
Reviewed by Dipali Mukhopadhyay (University of Minnesota)

Published on H-Diplo (December, 2023)

Commissioned by Seth Offenbach (Bronx Community College, The City University of New York)

It is perhaps not surprising that an institution like the US Agency for Aid and International Development (USAID), despite its substantial footprint the world over, has not been the object of much scholarly scrutiny. The hidden role of aid in war making makes it a less obvious object of study for students of military intervention. This is, as Wesley Attewell makes clear in *The Quiet Violence of Empire*, no accident. “Seemingly benevolent infrastructures of technical assistance, marketization, and self-help” allow aid and those who mete it out to slip in and out unnoticed, even as they often work hand in hand with “violent Orientalist forms of counterinsurgency” (p. 3). Not only do aid’s technologies enable it to divorce itself, at least ostensibly, from the violence in its midst, but it also offers up alibis of generosity, even empowerment, to those doing “the dirty work of empire” (p. 142). Regime change involves the ugly destruction of war fighting, but, in its wake, those in a position to clean up, rebuild, and improve enter the scene. Attewell’s rich exploration of USAID’s role in Afghanistan forces us to confront the unpleasant fact that the two—violence and aid—are inextricably intertwined and, in fact, mutually reinforcing.

Attewell starts by taking the reader back to the 1960s, when USAID first ventured into Afghanistan and turned the country into “one of the largest per capita beneficiaries of American foreign aid” (p. 45). Few students of foreign aid or Afghanistan will know the details of this fascinating history, one in which the American suburban ideal became an “organizing framework for rural Afghan society” (p. 46). By starting his investigation in this era, Attewell helps the reader understand the lineage of twenty-first-century development efforts in Afghanistan (and elsewhere) and the degree to which those efforts draw on a larger set of legacies that many would rather ignore. Efforts like the Helmand Valley Project paradoxically married the quest for a liberating form of
modernization with the desire to replicate the naive delights of a *Brady Brunch* version of America in a new frontier, rural southern Afghanistan. Attewell’s inclusion of a 1962 Fourth of July celebration flyer for the residents (Afghan and American) of Kandahar is especially telling in this regard: a program filled with flag raising, pie eating, and a grease pole contest make it hard to know whether locals found themselves in small-town Texas or the soon-to-be heartland of the Taliban. And this, it seems, was precisely the point.

This utopic vision of modern coexistence obscured the colonial implications of USAID’s endeavor. And yet, Attewell explained, “at the level of everyday practice, [rural development in Cold War Afghanistan] drew heavy inspiration from longer genealogies of race war, topologically connecting the Helmand Valley to other domestic and foreign theaters of imperial racial management, including the Jim Crow South, the American inner city, and insurgent South Vietnam” (p. 46). As Jim C. Scott taught us in *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (1998), development has long been part of an effort by states to “improve” by way of social control in terms that have regularly provoked more popular resistance than gratitude. The internationalized version of development is marked by many of these same features with the additional element of foreign imposition even as it presents itself as “putting Afghans first” (p. 47).

The focus of Attewell’s research—agrarian development—is an important, and under-explored, sector within which to consider the larger concepts that animate foreign aid, so-called stabilization efforts and even democracy promotion, precisely because it has long been anchored in notions of “self-help,” sustainability, and local community building. These concepts, as he demonstrates, have migrated comfortably into the counterinsurgency lexicon since the Vietnam War. Here, Attewell’s historical approach is especially helpful, in that he demonstrates how American-led efforts at agrarian development have long strayed well beyond the technical and, instead, have been part of a larger effort at “progressive social engineering” that claimed to center local needs and concerns but, in reality, represented an often unwelcome attempt at “ordering and managing Afghan lifeworlds” (p. 69).

Drawing on the work of Laleh Khalili, Attewell considers USAID’s work in Afghanistan as a many decades-long effort that involved a range of impositions in its “unleashing [of] various forms of ‘infrastructural power’ throughout the countryside” (p. 17).[1] It would have been fruitful for the author to have also engaged with the writings of Michael Mann, the sociologist of the state who famously deployed the term “infrastructural power” (alongside “despotic power”) to theorize the various modes of reach states obtain. As Mann conceived of it, infrastructural power represented the various means (material and otherwise) by which the state could reach down and into society in order to govern, impose, control, deliver, and improve. Once established, however, infrastructural power also offered channels and opportunities whereby citizens could push back.[2] The dialectical quality of Mann’s concept would have given Attewell more scope to explore the means by which Afghan farmers operated, not merely as objects of aid but also as agentic actors, who often opted out of what was on offer and, à la Scott, found modes of resistance that advanced their own politics in the face of empire.

In his tome, *Liberalism and Empire*, Uday Singh Mehta recalls how Britain’s liberal thinkers saw India as “the promised land of liberal ideas—a kind of test case laboratory.”[3] The notion of Afghanistan as a laboratory, a site of experimentation, was, as Attewell makes clear, not a metaphorical one: intervening agents tried and failed repeatedly, inflicting the costs of their errors on the Afghan people. And these experiments unfurled in terms that suited the interests and agendas of the interveners; those interests and agendas some-
times aligned with those of Afghan stakeholders, but often they did not. This frequent misalignment helps explain the flow of humanitarian assistance while the mujahideen fought the “evil empire” and the subsequent period of profound international neglect after Soviet withdrawal. It similarly helps to explain the incoherent (and ineffective) decades-long approach to poppy cultivation. In unpacking the various programs and initiatives that encompassed these efforts, Attewell unearths one of the most discomfitting truths about development as an imperial tool: “From the outset, empire has been a fundamentally experimental and utopian project, one that unfolds and travels through models, plans, blueprints, calculations, speculations, and laboratories ... defined by its seemingly limitless capacity to transmute failure into reinvention and renewal” (p. 211).

Ultimately, Attewell makes an audacious move to link the “US developmental-industrial complex” as it operated in twenty-first-century Afghanistan to the legacy of Jim Crow in the United States, including the contemporary modes by which black bodies are policed. He employs a genealogical approach that reveals the traveling logics of empire and the means by which “lessons learned” in one imperial site found themselves recast and resurrected elsewhere, charting “the transnational afterlives of US empire” (p. 29). Having engaged these “imperial durabilities” as Ann Stoler would describe them (Duress: Imperial Durabilities in Our Times [2016]), he contemplates an “abolitionist” posture vis-à-vis the current aid apparatus. His push is not to eliminate development as an aspiration but to rethink it in radical terms that, in Anun Kundnani’s words, “fosters the social and economical relationships needed to live dignified lives, rather than relatively identifying groups of people who are seen as threatening” (p. 224). As Attewell no doubt understands, this is a call likely to fall on deaf ears in Washington. And, yet, his well-furnished critique (alongside many others) of all that has gone so terribly wrong in Afghanistan ought to at least give pause to those who call for greater aid to Afghans (and many others across the developing world) with little reflection on the many ways it has done more harm than good.[4]

Notes


If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
https://networks.h-net.org/h-diplo


URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=59530

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.