When was development invented? A frequent answer has been 1949, in the inauguration speech of American President Harry Truman. This answer appears in scholarly publications, particularly by authors with a critical perspective, and in some undergraduate textbooks.1 Gilbert Rist’s *The History of Development: From Western Origins to Global Faith* is an important reason for this answer.2 The other widely cited reason is *The Development Dictionary* (1992). The authors of many of its entries state that the “age of development” began on January 20, 1949, the date of Truman’s speech.3 Between these two books Arturo Escobar published his influential *Encountering Development*, which also started with Truman’s speech.4

Rist, Escobar, Wolfgang Sachs, and the other *Development Dictionary* authors belong to the Post-Development school, which emerged in the late 1980s.5 While a diverse school, its members share a comprehensive rejection of development, citing its economistic and Eurocentric essence, and its destructive impacts. One of the school’s most influential contributions has been the argument that development is a discourse, a historically situated way of seeing and speaking about the world. As Aram Ziai explained:

> knowledge about and representations of the social world are not neutral, but have a certain perspective and imply relations of power. Knowledge about “development” therefore al-

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ways implies a claim on how other ("underdeveloped") people should live and how their lives can be improved, and thus a justification of intervention (knowledge as power).⁶

In making this argument Post-Developmentalists needed to identify the historical context in which development discourse emerged and gained power. Their outline of this context has become the accepted history of development for many in development studies, most of whom have social science backgrounds. While some social scientists have a long-standing interest in the history of thought in their disciplines, including ideas about development, many do not read research on development by historians.⁷

Over the last two decades historians have become interested in development. The picture painted by their research is, not surprisingly, more complex than the Post-Developmentalists' outline. It also challenges that outline at several points; most strongly on the origin of development. There is a consensus among historians that development as a concept and a program of action existed well before 1949, while its invention by Truman in 1949 remains a core principle of Post-Development.⁸

At the turn of the millennium historians were optimistic that using history to study phenomena like modernization offered "a way to write about development without accepting its clichés."⁹ At that point development studies was still polarized by debates that neoliberalism's ascendency triggered, debates that reframed but did not reverse the fragmentation of development thought that occurred in the 1970s and 80s. Even if historians do not follow these debates within development studies, they cannot easily escape them. The definitions of development historians adopt and the initiatives they choose to research play into those debates.

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⁶ Aram Ziai, “I Am Not a Post-Developmentalist, but...': The Influence of Post-Development on development studies,” Third World Quarterly 38, no. 12 (2017): 2719–2734, 2721. This special issue marked the twenty-fifth anniversary of The Development Dictionary’s publication and discusses Post-Development’s legacy.


This article takes a critical look at Post-Development’s outline of development history, which has been most fully elaborated by Gilbert Rist. It will summarize Rist’s argument, for readers not familiar with it, and evaluate his claims using the criterion of novelty, which Rist considered important. Additional criteria suggested by agency-based definitions of development and by discourse analysis—the intentions of the speaker and their capacity to initiate change, as well as the purpose and context of a speech—will also be applied. Identifying parallels between the Post-Development view of development history and Cold War-focused histories of development will be the final task of this article.

Seeing Development as a Discourse

Despite its title Rist’s History of Development was primarily a critique of development. This was not surprising given that Rist was a political scientist with an interest in anthropology. Rist’s critique followed established Post-Development lines, aiming to ensure the development’s rejection. He decried development’s obsession with economics and growth, and lamented the destruction it wrought by assuming that Western ways were superior to those of other cultures. He was deeply critical of the dominant theories of development, produced either by individuals from the global North or within the UN system—implicitly dominated by the North. The only Southern contributions to development were dependency theory from Latin America and Tanzania’s ujamaa policy.¹ The former Rist dismissed as a variant of modernization; of the latter he said that it represented “a diversification of ‘developments’;” but was nonetheless a top-down initiative that failed to achieve its goals.¹¹ Although Rist organized the objects of his critique chronologically, outlining the history of development took only four of the first edition’s 13 chapters. Rist prepared new editions in 2001, 2007, and 2013, with English translations following in 2002, 2008, and 2014. In all the later, longer editions the four chapter history section remained and was unrevised.

Development for Rist was a discourse, an idea that had the “power to seduce in every sense of the term [...], but also to abuse, to turn away from the truth, to deceive.”¹² Reality was not created by words, Rist added, but
certain forms of discourse express more accurately than others a reality in the making, because certain texts bring out more clearly than others the episteme of an epoch, and finally—this is the performativity aspect of the text—because power does not necessarily involve changing reality, but, rather, inserting it into a different problematic, proposing a new interpretation to kindle the illusion of change.¹³

Rist did not provide a more detailed explanation of discourse, though the concepts and methods of critical discourse analysis were developing in the early 1990s.¹⁴ As Jan Nederveen Pieterse noted, for Post-Development scholars discourse analysis was an “ideological platform” rather than a methodology.¹⁵

Religion was another term Rist used to describe development, though it was a metaphor rather than an analytic category he pursued in depth. He used religion to highlight development’s Western origins, arguing that development shared characteristics with European Christianity as he saw it. It was a belief system that set out “indisputable truths” that compelled or determined behavior, creating a “collective certainty” that it would be improper to question, at least in public.¹⁶ Religion was later a metaphor with which to stress compulsion rather than seduction as Rist sought to explain the continuing power of development.¹⁷

