
by Robert Lekachman

In the Western world equality of opportunity is a shared value of enormous force, arising alike from the Christian heritage and the ideals of the Enlightenment. Gunnar Myrdal's classic examination of racial discrimination in this country, An American Dilemma, stressed the tension between this ideal and its contradiction by our day-to-day treatment of Negro citizens. In much the same way, Myrdal points out challengingly, the poverty of the underdeveloped nations is an affront to the values of the rich nations, the lucky one-sixth of the globe's population.

It is one of the theses of this brilliantly-argued book that the rich and the fortunate defend themselves against the implications of their own values. They defend themselves in the first place by refusing to make genuine sacrifices in the interests of equality. As Myrdal coldly reminds us, the rich countries and the international agencies which they dominate have made the smallest of token contributions of capital to the underdeveloped lands, have persisted in refusing to control the industrial cartels which raise the prices of the capital goods and concentrate on protecting the poor nations against the prices of the raw materials which are the major source of their import incomes.

Other defenses are intellectual. Much of the advice which is so freely offered our needy neighbors is founded upon a mistaken analogy and an inapplicable theory. The theory is the classical doctrine of laissez-faire, with all its implications that economic progress is the consequence of the free movement of men and resources between occupations and between countries. From this theory, every developed nation—including the United States—has long since departed as far as its own affairs are concerned. As a guide to the action of the poor, it can lead only to disaster. Although many economists would dissent, Myrdal's case demands a lot of answering. As for the tempting analogy to the Industrial Revolution, Myrdal disposes of it cogently:

"The economic level at which they [the poor nations] start is in most cases much lower. The relationship between population and resources is usually much more unfavorable and the population trends more dynamic and dangerous. They do not have at their disposal an international capital market as the now-developed countries had in their time, nor the outlets for emigration. They have not inherited the traditions of rationality and the rule of law which were so important in the earlier history of the now-developed countries.

"And they are late-comers: they have not the opportunity, as the now-developed countries had, to advance as industrial islands in a surrounding world of backward nations which they could exploit as markets for manufactured goods and as sources of raw materials and for this purpose even keep in colonial bondage."

A second intellectual resource is a revived Malthusianism. Unfortunately, it is all too plausible to suggest that development gains will be dissipated by the rapidity of population growth. As a result of the differential impact of science, it has become a good deal easier to diminish death rates and increase fertility rates than it has been to produce the goods and services which make life tolerable. In the nineteenth century, an easy English inference from the regrettable tendency of the poor to multiply in number was the proposition that it was their own fault. From this conclusion, it was equally easy to reason that helping the poor was useless as a means of improving their lot, and harmful to their moral characters into the bargain. In the Western world today, there is more than a trace of similar attitudes toward poor nations. Standards of life in some of them have actually dropped in the last decade. Will not any conceivable measure of assistance simply be lost in the sea of humanity which it will help to conjure up?

Myrdal does not leave many shreds of Western complacency. But what are his own remedies? They are both debatable and iconoclastic. First, he advocates more nationalism. Only as the poorer nations develop brotherhood within themselves is it possible to conceive a movement toward one world. On their way to human brotherhood, the underdeveloped countries must pass through nationalism.

Second, Myrdal advises the poor nations to avoid free trade and concentrate on protecting their fragile beginnings of economic growth. Free trade, says Myrdal, damages young nations and leads to a cumulative downward drift of their economics.

Third, he insists upon the absolute necessity of state planning. Judged by the calculus of profit and loss, there are precious few opportunities for investment in the poor lands. Only the state can create the facilities, provide the education, construct the network of roads and communications, and encourage the training and attitudes which—in time—will make investment profitable. Oddly enough, opportunities for private
The Meaning of Nasserism


If all the events that have been attributed to the nefarious designs of Gamal Abdul Nasser during the past few years by some sections of the Western press were really the result of his own volition, there is little doubt that he is one of the most important statesmen alive today. With the resources of an ignorant, poverty-stricken and disease-ridden people, with the all-too-present remnants of a long era of foreign control, with few of the trappings of modern state power—a potent army, an experienced bureaucracy, wealth and prestige—Nasser has mobilized the forces available to him to become the most effective leader of the Arab peoples in a millennium.

Yet, he has not accomplished many of his political aims, and much that is supposed to have resulted from his scheming has occurred more for the reasons that made him influential than because of his own designs. As Mr. Wynn points out in his final chapter, the use of the word "Nasserism" to imply that the Egyptian dictator originated the movement, or that it depends on him, is totally false. Nasserism is nothing more than the yearning, transformed into action, of the Arabs for independence and dignity. This yearning, taking the form of anti-colonialism, the desire by the Arab peoples for independence, dignity and social justice, was neither originated by Nasser nor would it die were he to lose power.

The position that Nasser has attained (and it is certainly a consequential one) results from the simple fact that he seized the initiative on Suez, the one political issue that would give him leadership of the area from Casablanca to the Persian Gulf. Yet, despite the wide swath that Nasser has cut, Mr. Wynn's book is the first effort by a knowledgeable authority to analyze without rancor just exactly what Nasser has been able to achieve, and what he has failed to accomplish. This book is certainly not perfect either as a history of Egypt since July 23, 1952, nor as an analysis of the motivations and forces that have brought Nasser to the point he has reached; but it goes sufficiently far in both directions to be a work of considerable importance for anyone who wishes to have an educated view of the man or the problems of the Middle East, problems that have already brought the world perilously close to the most destructive war imaginable.

W.P.