

Books

On Spitting Against the Wind

John Naughton

War," as C.E. Montague once observed, "hath no fury like a noncombatant." The war against world hunger, such as it is, is no exception, except that it has more noncombatants than any other war in history. And more, many more, casualties. We don't know with any degree of accuracy how many people die of hunger every day, or how many more are grossly undernourished and malnourished. But we do know for sure that they are a majority of the world's population and that their numbers are increasing fast. And we also know that they are distributed unevenly over the surface of the globe, that they are concentrated in what we euphemistically call the Underdeveloped Countries, and that in these areas at least 20 per cent of the population is undernourished and up to 60 per cent is malnourished. And one thing more we know: Every time there is a drought in the Sahel, every time the world price of wheat increases in the futures markets, every time a harvest fails in Bihar, these grim percentages and the totals on which they are calculated rise.

I write as an undistinguished noncombatant in the war against world hunger. Like most academics in my own fair land I feel vaguely that I am overworked and underpaid. Being also a liberal, I feel slightly guilty about complaining—so I don't. The truth is that by the standards of my own society I am moderately well off. I have a house and a mortgage and a car. And I can afford to eat, to have meat and fruit and vegetables, a balanced diet. By the standards of the overwhelming mass of mankind, therefore, I am richer than Croesus.

My riches sometimes bother me. Being a liberal, as I say, I am only a partial hypocrite, not a complete one. There are chinks in my emotional and intellectual armor; through them I sometimes see the shadowy faces of the Third World's starving kids. They come into focus only intermittently, but always suddenly; often when leafing through a glossy color magazine, looking at ads for Campari, microwave ovens, electric toothbrushes, I turn a page and there they are. Brought to me courtesy of some of the world's most gifted photographers, I see a kid, younger than my own son, his belly swollen like a

balloon, tiny legs emaciated, limbs like knitting pins, scrabbling in the dirt for something, anything, to eat. Like a hen on my grandparents' farm, only with less chance of success.

My reaction is always the same: a mixture of disbelief, shame, guilt, and horror. I wish the kid would go away, wish that he were somehow as ephemeral as the consumer durables on the previous page. But he can't and he isn't. In the end I always dodge the problem he poses by mentally shutting him out, by making resolutions to be more concerned. I sometimes salve my conscience by sending a check to Oxfam, by signing petitions, and by all the other pathetic, ineffectual gestures of my liberal creed.

There was a time, not so very long ago, when many of us thought that the problem of underdevelopment could be solved by goodwill, money, organization, and large helpings of sweetness and light. Indeed, to some extent this was the idea which informed Marshall Plan aid, just as, a century earlier, it had helped to determine the attitudes of the Victorian middle classes to the poor of England. Like most attractive ideas, Marshall-type assistance was then taken out of context and flogged to death without much recognition of the fact that what was good for Germany and General Motors might not be appropriate for Asia or, for that matter, Latin America. Not surprisingly, even with optional extras like land reform added on, development aid along Marshall Plan lines was at best only partially successful in the Third World; at worst, when allied with the operations of multinational corporations, it has proved disastrous.

But if the cure of Marshall-type aid turns out to be worse than the disease of underdevelopment, what then? We don't have a complete answer; but from the work and experience of thousands of people we are beginning to get some idea of what the problem really is. And the picture that is slowly emerging is a profoundly disturbing one.

The picture is disturbing because it shows that underdevelopment is a systemic phenomenon. To a large extent it can be explained, analyzed, understood, described, and predicted. It has causes and effects. The fact that most of the nations of the world are poor cannot be ascribed entirely to mere historical accident which, in the fullness of time, will be duly rectified. On the contrary. As Gunnar Myrdal and others have pointed out, countries are underdeveloped because the interactions of the world economy and the internal dynamics of their own societies work out that way. For many laymen, myself included, it was Myrdal's magnificent book, *Asian Drama*, which slipped the pieces of the underdeveloped jigsaw into place. But while *Asian Drama* provided the material for many an intellectual's con-

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version, it never looked as if it could provide a springboard or a platform for political action. It was too cold, too academically respectable, for that.