Post-Development’s Outline of Development’s History

Like any respectable Western phenomenon, development needed a civilizational genealogy. Rist’s history started with a standard one: Aristotle, Augustine, and several Enlightenment thinkers. Social evolutionism, the progenitor of development, was their child.¹⁸ Social evolutionism was implemented by the “great powers” of Western Europe between 1870 and 1940 via their empires.¹⁹ The League of Nations provided new legitimation for European imperial interventions, but the League lacked the capacity to fully implement its mandate system and become

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¹³ Rist, *History of Development*, 78, emphasis in the original.
the institutional expression of an internationalized imperialism. A glance at texts like Victor Hugo’s speech on the abolition of slavery (1879), a presentation on *mise en valeur* by Jules Ferry (1885), and the League of Nations Covenant (1919) allowed Rist to characterize this era. It was the annunciation of these ideas, rather than their embodiment in policy, that interested Rist.

While the colonial era’s practices and rationales had similarities to and continuities with the development era that succeeded it, Rist argued there were crucial differences. Some Post-Developmentalists said colonization had been primarily a cultural project, while development was an economic one, but Rist disagreed—and provided a more detailed analysis. He focused on agency rather than on the minimization of economic motives in colonization. “The initiative of turning the colonies ‘to account,’” Rist said, “could [...] be taken only by the metropolitan countries,” within an “openly asymmetrical, hierarchical and non-egalitarian relationship” that was distinctive to “the colonial enterprise.” In the era that followed, all peoples and states possessed agency, but it was notional because development held them—or their leaders, at least—in deepening thrall. The other differences were the absence of the United States, which Rist said did not participate in colonization, and the absence of development.

Truman’s inauguration speech, nicknamed Point Four for its final point, which announced a development initiative, initiated profound change. It also “gave the impetus” to the adoption of development by the United Nations, which, unlike the League, was able to institutionalize development. While other Post-Developmentalists assumed the UN was the US writ large, Rist described the transfer of American-invented development to the UN, using John F. Kennedy’s speech proposing a “Decade of Development” to represent this. Rist ended his historical outline with a selection of material, mostly from the

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21 While Rist was writing there were already studies of *mise en valeur*’s translation into policy. Alice Conklin, *A Mission to Civilize: The Republican Idea of Empire in France and West Africa, 1895–1930* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997) was published one year after Rist’s first edition.
1991 and 1992 UN Development Programme’s (UNDP’s) *Human Development Reports*, which he said became “the basis of all discourse on ‘development’.”

**Evaluating Speeches and Truman’s Invention of Development**

By what criteria might we judge the impact of Truman’s Point Four speech and Post-Development’s claim that it constituted the invention of development? Evidence of novelty would be one: was the word development being used for the first time, or used in a new way? For Rist this was an important issue, and thus a criterion worth including. Further criteria for evaluation are suggested by reflection on human agency, in particular the intention and capacity to act. Since the intent to change has become important to definitions of development, this adds weight to the intentions of a speech’s authors as a criterion for judging its impact. In addition, critical discourse analysis suggests that the purpose of a speech is important. So are the context in which it was delivered and the event’s participants. This kind of analysis works outward from the content of a text (written or spoken) to the social relations, processes, and circumstances in which it is embedded.

The capacity to act is linked to the issue of power, a core concern for the Post-Development school and of great interest to others who research development. While financial resources are an imperfect proxy for an actor’s capacity, a look at changes in the allocation of money by or to actors named in a speech would help understand the capacity of the speaker (and their backers or allies) to institute the changes of which they spoke. I have argued elsewhere that

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30 Petersie, for example, defined development as “organized intervention in collective affairs according to a standard of improvement”: Petersie, *Development Theory*, 3. The focus on intention in defining development originated with Michael Cowen and Robert Shenton, whose work is discussed in the next section.
32 Rist does not explain what he means by power, but Escobar indicates his understanding of power is based on Foucault in Escobar, *Encountering Development*, 5.
changes in resources are a tool for periodization in development history.\(^{33}\) If a speech constituted a turning point in development history, significant changes in access to and allocation of resources would be indicators.

Related to this, the implementation of key elements of the speech via the creation of new practices or organizations, or significant alteration in existing ones, would be a fourth criterion for evaluation. The institutionalization of any such changes would be a further sign of the speaker’s capacity to effect change, and to persuade others to adopt it. For Post-Developmentalists, though, implementation was not important. As Sachs put it, development was a “cast of mind” more than “a socio-economic endeavor,” and like other “myths and fantasies” it rose and fell “independent of empirical results.”\(^ {34}\)

To the extent that Rist considered institutionalization, he looked at the UN system rather than the US, so the UN will be the focus in the latter part of this paper. What follows is a brief look at each of these criteria for evaluation, supported by a mix of sources from the 1950s, literature contemporaneous with the Post-Development classics, which were researched in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and more recent studies of Truman’s speech and the Point Four Program that followed it.

