

BOOK

**Thinking small: The United States and the lure of community development**

By Daniel Immerwahr

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Recent historiography of United States (US) foreign relations has nursed an interest in modernization processes, looking at how they served as a major feature in the United States overseas involvement after the Second World War. Scholars have been interested in massive impact projects such as dams, power plants, market roads, and other infrastructural projects, which the US sponsored in global South countries with an ostensible goal of promoting economic growth and prosperity. They have also set out to explain why, despite lofty goals, these projects failed and have come to understand that the failure was due in large part to a verticalist, top-down approach that left little or no input from the societies who received the projects. In *Thinking Small: The United States and the Lure of Community Development*, Daniel Immerwahr aims to problematize and at the same time complement this thesis by examining the intellectual history of what is now called “community development,” of which the concern for small-scale, horizontalist, bottom-up economic actions had existed as a vibrant developmental tradition in concert, or in contest, with modernization thinking.

The book begins with a discussion on the discursive place of small, face-to-face social units in the US Anglo-American imaginary, and gradually tells a story of how community development became a movement, was brought to the global South where it generated excitement (and some relative success), and then was returned to the US as an approach to solve domestic poverty. In the 1930s, a section of the US social sciences became increasingly interested in looking at the small group’s potential to replace the classic leviathan, i.e., the state or the national government, as the guarantor of economic prosperity. The early efforts to put this policy into action took place in agencies such as the Tennessee Valley Authority, the Bureau of Agricultural Economics, and—who would have imagined?—Japanese internment camps.

Gaining only modest outcomes in the US, communitarian programs were eventually transplanted by American technical experts and purveyors of anti-insurgency tactics into Jawaharlal Nehru’s India, Ramon Magsaysay’s Philippines, and Ngô Đình Diệm’s Vietnam, where they gained avid supporters among local modernizers who shared an equal fascination on the promise of the community. The centerpiece of these efforts was the formation of locally based small-scale groups, e.g., *panchayat* in India and *barrio* councils in the Philippines. With generous funding, they were tasked to identify the community’s felt “needs” and mobilized the community’s human resources to attain desirable results. Immerwahr

demonstrates that the assumptions of US rural experts about the community's promising features, such as intact mechanism for social harmony and existence of organic leaders, eclipsed inequities such as an intransigent caste system and patriarchy. Successful community projects, such as those in Kerala, involved a communist party whose local influence compensated for weak village relations. Projects in the district of Etawah had some promising results, but experts and their local allies allowed these projects to be dominated by local elites, who easily turned to large-scale modernization projects as replacements to previous communitarian initiatives. Despite the less-than-stellar level of development they produced, communitarianism's emphasis on social harmony rendered them effective anti-insurgency measures. This was true in the Philippine experience, where community development served as band-aid measures in place of massive land redistribution, as well as in other parts of Southeast Asia such as Vietnam. In what could have been a triumphant return to the metropole, community development was adopted as a major feature of Lyndon B. Johnson's "War on Poverty," with the intent of devolving authority in poverty alleviation campaigns launched in poor communities across the US. But whereas community action overseas was a conservative/counterrevolutionary force that stabilized communities, community action in the US became a revolutionary force that challenged white racist prejudice and oppressive economic power. The possible disruption was too alarming, so much so that the federal government pulled the plug before it became too unwieldy to control.

There is much hesitance in Immerwahr to call communitarianism as yet another function of US imperial power. The book, nevertheless, still succeeds in making its readers ask questions about global politics, and be more attentive to intellectual traditions and their transnational links, and how they informed and guided US development programs in the global South after the Second World War. Steering clear of any easy answer, the book makes a good case as to why serious consideration has to be given to localist, community-centered campaigns, and why they are worthy of their historical inquiry, something that could benefit students of post-World War II (WWII) Southeast Asian history, too. For instance, the notion of "community health" only appears as a phenomenon that started in the late 1970s in the historiography of post-WWII international health, with historians showing a propensity to dismiss prior community-centered programs as mere distractions to large-scale mass vaccinations and insecticide sprayings. Similar to modernization historians, they approach post-WWII international health as a period of vertical, high modernist health programs, only to be disrupted belatedly in 1978 by the Alma-Ata Declaration and the World Health Organization's leadership in promoting a more horizontalist, community-oriented Primary Health Care (which, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund eventually co-opted and restructured back into top-down verticalist campaigns in the 1980s). Hardly has there been any study on the longer history

of village councils as a vital component in post-WWII public health programs. In the Philippines, these councils were locally called *purok* or rural school-based formations that were organized around the philosophy of “village self-help,” tasked to mobilize the community’s human and financial resources to match US development aid. They acted as the mass education component alongside big technocratic health programs like vaccination and insecticide spraying. Likewise, in post-WWII Indonesia, health programs relied heavily on initiatives to mobilize human and material resources on the *desa* (village) level, including the recruitment and deployment of paramedical personnel called *mantris*, who covered varying functions ranging from program planning, to public information drive, supervision, and even administering medical services on the ground. Indeed, *mantris* served as the backbone of health programs in the midst of Indonesia’s postwar shortage of public health doctors. In this regard, the small complements the big, and both are vital components to the developmentalist goal of eradicating diseases and alleviating human suffering.

The book’s story of communitarian ideas moving from the US to global South countries and back to the US somehow falls short in showing the complexities of their global trajectories. Despite Immerwahr’s constant reminding of their ambidexterity (i.e., the political malleability that allows these ideas to be utilized and deployed by various ideological persuasions in the political spectrum), the left is a bit ignored and there is a tendency to place too much emphasis on Anglo-American contributions, thus ignoring other possible intellectual routes that could have included European social democratic trade unionism and cooperative formation; women’s reproductive rights movements; and, self-help groups that aspired to pan-Asianist solidarity. Nonetheless, much of what the book lacks is made up for by its gradual yet compelling build-up toward its overarching argument: that uncritical and romantic views of the community, despite adornments of altruism, ultimately hurt any chance of substantive reform—a useful lesson for both the left and the right. The book’s epilogue also hints at additional transnational connections that its previous chapters did not cover. On the whole, Daniel Immerwahr’s *Thinking Small: The United States and the Lure of Community Development* must be required reading for anyone interested in US foreign relations and the history of international development.

#### REVIEWER

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