Paul and Arthur Simon's *The Politics of World Hunger* (Harper's Magazine Press; 249 pp.; \$8.95) is aimed at filling the gap between analysis and action Myrdal highlighted but didn't fill. It is an unashamedly political book, designed to act as a manifesto for a grassroots political campaign in the United States against world hunger. It suffers from all the defects of the manifesto genre: It is overwritten, glib, and breathless in some places; in others it uses bland generalizations to ride roughshod over inconsistencies and contradictions. It comes complete with the usual platitudinous, multi-purpose accolade from Senators Edward Kennedy and Adlai Stevenson III. But unlike most political documents there is a ring of sincerity about it that must strike a response from even the most cynical reader.

The Simon brothers begin with a brief review of global poverty as it obtained at the beginning of this decade. They present the picture in a calm, low-key manner, with a minimum of abstract statistics or emotive breast-beating. They give some of the available estimates of hunger and nourishment, and describe the effects of population growth in some detail. They also make the obvious but necessary point that the hunger and undernourishment so manifest everywhere in the Third World are only a symptom of a much deeper problem, i.e., the problem of world poverty. Food parcels, in other words, are not enough. It's an apt reminder to people like me who try to discharge their moral obligations by subscribing to disaster funds.

The second section of *The Politics of World Hunger* (dramatically and possibly mistakenly labeled "The Way Out") discusses some possible approaches to the problem of underdevelopment and is, in my opinion, the best part of the book. It contains a lucid exposition of the internal and external obstacles which hinder the development efforts of the poor countries, and follows this with a discussion of the main policy lines which might help to bridge the ever widening gap between them and us. The Simons take the unremarkable view that successful agricultural and industrial development constitute the twin keys to the problem, but add a strong proviso that the two should proceed in parallel and be linked much more intimately than they have been.

Section 2 then goes on to describe how world trade locks the underdeveloped countries into a losing deal (a far cry from the assumptions of classical economists about the equalizing influence of free trade). The section also discusses the problems of direct economic assistance and of our current obsession with pollution control (which simply means that the poor nations are being asked to bear costs their

rich counterparts didn't pay while *they* were developing).

Given that the development "problem" has so many facets, it would be surprising if attempts at solving it did not differ widely. And so indeed they do, ranging from the hard-line capitalist model of Japan, through mixed cases like that of India and Chile, the full-blown socialist attempts like that of China. Perhaps the most sobering thought to emerge from the Simons' survey of these very different approaches is the fact that, of all the nations on earth, China apparently is the only one which seems to have eliminated *hunger*—at least so far as we can now tell. The Simons then turn to U.S. policy. They begin with a gloomy premise, an "ugly truth":

The United States is not seriously trying to help the human race overcome hunger and poverty. We have no vision for joining with poor countries to arrange a more livable world. Instead we let them slip toward a situation in which unmanageable conditions increasingly threaten.

This collapse of concern has, they argue, been accompanied (and perhaps caused) by the growth of U.S. military power and commitments on a global scale. It is partly the old question of guns or butter, missiles or blankets; to put it crudely, it is partly a resource-allocation problem. But it is also a question of *will*. It is no accident that the United States was generous with aid when those in need were Germans, Italians, Greeks—people with sons and daughters and grandchildren in the New World. But today those in need are Peruvian or Indian or Indonesian and they have no relatives in the United States to lobby on their behalf. The Simons are convinced that the current mood of American isolationism is a temporary aberration and that the traditional generosity of their fellow citizens will reassert itself in time, given a little prodding. As an outsider I must confess to having my doubts.