### Development and Underdevelopment—New Terms or Concepts?

Rist argued that Point Four in Truman’s speech was an instance of “terminological innovation.”\(^ {35}\) Instead of looking at use of the noun development, he focused on use of the adjective underdeveloped “as a synonym for ‘economically backward’ areas.” Rist qualified his claim for novelty by noting Truman’s speech was the first time underdevelopment had been used in this way “in a text intended for such wide circulation.”\(^ {36}\)

The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) supports this, listing Truman’s speech as the first usage example of underdeveloped in this sense.\(^ {37}\)

However, Rist’s argument for innovation was mostly based on the distinction between development as an “intransitive phenomenon” and a “transitive mean-

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35 Rist, *History of Development*, 72, emphasis in the original.
ing” of development. In the former development “simply ‘happens’,” and nothing can be done to alter the evolutionary process through which it is achieved. In the latter, action can be taken to bring about development; it becomes “possible to ‘develop’ a region.”$^{38}$ This is the distinction that Michael Cowen and Robert Shenton made, also in 1996, between development as an immanent process and development as intentional change.$^{39}$ They built a powerful argument for the nineteenth century birth of development as an accepted term for intentional change, an argument supported by numerous nineteenth century OED usage examples of develop as a transitive verb, together with an argument for the nineteenth century birth of underdevelopment.$^{40}$ Responding to the Development Dictionary’s just-published argument about Truman, Cowen and Shenton said the late 1940s was a time when “when ‘development’ had become so accentuated that many are led to believe that it was then discovered.”$^{41}$

Rist also made a broader claim about conceptual innovation, arguing that Truman’s speech “radically altered the way the world was seen.”$^{42}$ The world was no longer divided between the colonizers and the colonized; after Point Four it was divided between the developed and the underdeveloped. This divide was new in that all nation-states were recognized as theoretical equals. Developed countries had the lead in economic, social, and political matters, but underdeveloped countries could act to alter their status—they could catch up by undertaking development.$^{43}$ It was this action, tied to a model of Western modernization, for which President Truman offered American assistance.

$^{38}$ All quotes are from Rist, History of Development, 73.
$^{41}$ Cowen and Shenton, Doctrines of Development, 7–8.
$^{42}$ Rist, History of Development, 73.
$^{43}$ Rist, History of Development, 74.
The Intent to Develop

Rist’s argument for the 1949 invention of development would be strengthened if it were clear that Truman intended to create something new and announced it in his speech. To understand Truman’s intentions, it is important to know a bit about the context of his 1949 inauguration. Harry Truman was Roosevelt’s last Vice-President and was thrust into the top office with little preparation when Roosevelt died in April 1945. Truman ran for the presidency in his own right in 1948, in an election so hard fought that several newspapers initially declared his Republican opponent the victor. Truman came into office with an ambitious agenda of social reform that built on Roosevelt’s New Deal.⁴⁴ However the Democratic Party, though it regained control of both Congress and the White House, was divided, while the Republicans were embittered. Truman, who had faced disdain and ridicule from within his own party as well as from opponents, was buoyed by a powerful sense of vindication. He was aware, though, that both voters and legislators would need to be coaxed if the reforms on which he campaigned were to be implemented.⁴⁵ The crowd of more than a million who gathered to witness his inauguration was Truman’s initial, intended audience. And the inauguration was historic: Truman announced that African Americans were welcome to attend, and the ceremony was broadcast on television.⁴⁶ Both “firsts” likely encouraged Truman to focus on his national audience; they were certainly among the social processes in which the speech was embedded.

The idea of technical assistance to underdeveloped areas—the speech’s fourth point—was not intended to significantly alter American foreign policy or recast international relations. It was added because Truman and his advisors felt the speech needed a “dramatic highlight.”⁴⁷ As a State Department official who helped generate ideas for the speech later explained, it was “a public-relations gimmick, thrown in by a professional speech-writer to give the speech more

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life.”⁴⁸ Truman, though, said that the idea of “a continuing and self-perpetuating program of technical assistance to the underdeveloped nations of the world” had been in his mind since the Marshall Plan was launched.⁴⁹ While historians of Cold War development are skeptical of this self-explanation, they agree that the fourth point was drawn from existing ideas and projects, not something new.⁵⁰

When Truman’s fourth point was turned into overnight headline news by the American media, “the White House and the State Department were taken completely by surprise.”⁵¹ Washington reporters saw Point Four as “one of the most ambitious pronouncements on foreign affairs” made by an American president.⁵² How Americans of various backgrounds responded to the televised speech is harder to judge, but domestic interest in Point Four did help create an international audience for the speech in a way Truman had not expected. As Jahangir Amuzegar observed, the speech “inspired interest and enthusiasm throughout the world.”⁵³ Over the next few years there was a flurry of publications about Point Four by academics and policymakers. As one of these noted, ordinary people in Latin America were also soon talking “about ‘Punta Cuatro’, and [...] Iranian farmers about ‘Astle Charom’.”⁵⁴ Rist, in contrast, claimed that Point Four “went almost unnoticed at the time.”⁵⁵

Resource Flows

If Truman’s inaugural speech initiated significant resource flows for development this would be an indicator of invention and support for the idea that it

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⁵³ Jahangir Amuzegar, “Point Four: Performance and Prospect,” Political Science Quarterly 73, no. 4 (1958): 530–546, 530. Amuzegar was a member of a politically prominent family in Iran.
⁵⁵ Rist, History of Development, 5.
was a historical turning point. Given the context for Point Four's inclusion in his speech, this was clearly not Truman's intent. As it also had when the Marshall Plan was announced in 1948, the State Department moved quickly to squelch hopes that the President's speech would mean significant new transfers to countries in Latin America, Asia or Africa. An additional concern with Point Four was whether Truman meant the US government to become a guarantor for American private foreign investment. The answer was no. As with direct spending, officials were keen to quash expectations of a significant new financial role for the government.

