

**Jacob Tropp**

**Native American Administration and the Making of International Development Expertise, 1935–1965**

This project introduces revealing, but generally neglected, undercurrents running throughout the beginning of the global “development” era in the mid-twentieth century: the important connections between Western development interventions among “Third World” countries and Native American populations in the United States. One of my goals is to bridge traditionally segregated geographical and historical fields. For scholars in Native American Studies, as well as those studying environmental and development histories, in particular colonial and post-colonial settings, this research provides new ways of understanding the tangible links between the experiences of native peoples in the US and those of the rural poor globally. For scholars focusing on the evolution of environmental and developmental paradigms and philosophies, this work broadens our approach to the transnational intellectual networks and contexts that helped shape international development’s ascendance in the twentieth century. Finally, for historians of American foreign relations and policy, this project illuminates some of the often under-represented international dimensions and impacts of US governmental relations with its own colonial populations in the twentieth century.

My research examines these transnational connections through various historical trajectories. Beginning in the 1930s, as the United States government implemented various New Deal agrarian programs, American officials increasingly engaged in dialogues about resource development planning with colleagues overseas, particularly with Great Britain and its colonial territories in Africa, South Asia, and beyond. As colonial officers from across the British Empire participated in study tours to learn firsthand how the United States grappled with mounting soil erosion problems, the Navajo and neighboring Indian reservations of the Southwest—the sites of some of the earliest projects undertaken by the U.S. Soil Conservation Service—were often routine stopping points. Looking beyond the technical insights American environmental managers shared during these study tours, my research explores how particular individuals in the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) and foreign visitors also exchanged what they viewed as “expertise” in restructuring the environmental practices and landscapes of their respective colonial populations.

Another broad direction of the project examines the overseas expansion of Indian Affairs development “expertise” during and immediately after World War II, deepening our understanding of the networks connecting America’s enduring colonial situation at home with its broadening involvement in an increasingly post-colonial “Third World.” My research traces the impact of a number of BIA personnel who moved directly from managing Native American social and environmental development projects into American technical assistance programs across Africa, Asia, and Latin America, and in the process influenced the transnational production of development “expertise.” Moreover, as part of these American programs, growing numbers of foreign development officers and technical trainees from across the “developing” world engaged in various United States study tours in the late 1940s and early 1950s that often involved extensive “hands-on” investigations of social and environmental conditions on Native

American reservations. Through these case studies, I hope to discern how Indian Affairs and visiting foreign officials collectively compared the challenges of Native American developmental predicaments and those across the globe.

Finally, I examine the flow of international development knowledge gained in the 1950s back into U.S. government officials' design of Native American development plans in the early 1960s. During the tenure of presidents Kennedy and Johnson, policy-makers initiated deeper development efforts for reservations than ever before and actively enlisted into the BIA key personnel with "expertise" in development management in the "Third World." Officials' approaches to and prescriptions for natural resource use and development financing on reservations reveal how American development thinking in this formative period was often the complex product of both transnational and intranational experience with managing "foreign" peoples.