Either way, the fact still remains that the fate of the poor nations in the next decade will be crucially dependent on U.S. aid policy. So what do the Simons think the U.S. should do? Basically they see three reforms as essential. First, barriers to free trade should be removed and the disadvantageous trading position of many underdeveloped countries overcome—especially those which depend on exports of certain primary products. Second, they think that a generous trading policy must be coupled with a thorough domestic adjustment program to help cope with the competitive and other side-effects of a liberalization of trade. Third, and most surprising, the Simons think that the level of American investment abroad must be *stepped up* in order to return profits which help to offset trade deficits resulting from a generous trade policy. This last recommendation is unlikely to commend itself to the large number of people who see U.S. overseas investment as a prime

causal factor in the long chain of underdevelopment.

As far as direct economic aid goes, the Simons propose a number of urgent detailed reforms, among them the following: Economic aid should be separated from military assistance in the U.S. National Accounts and calculated accurately for the public; economic aid should be decoupled from domestic and international politics; better criteria for recipients of aid should be devised; and, last but not least, *more aid should be provided*, adopting 1 per cent of GNP, honestly calculated and excluding military assistance, as a target.

Having read this book twice, trying to assess it, I find myself still rather ambivalent. On the one hand the book is obviously a valuable contribution to the only "just" war we are likely to see this century, the war on world poverty. In addition, I like its straightforward, unpretentious style and its freedom from dogma. On the other hand I have to confess that I found it confused and confusing in some places and somewhat naive in others.

The book is also confusing in its failure to make any clear distinction between the symptom, hunger, and the underlying disease, world poverty. To that extent a better title might have been "The Politics of World Poverty." Given that the Simons adopt a reformist stance, it is surprising that they do not

devote more attention to the short-term policies needed to avert the critical world food shortage that many people are now predicting for 1976 and 1977. It is arguable that any reformist tract worthy of the name should at least outline the methods of buying time that remain open to us while more far-reaching and permanent arrangements are negotiated.

But even if we assume that a concentrated attack on world poverty could succeed within the framework of an international economic system that is predominantly capitalist, there is still the problem of mustering the political will to make such an effort possible. The Simons clearly believe that a grass-roots political movement that pushed for global development could now take root and flourish in the United States. Again, I can't really judge from here, since I subscribe to the view that anyone who thinks he understands American politics has been misinformed. But I have my doubts. After all, to get the average voter sufficiently interested in the subject to constitute a political force would require quite an upheaval in traditional attitudes and behavior. And it seems to me that a political movement dedicated to bringing about that kind of radical change will be spending a great deal of its time, energy, and resources simply spitting against the wind. But we have to try. We owe it to that starving child whose photograph I keep seeing.

Engels, Manchester, and the Working Class by Steven Marcus

(Random House; 271 pp.; \$8.95)

Wittgenstein's Vienna by Allan Janik and Stephen Toulmin

(Simon & Schuster; 314 pp.; \$8.95/3.95)

Martin Green

The similarity between these two books is made clear in their titles. Both deal with a single writer, but also with the city he lived in; they deal with one of his books at length; and with the period, of about twenty years, which led up to that book's writing. Marcus deals with Manchester and with 1835-1850 in England, and to some degree in Europe. Janik and Toulmin deal with Vienna and with 1890 to 1910 in Central Europe. Marcus devotes 118 of his

256 pages of text to *The Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844*, Janik and Toulmin devote 45 out of 275 pages to *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*.

The authors of both books are highly self-conscious about choosing "fourfold subjects" to study, and thus breaking down scholarly barriers and invading areas in which they are not specialists. Janik and Toulmin defend their procedures as made necessary by the close inter-

connection in their Vienna between intellectuals working in fields as remote from each other now as music, philosophy, physics, and political journalism. Marcus justifies his procedures as deriving from a bold belief that literature and literary criticism have cognitive value, and so can cooperate with history, economics, sociology. The length at which they defend themselves and the bravery of their defiance in fact seem a bit absurd in both books. There is practically no *principled* resistance to "breaking down disciplinary barriers"—the principle is all on the other side in that battle. In the corridors of the authors' English and Philosophy departments perhaps petty envy and parochial jealousy still drape their dwarfishness in scholarly togas. But out here in the sunlight, where books are read, all the praise and attention go to books like these, and have done so for a long time. What deserves our admiration is not their rebellious project but the quantities of hard