Point Four's American supporters emphasized that "self-help [was] fundamental" to the Point Four Program, the practical outcome of Truman's speech. Recipient countries had to request assistance, and they were expected to contribute half the resources for the Program's training programs and demonstration projects. Agreements with recipient governments were thus crucial, and each agreement was to be tailored to the recipient country. Drafting agreements and getting experts and supplies into place took time, so it was not until mid-1951 and in some cases early 1952 that the Program was actually operating. By this time it had a Cold War function that went beyond reducing international tensions and wooing citizens of underdeveloped countries through improved living standards. It housed geological surveys that identified deposits of strategic minerals needed by the US.

The Eisenhower administration that succeeded Truman's continued to offer international aid, including technical assistance, after 1953 but Point Four was no longer the American aid flagship. With the transfer of development programming to a new International Cooperation Administration in 1955, the Point Four

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Program disappeared. Ethiopia and Iran are the two recipient countries whose Point Four experiences have so far been examined in depth.

The Point Four Program did not receive Congressional approval until May 1950, the victim of infighting between the White House and State Department as well as partisan differences. The Program was modest, even more so after skeptical Congress members whittled the $45 million requested for its first year down to $35 million. This was a fraction of what the US was then providing in other kinds of international assistance. The Program’s outlays were also small in comparison to private American investment, which the Truman administration expected would flow to underdeveloped countries after the Point Four Program catalyzed their economic development. However, the share of American foreign investment directed at Africa, Asia, and Latin America fell between 1940 and 1960, even as the total stock of American investment almost doubled. Truman’s inaugural address did not generate significant new American flows of aid or investment for development.

One of the Program’s administrators suggested that Point Four’s novelty was not the amount of money involved, but the range of its intended recipients—the commitment to provide assistance to “all peace-loving peoples,” not just to “allies, satellites, and dependencies.” A look at the allocation of Point Four funds between 1952 and 1954, however, shows the majority of them were concentrated on allies and satellites, like Iran, Israel, Jordan, and Formosa, as well as countries whose relationship to US was colonial or quasi-colonial, like the Philippines, Puerto Rico, and Liberia. Although Truman said his bold, new program would replace imperialism, Point Four funds were also allocated to the “Depend-


68 Bingham, “Partisan Politics,” 84.

ent Territories” of European allies, meaning their colonies.⁷⁰ These were the “most underdeveloped parts of the world,” American officials argued. They hoped, though, to associate “colonial people” with “posts of some significance and responsibility” in the Program to avoid accusations of neo-imperialism.⁷¹ In Sub-Saharan Africa “Dependent Territories” were by far the largest recipients of Point Four funds, though in both the Caribbean and Pacific regions they were minor recipients.⁷² In this respect the Point Four Program resembled the Marshall Plan, which the US had allowed its allies to use for development projects in their colonies—even to cover the cost of suppressing anti-colonial rebellions.⁷³ When Rist suggested that Point Four inserted colonies “into a different problematic,” re-interpreting them as underdeveloped areas, he overstated the degree of historical discontinuity.⁷⁴

**Implementation and Institutionalization**

Implementation is the final criterion proposed to evaluate the impact of a speech. Like other Post-Developmentalists, Rist downplayed this aspect of innovation, and with respect to the advent of official development assistance he was right to do so.⁷⁵ As a range of historical work on European imperialism has pointed out, Britain’s 1940 Colonial Development and Welfare Act was a prominent example of pre-1949 official development aid. It named the welfare of colonial subjects as a goal of development, though economic growth remained a primary aim. It also institutionalized planning, as each colony’s administration was required to submit a multi-year plan to access money under the Act. In French colonies the 1946 *Plan de modernisation et d’équipement*, modeled after the 1940 British Act, guided post-war reconstruction and development. Its distinctive element was a significant growth in public transfers, both grants and loans, to finance development in the empire.⁷⁶ Both the 1940 Act and the 1946 *Plan* had

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⁷¹ Advisory Committee on Technical Assistance, “Point Four Program in Relation to Dependent Areas,” July 27, 1949 as quoted in McVety, *Enlightened Aid*, 105.
⁷² Bingham, *Shirt-Sleeve Diplomacy*, 245, 255.
⁷⁴ Rist, *History of Development*, 78, emphasis in the original.
precedents in British and French policies following World War One and the inter-war recessions, policies that ensured access to essential raw materials and discouraged unrest. The International Labour Organization’s work on nutrition and the League’s Mandates Commission were additional inter-war influences on colonial development and aid for it.\textsuperscript{77}

Recent scholarship has shown the Point Four Program had important American precursors as well. These included the Export-Import Bank, wartime technical assistance offered through the Institute of Inter-American Affairs, and publicly-funded international relief provided after World War One.\textsuperscript{78} Americans were also aware of British colonial development precedents. Critic Henry Hazlitt, for instance, argued Point Four was designed to repeat all the mistakes of Britain’s East African Groundnuts Scheme.\textsuperscript{79} If Rist had been content to make a much narrower historical argument about development aid as a tool of American foreign policy, he would have been on solid ground. Point Four was the moment when development aid became a permanent part of America’s foreign policy tool kit, a point made in several recent histories of Cold War development.\textsuperscript{80}

