernity, the book offers a fierce critique of how a coalition of policymakers, development planners, advisors, and academic institutions created an image of Africa that bore little resemblance to the realities of the early independence era.

Borrowing from Edward Said's "Orientalist" perspective, Larry Grubbs describes how the Africa of the 1960s (and, as he suggests, it was an "Africa," rather than an understanding of political, cultural, social, economic, and cultural differences that lay between and within individual countries) was perceived by U.S. policy as a blank slate on which the dreams of modern economic planning,

political reform, and cultural "progression" could be imprinted. This tabula rasa would be an ideal petri dish for testing theories of development and modernization. And in "developing" Africa, U.S. Africa policy saw the opportunity to pursue Cold War politics in newly independent African states, using development to underpin an expansion of U.S. interests. But, reliant as this vision of development was on modernization theory, it failed to understand Africa's history, and how that history might inform the present, and might influence the future. With tunnel vision, development planners focused on one objective, one that saw a new Africa rising in the image of America.

The book's contention, stated in the introduction, that the history of development is an area of study that has only emerged in the past decade, is wrong. There is now a large and extensive body of literature on colonial development in Africa, for example. However, what has been relatively limited is the intellectual history of development in the 1960s. This book is a valuable addition to our understanding of this vital decade.

Sections outlining in considerable detail the establishment of the African Studies Association (ASA), and its links to the Kennedy and subsequent administrations in the formulation of this image of Africa, will make uncomfortable, if necessary, reading for Africanists. The eclipsing of longer traditions of scholarship on Africa by African Americans, and the colonization of advisors by a new, muscular set of Africanists in tune with, and providing an intellectual foundation for, U.S. modernist approaches, is a compelling narrative. But the charge that “African studies” as a whole bought into the reconstruction of Africa under modernist perspectives, and wrote off its past, airbrushes out of the history the growing number of scholars who never subscribed to such views. True, the book acknowledges the emergence of a “radical” wing, challenging the leadership of the ASA, but surely African studies in America was more complex than the picture that emerges here.

To extend the metaphor adopted in the title of the book, the book focuses overwhelmingly on the secular bishops and cardinals, not on the “ordinary” secular missionaries, who, like their historical counterparts, engaged in a very different set of relationships with Africans, and often offered different perspectives. The book does deal with the experience of Peace Corps volunteers in chapter 8, but it is a very generalized account that fails to capture the myriad of experiences and interpretations of the countries in which they lived, and people with whom they resided. The voices of other “secular missionaries” who might offer a counterpoint to official U.S. narratives—the growing number of graduate students researching across the continent, or people working on local development projects for a range of nongovernmental organizations or for other volunteer organizations—and “religious” missionaries traveling to long-standing missions and establishing new ones remain largely unheard.

Although the book is a valuable addition to the growing understanding of the history of development, it is in places rather ahistorical in its own approach. Development planning was not a new tool in the armory of

modernization, “limited” in its use in the colonial period, as Grubbs suggests (p. 102). The British Colonial Development and Welfare Act, for example, was based on the articulation of ten-year development plans, and many British colonies had begun planning for postwar development in the early 1940s. African critiques of official U.S. discourses on Africa are also given relatively little space (although to be fair, this is a book on American debates). For example, the author at one point alludes to African scholars not accepting American scholarship uncritically, but some illustrations would have been useful (p. 52). To take just one, University College (later a university in its own right) Dar es Salaam was building an international reputation for radical, alternative approaches in the 1960s, attracting academics from around the world who would dominate the study of Africa in a range of disciplines for the next two decades at least. The Ethiopian famine of 1984-85 was not, as the author suggests, the result of “economic catastrophe,” but of war and deliberate government policy to undermine its opponents (p. 184).

The index throws up some curiosities. For example, it includes an entry for an incidental mention of “swimming pools,” but not for the African Growth and Opportunity Act, about which the book makes a far more serious point.

But these criticisms aside, the book is an enjoyable and interesting foray into the murky world of foreign policy, international relations, and the construction of identities of “the other.” It charts the undercurrents to the optimism of the 1960s as African nations became free, and as aspirations for a better world lost their sheen. The book is an intellectual history of ideas about Africa, and how those ideas were translated into policies that proved damaging, culturally illiterate, patronizing, and racist. There are perhaps some important gaps, but the study, with its the level of detail and use of diaries and letters to explore the American encounter with Africa in this period, is essential reading for anyone interested in the history of development, modernization, and the interpretation of “Africa” by outsiders.

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