It is worth noting that not all critical scholars shared Post-Development’s assertion that Truman invented development in 1949.\textsuperscript{81} Some suggested inflection points rather than historic breaks between the “colonial project,” the post-World War Two “development project,” and the “globalization project” that succeeded it.\textsuperscript{82} Some accepted 1949 as a historical turning point, but complained that talk of

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\begin{flushleft}79 Henry Hazlitt, Illusions of Point Four (Irvington-on-Hudson: Foundation for Economic Education, 1950), 13–16.
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\begin{flushleft}80 Erb, “Prelude to Point Four,” 249; Nick Cullather, The Hungry World: America’s Cold War Battle against Poverty in Asia (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 212–213; Ekbladh, Great American Mission, 98.
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\begin{flushleft}82 For example, Philip McMichael and Heloise Weber, Development and Social Change: A Global Perspective (Los Angeles: Sage, 2021).
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a development project and a globalization project downplayed their shared characteristic—American imperialism.\textsuperscript{83} Yet others were bothered by the claim of a “rupture” in development history in the late 1940s, believing that this argument helped “mask the fact that the global political and economic organisation established in the late nineteenth century is still largely intact.”\textsuperscript{84}

In spite of critical responses and the growing literature on development history from historians and social scientists, Rist extended rather than re-examined his argument in subsequent editions. “When the first French edition of this book appeared,” Rist said, “it was possible to think that ‘development’ was running out of steam.”\textsuperscript{85} It was not, and Rist added recent examples of development, like the Millennium Development Goals, to his critique, but made no changes to the earlier, history-focused chapters of his book. He evidently felt no need to consult the emerging literature to deepen his understanding of development in the colonial era. Although Escobar noted some of the early research on imperial development in Africa in his first edition, he also did not use more recent histories to update his 1995 observation that “the period between 1920 and 1950 is still ill understood from the vantage point of the overlap between colonial and developmentalist regimes of representation.”\textsuperscript{86} The unfortunate pattern of updating prefatory material, but not the book’s core chapters or the late 1980s and early 1990s research on which they were based, is also evident in the 2019 edition of \textit{The Development Dictionary}. None of these Post-Development classics address histories of development published after 2000. Elsewhere, though, Rist responded to critics who pointed out that Point Four was added to Truman’s speech for publicity reasons. Though Truman’s “stroke of genius” might have been unintentional, it did not change his speech’s historical significance for Rist.\textsuperscript{87}

\textsuperscript{86} Escobar, \textit{Encountering Development}, 27.
Why Speeches by American Presidents?

Given the lack of evidence for terminological or conceptual innovation, for the intent to create change or for altered resource flows, and the mixed evidence for implementation and institutionalization, the question becomes why Rist and other Post-Developmentalists insist that Truman’s speech inaugurated a new historical era. Rist gave three reasons: the prior absence of a concept of development as intentional change, an alteration in historical agency with the end of colonization, and the changed role of the US in international affairs. As we have seen, there is little evidence for the first of these. The second reason depends on viewing imperialism and trusteeship—as well as modernization—as binary relationships where only one side possessed power. This view was being questioned in the early 1990s and is challenged more strongly by recent historical scholarship. ⁸⁸ Monica van Beusekom’s research on the Office du Niger is one example of work showing how imperial officials were compelled to take into account the views of African participants in their development projects. ⁸⁹ Rist’s third reason is thus the crucial one: colonization and the mandates system were essential to European history and both “were conducted without the United States.” ⁹⁰ While this is a questionable statement, for Post-Developmentalists the post-war years were an important “historical conjuncture” in which a new world power, the United States, needed a global mission as it faced off against the USSR. ⁹¹ Development, as announced in Point Four, became that mission. It “allowed the US to behave as herald of national self-determination while at the same time founding a new type of world-wide domination.” ⁹² With the end of

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⁹⁰ Rist, History of Development, 66.


the Cold War, Post-Developmentalists expected development would lose its ideological fuel and be consigned to “the scrapyard of history.” ⁹³

It is worth asking why the Americans were so central to Post-Developmentalists’ conception of development history. The answer may be that the early 1990s, when Rist was writing and the Development Dictionary was published, was the end of the Cold War. ⁹⁴ The US had won and Western liberal democracy and capitalism triumphed, said many. ⁹⁵ Some saw parallels between the emerging post-Cold War world and American dominance of the global economy after World War Two. ⁹⁶ Rist certainly saw parallels between intensified support for structural adjustment policies, strongly associated with the US, and the justifications for colonization that had intensified as mid-twentieth century challenges to empire grew. ⁹⁷ Neoliberalism, the theoretical basis for structural adjustment, reached its apogee in the early 1990s with vociferous supporters combatting an increasing range of critics. In addition, the early 1990s saw significant change in the development aid landscape. Disenchantment with aid and recession in many donor countries, the collapse of Soviet aid, and dramatic reductions in aid from oil-producing countries all played a part. Consequently Western donors, led by the US, were by default supplying the vast majority of the development aid on offer. ⁹⁸ The only historical parallel for this aid dominance were the early years of the 1950s. This is speculation, but this conjuncture may have led Rist and other Post-Developmentalists to identify the US as the key actor in their historical outline. In addition, work on development by historians at the turn of the millennium was American-centered, which validated the Post-Development interpretation. ⁹⁹

Rist’s methodology also predisposed him to a particular view of development history. He located “significant episodes” that represented “particular ep-

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⁹⁶ For example, Justin van der Merwe and Nicole Dodd, The Political Economy of Underdevelopment in the Global South: The Government-Business-Media Complex (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 40.
⁹⁷ Rist, History of Development, 58.
ochs” in the long span of history, and within each of whose characteristics were revealed by “great texts.”¹⁰⁰ This focus on “great texts” biased his inquiry, and that of Post-Developmentalists who shared his approach to discourse, toward the speech of those powerful enough to be recorded or published and widely circulated. Combining this method with the assumption that development was (and is) the hegemonic product of “the preoccupations of the industrialized countries” made it appropriate to focus on the speech of persons from those countries.¹⁰¹ In the early 1990s, choosing the speech of an American president to initiate a new historical era was not surprising; neither was the use of another presidential speech to embody the transfer of development to the UN.

Other Speeches and Alternate Histories

Rist’s decision to use bits from the 1991 and 1992 UNDP Human Development Reports to represent UN development thinking, remarked earlier, inadvertently reveals his omission of a person whose speech should matter in histories of the UN and broader histories of development—Pakistani economist Mahbub ul Haq. Haq was hired by the UNDP in 1989 and led the team that created the annual Human Development Reports.¹⁰² The first Report, published in 1990, set out the concept of human development and provided an indicator for it, the first to successfully challenge the primacy of national income per capita. Those who worked with Haq used words like “crusade” and “heresy” to talk about this effort to put human well-being rather than economic growth at the center of development.¹⁰³ The early Human Development Reports embodied a change in thinking. They were initially controversial within the UN and in many member countries.¹⁰⁴ To imply that these Reports represented the UN’s understanding of development and that its essence had not changed since the early 1960s is inaccurate.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁰ Rist, History of Development, 2, 4–6.
The concept of human development also did not appear suddenly in 1990, but rather emerged from work spanning many years. Haq played an important role, but did not invent human development. He did, though, play a notable role in re-thinking development in various UN agencies. In the early 1970s Haq was senior advisor to Robert McNamara, who had been appointed President of the World Bank in 1968. McNamara’s speech at the Bank’s 1973 annual meeting is arguably a significant one for development history, if the criteria for a speech’s impact are conceptual change plus new resource flows that followed from it.¹⁰⁶

In September 1973 the World Bank’s and International Monetary Fund’s governors convened in Nairobi, their first meeting outside Washington, DC. There McNamara announced that poverty reduction would become an explicit goal of the World Bank. This was a noteworthy change, one that Martha Finnemore argued soon spread throughout the international development establishment.¹⁰⁷ McNamara also articulated changes in the conceptualization of poverty: it was a characteristic of people, not nations. Further, it was a destabilizing force and an indicator of political failure, not an inevitable or even necessary side effect of economic growth.¹⁰⁸ McNamara also advocated a focus on “absolute poverty,” a poverty so extreme that “it degrades the lives of individuals below the minimal norms of human decency.”¹⁰⁹ Absolute poverty afflicted about 40% of the people in developing countries. Some could be found in slums, but the vast majority lived in rural areas. “And it is there—in the countryside—that we must confront

¹⁰⁸ Finnemore, “Redefining Development,” 208–211.
their poverty,” McNamara urged.¹¹⁰ Eradicating absolute poverty by the end of the twentieth century would require developing country governments to reverse growing inequality within their nations and invest in agriculture, health, and education, an approach later elaborated in the World Bank’s *Redistribution With Growth* (1979).

McNamara gave voice and impetus to emerging development ideas in his Nairobi speech, he did not invent them.¹¹¹ Increased use of the term absolute poverty started in the late 1960s, and the explosive growth in its use in the early 1970s was associated with rather than initiated by McNamara’s speech.¹¹² McNamara oversaw a substantial increase in World Bank lending, much of which went to countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. The share of Bank lending allocated to agriculture and social development also more than doubled.¹¹³ The initiative McNamara and the Bank took on agriculture was particularly significant at a time when fears of a global food crisis were intensifying.¹¹⁴

McNamara’s speech dropped out of the public eye quickly, as the Yom Kippur War broke out only weeks later, and it was accompanied by Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries production cuts to enforce their demand for higher prices plus an embargo by some members against Israel’s allies.¹¹⁵ Real international oil prices quickly doubled, which dramatically changed the global context for development. Although eclipsed in a way that Truman’s inauguration address was not, McNamara’s Nairobi speech was the point at which “the momentum behind the anti-poverty program snowballed.”¹¹⁶ As Finnemore argued, prior to McNamara’s World Bank presidency

most states and even most development experts did not understand poverty alleviation to be central to the development effort. By 1975, poverty had been moved to center stage. The World Bank was not solely responsible for this change. It did not invent the poverty concern nor was it the only actor promoting a poverty orientation. What the Bank did was to pick up

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¹¹⁰ McNamara, “Address to the Board of Governors.”
¹¹² Google Books Ngram Viewer, s.v. “Absolute Poverty.”
¹¹³ While lending to the southern continents remained at 87% of the Bank’s total lending, the growth in lending doubled resource flows to these regions. Kapur, Lewis, and Webb also establish that the Bank’s attention to agriculture did not begin under McNamara; Kapur, Lewis and Webb, *World Bank*, vol. 1, 6, 382–391.
this new approach to development and institutionalize the poverty focus so that it became a necessary part of development efforts by both states and international development agencies.¹¹⁷

Identifying McNamara’s 1973 speech as an important one for development history would support the emphasis put on American agency by Post-Developmentalists, since McNamara was US Secretary of Defense prior to his appointment at the World Bank. However, discussing the role Haq played in the Bank’s institutional interest in poverty gives the history a different slant, as would looking at the speech that brought him to the World Bank.¹¹⁸

In April 1968 Mahbub ul Haq was the youthful chief economist of Pakistan’s National Planning Commission. While the country was celebrating a decade of rapid economic growth that Haq helped to engineer, he made a speech at the University of Karachi.¹¹⁹ In it he pointed out that the benefits of that growth were being appropriated by a few. Twenty-two families “controlled about two-thirds of industrial assets, 80 per cent of banking, and 79 per cent [of] insurance.”¹²⁰

Meanwhile, [...] the real wages of the industrial workers had dropped by a third in less than a decade, the percentage of illiterates was steadily increasing, fifteen times as much had been spent on importing private cars as public buses, and 80–90 per cent of private construction work was going into “what can only be called luxury housing”.¹²¹

What worried Haq most, though, was the way the 22 families colluded to control the country’s economic decision-making, preventing structural change.¹²² Coming from a senior public official, the speech was “a bombshell.”¹²³ Haq left Paki-
stan for the World Bank some months later. Challenges like Haq’s speech helped drive a new interest in poverty in the late 1960s, and were rootstock for human development in the early 1990s; they also prepared the ground for contemporaneous Post-Development critiques.

It is worth noting that some Cold War-focused histories of development echo another part of Post-Development’s historical outline when they argue the UN’s development ideas came from the US David Ekbladh, for example, argued the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) was the inspiration for America’s modernizing development. Then, “when the UN discussed how modernization might [...] be achieved, the TVA and the liberal development it stood for led the conversation.” He highlighted a 1948 UN conference on development where the US presented the TVA to delegates from other countries. Nick Cullather said the “post-war order began with food.” The Roosevelt administration’s 1943 assembly of 77 national delegations “to institute the first component of a new UN system, the FAO” inaugurated that order. Cullather also suggested the UN’s concept of community development was American-inspired, linked to a 1952 rural development program in India in which the Ford Foundation and the Point Four Program were both involved. However, Nicole Sackley, looking at this program’s pilot in Uttar Pradesh, argued that an “American-centric story” did not do justice to this complex initiative. Larry Grubb’s study of the Americans who helped draft Nigeria’s 1962–1968 development plan also provided a more nuanced view of the role of American technical assistance. More recently, Sara Lorenzini’s Global Development adds Soviet views and initiatives, as well as those of European countries to the Cold War history of development. Lorenzini also makes some space for the leaders and governments of aid receiving countries in her account of development initiatives and UN development debates.

There is no doubt that development became a central issue in the UN system. The question of how and when that happened is one where a choice of speeches—and of events more broadly—yields different possible histories. The

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125 Ekbladh, Great American Mission, 91.
126 Cullather, Hungry World, 34.
127 Cullather, Hungry World, 77.
130 Sara Lorenzini, Global Development.
International Labour Organization, which the UN inherited from the League of Nations, was a forum for debates about development in the 1940s. In a footnote, Rist acknowledged that an “ILO functionary” used underdeveloped in the Trumanesque sense in 1942, but Rist did not consider this to be history-changing speech because this booklet did not reach a wide audience.¹³¹ Daniel Maul, though, argues that the ILO publicly committed itself to development in its 1944 Declaration of Philadelphia.¹³² He also noted that within the ILO it was Latin American and Asian member countries who put “increasing pressure on the ILO” to implement the Declaration and provide practical assistance to nations that wanted “economic and social progress.”¹³³

This point—that the concept of development and the perceived need for it was not created by the US and transferred to the UN—is made strongly in publications of the UN Intellectual History Project.¹³⁴ Books and articles by UN development staff reiterate the same point. Nassau Adams and Digambar Bhouraskar, economists from Jamaica and India respectively, emphasized the role of governments and individuals from Latin America, Asia, Africa, and the Middle East in their histories of development at the UN.¹³⁵

Bhouraskar, for example, described how during the UN General Assembly’s first session in 1946 the Lebanese delegation requested that the UN create advisory boards to provide expert advice on economic, social, and cultural development.¹³⁶ In making the case for this technical assistance, Lebanon’s representative Charles Habib Malik classified countries into four groups: “highly developed countries,” “Non-Self-Governing Territories, and the Trusteeship Territories,” and between them states that “enjoyed full sovereignty” but “did not have sufficient technical and economic means for development without outside help.”¹³⁷ While

¹³¹ Rist, History of Development, 72, fn. 5.
¹³⁴ For example, Richard Jolly et al., UN Contributions to Development Thinking and Practice (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004).
¹³⁷ UN General Assembly, Joint Second and Third Committee, Tenth Meeting, December 6, 1946, Item 19, A/C.283/38, in Joint Committee of the Second and Third Committees Summary Record of Meetings, 18 November-10 December 1946 (Lake Success: United Nations, 1946), 70. I am indebted to the staff of the Dag Hammarskjöld Library for a scanned copy of this document.
countries in the first group had developmental responsibilities for the territories under their imperial control or trusteeship administration, countries in the last group were in a difficult situation. They needed external assistance but would have to “resort to bilateral agreements” to get it. This threatened their “economic independence” and put them at risk of conflict as aid-providing developed states competed for influence over them. Disinterested technical assistance from the UN would remedy these problems, Malik said. His remarks, made several years before Truman’s, contained a division of the world’s countries based on their development status, a clear concept of development as intentional change, and a role for international technical assistance in bringing about that change. The diplomats who responded to Malik took issue with some of them but did not react with surprise to the conceptual scheme he put forward, demonstrating that December 6, 1946 was also not the birthday of development.

Histories that include Malik’s speech also include another voice that Rist omits, that of W. Arthur Lewis. A St. Lucian economist, Lewis was an advisor to the British government on colonial development policy in the 1940s and the lead author of a 1951 report that many referred to as the UN’s primer on development. The story of this report is another illustration of the key role that Latin American, Asian, and African representatives played in putting development on the UN’s agenda. In the UN’s Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and the General Assembly these representatives insisted that prosperity and peace—the industrialized countries’ goals—could not be achieved unless the growing gap between developed and underdeveloped countries was addressed. When the experts who wrote a 1949 ECOSOC report on employment only discussed industrialized countries, the UN Secretary General was pushed to appoint another expert group to study the problems of developing ones. The make-up of this group—only one of its five experts came from an industrialized country—was noteworthy. Although the group’s formal mandate was employment, informally its members were told to focus on the question Latin American, Asian and African

138 All quotes from Joint Second and Third Committee, December 6, 1946, Item 19, in Summary Record of Meetings, 71.
141 Bhouraskar, United Nations Development Aid, 28.
delegates were continually posing in UN debates: “what measures are required if development is to be speeded up in underdeveloped countries?”

The resulting report, *Measures for the Economic Development of Underdeveloped Countries* (1951), would be a far better text to analyze for emerging concepts of development at the UN than speeches by American presidents.

The omission or minimization of voices like those of Malik, Lewis, and Haq is the symptom of an underlying problem in Post-Development’s historical outline: the need to demonstrate that development is Western, that it is monolithic, and that it is unchanging in essence. Post-Developmentalists were not interested in debates about developmentalism in non-Western empires, for example. While some admitted that modernity and the West were neither monolithic nor synonymous, they did not re-visit this working assumption. Histories that focus on the role of American (or European) ideas, actors, and resources in global modernization also present development as Western and homogenous, even if their authors say development was an encounter or an interchange rather than an activity with a unidirectional flow of ideas and causality. If the American or European side of developmental interactions is far better documented and analyzed, readers are left with the impression that Asian participants were objects rather than agents. Since Asia was a Cold War focal point, development histories of the region are essential, but development occurred elsewhere too. The history of development, especially the relationship between imperialism and deve-

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development, was different in African countries, for instance. Abiola Irele has argued that discussions of modernity in Africa also had a distinctive character. Others African scholars suggest a different interpretation of post-war development history. Thandika Mkandawire for instance, argued that the African and Asian leaders who met at Bandung in 1955 initiated an emancipatory post-war project of development that differed from the Trumanesque one, and called out Post-Developmentalists for ignoring it.

**Conclusion**

Speaking of invention draws attention to agency, implying that an identifiable actor (or actors) created something new. With development as an invention, it is natural, even necessary, to identify an inventor, someone like Harry Truman. As Ekbladh observed, it is also satisfying to be able to name a “simple and easily definable takeoff point” for an important historical phenomenon—hence January 20, 1949. The ideological reasons for Post-Development thinkers to assign agency to the United States or “the West” are understandable, if debatable. Their continuing insistence on Truman’s speech as the moment of development’s invention, after almost 30 years of research on development history, is not.

An interest in how development is spoken about has been an early and continuing feature of development history, and for that speeches are a potential tool. However, a more careful analysis of those speeches than has so far been provided by Post-Developmentalists is necessary. Rist drew attention to the performative aspect of discourse, which is an immediately evident characteristic of a speech, but did not integrate this into discourse analysis. Attention to a speech’s context and reception are equally important, as are the speaker’s intentions, all things which the Post-Development outline of history did not provide. The implementation of ideas in a speech and the resources committed to that implementation are also crucial. They point to the way that speeches and texts are yoked

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149 For example, Emmanuel Akyeampong et al., eds., *Africa’s Development in Historical Perspective* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Bahru Zewde, *Pioneers of Change in Ethiopia: The Reformist Intellectuals of the Early Twentieth Century* (Oxford: James Currey, 2002).


together with heterogenous elements, both physical and social, to give effect to
discourse.¹⁵³

Historians of development should also look at different types of speeches, not just ones delivered on special occasions. Workaday speeches by Clare Short, Eveline Herfkens, Hilde Johnson, and Heidemarie Wieczorek-Zeul played an important role in reviving and reforming development aid in the late 1990s, for example.¹⁵⁴ It is also essential to look at a wider range of speakers, not least because this choice implies assumptions about agency in history and positions vis-à-vis development theory. As this paper itself illustrates, it is not easy to move beyond the speeches most easily accessible to historians—those made by powerful men and those made in European languages.

¹⁵⁴ These four women were cabinet ministers with responsibility for international development in the U.K., the Netherlands, Norway, and Germany respectively. Their work is described in Constantine Michalopoulos, Ending Global Poverty: Four Women’s Noble Conspiracy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).