

Lewis for the 21st Century¹

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Professor Sir William Arthur Lewis was a St Lucia Island Scholar of 1932 at age 17, the first West Indian to take First Class Honours at the London School of Economics and a PhD in Industrial Economics at age 25. He was appointed first black faculty member at the L.S.E., first black Professor of economics at a British University at the age of 33, first West Indian Principal of the University College of the West Indies and first Vice Chancellor of the University of the West Indies. He was also first President of the Caribbean Development Bank, first West Indian Nobel Laureate, recipient of 29 honorary degrees and of other awards too numerous to mention.

The volume and the range of Sir Arthur's scholarship over a period of approximately 50 years are, to use a cliché, mind-boggling. At the time of his Nobel he acknowledged publication of 'ten books and about 80 other pieces' (Lewis 1994: I). A collection of his papers published in 1994 by this Institute runs into three massive volumes, each about three inches thick, with a total of 109 items whose wide subject matter show the reach of his mind and interests. There are ten papers on industrial economics, twelve on world trade, eight on development planning, twelve on dual economies and five on agricultural economics. On the economics of particular regions in the developing world we find seven on Africa, two on Asia, and five on the Caribbean. Other categories reflect Sir Arthur's engagement with the topical issues of his day or connected to his administrative work: there are six papers on the subject of race and economic development, six on education and three on politics.

At this point the editor, the late Dr Patrick Emmanuel, to whom we are all indebted for this Herculean effort, appears to have given up on further classification, for 25 items are placed into

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the category “other development issues”, and another eight into a category known as, “various topics’. And all this done before the age of the personal computer and the internet, which have given contemporary researchers access to quantities of information and a capacity to process it that were undreamed of in Lewis’s time.

To all this work Sir Arthur brought an incisiveness of analysis, originality of insight, and lucidity of exposition, at times spiced with an ironic sense of humour, that one can truly say was unequalled among his peers and successors.

We are in awe of such a record, even as, by embracing him as a son of the Caribbean, we seek to share in the pride and prestige of its ownership. I am happy to have played a personal part in the re-naming of the former Institute of Social and Economic Research, upon its merger with the Consortium Graduate School of Social Sciences, as the Sir Arthur Lewis Institute of Social and Economic Studies in 1999.

As we convene in scholarly contemplation of one of his seminal works, we are moved to ask the following questions: what provided the motivation and what was the vision that energised this enormous output? What led Lewis to choose the subjects that he did and what method did he employ in investigating them? And what lessons can be drawn from all this for the challenges we confront today?

Overview of Lewis

Sir Arthur himself would have us believe that his whole career was virtually an accident, or a series of accidents. He says, “I became an economist when I really wanted to be an engineer, became a university teacher because there was nothing else for me to do, and became an applied economist because that was my mentor’s subject. The rest of the story continues in the same vein.” (In Lewis1994: xxxix).

Earlier, his accelerated progress through school is attributed to the fact that as a child he went through a period of illness which kept him at home, and hence was tutored by his own father for several months. The one I like the best is his account of his meteoric rise through the ranks of British academia to be appointed Stanley Jevons Professor of Political Economy at Manchester

University at the age of 33. He says, “My luck held, and I rose rapidly.” Lewis 1980: 2). One is tempted to think that if Sir Arthur could have found a way to attribute his Nobel Prize to ‘luck’, he would have done so!

But there are certain things that stand out about the making of Sir Arthur to which I would like to draw attention. The first of these is that he was an anti-imperialist and a nationalist. He lived during the time of transition from a dying colonial order to a new era of decolonisation and national independence.

He recalls, as one of the most significant events of his childhood, his father taking him to a meeting of the local branch of the Marcus Garvey association at the age of seven. He knew colonial racism at first hand, for the reason that he could not realise his ambition to become an engineer because of the colour bar that the British Government imposed in its colonies (Lewis 1980: 2). After graduation, even as he made his academic name in the field of industrial economics, he was doing his own research on the West Indian peasantry and the West Indian labour movement, meeting with ‘fellow anti-imperialists from all over the world’, and meticulously researching the economic practices of the British colonial empire.

But his was not an anti-imperialism of bitterness or of hate. It was rather, one of self-confidence and self-responsibility. Lewis grew up in the knowledge, instilled by his mother, that ‘anything they can do, we can do’. As a lecturer to colonial students in London in the 1940s, he challenged them to shift from criticism of colonial rule to focusing on what they would do when they have the responsibility to govern. He tells us that he has ‘always taken it for granted that what matters most to growth is to make the best use of one’s own resources, and that the exterior events are secondary’ (Lewis 1994: xlv)source needs to be cited.

The second thing that stands out is that Lewis was a social democrat and a firm believer in the mixed economy. He had a clear understanding of the limitations of the free market and of the necessity for public intervention when the market failed. He was also firmly opposed to totalitarianism whether of the left or right. He believed in development planning of the indicative type, but not in central planning of the command type. Lewis was a socialist of the Fabian, not the Marxist, variety.

The third thing that stands out is that Lewis regarded himself as an applied economist rather than as an economic theorist. He tells us that when he started his work on industrial organisation, most of the faculty at the L.S.E. were practitioners of neoclassical economics, and “most of the writing...was concerned with elaborating the theory, with turning words into diagrams and diagrams into equations. I was one of a minority engaged in testing the theories against the facts.” (what does this refer to? xxxvii).

And his approach to the teaching of development economics was policy-oriented:

“...the emphasis was heavily on policy. One must therefore have a good idea of the sociological background and also of the political linkages. There are economists who put too much emphasis on prices, forgetting that it may be easier to solve a problem by changing the institutions wherein it is embedded than by changing prices. There are other, structural economists, who avoid the use of prices as a policy instrument because of adverse effects on the distribution and volatility of income. I am usually somewhere in between. One purpose of the book, *The Theory of Economic Growth*, was to give shape to the discussion to ensure that anyone interested in the economics of the problem would find it deployed in all its ramifications” (Lewis 1994: xivi).

These passages make it clear that Lewis’s concern was with the application of economics to the problems of public policy, that he was firmly of the view that this required taking account of non-economic variables, and that he was, if anything, theoretically eclectic. In fact his analysis of development problems drew from various theoretical schools, mainly the classical and neo-classical, but he cannot be identified with any one school, and he tended to use the tools—and even invent them that seemed most appropriate to the problem.

I would like to suggest that it is in the context of his anti-imperialism, his belief in the mixed economy, and his method of Applied Economics, that we can most easily follow the course of his work and draw lessons for the present. As we know he identified three major subject areas of his research: industrial economics, the history of the world economy since the middle of the 19th century and problems of economic development. Industrial economics

For the first ten years or so of his academic career Lewis specialised in industrial economics. His first academic book, which was based on his doctoral thesis, was called *Overhead Costs*. It explored the problem of pricing in industries where average costs exceed marginal costs. I am pretty sure that most people in the Caribbean have never read it or heard about it. I use this as an example to graduate students who are agonising over their PhD theses. ‘It doesn’t have to be your magnum opus, the one that makes you famous’, I tell them, ‘Have you ever heard of a book called *Overhead Costs* by Arthur Lewis?’-.

But his work on industrial economics signalled his analytical skills in the subject of price formation, later used in his analysis of the terms of trade problem, and his willingness to make the case for public intervention.

History of the world economy

His research on the history of the world economy came about because he was asked to teach a course on the history of the inter-war years. The eventual result was a book on the world economy from 1919 to 1939. But the research left him with two unanswered questions that continued to trouble him for years.

One of these was what determined the terms of trade between industrial and primary products, represented by steel and coffee. “The question”, he says, “was central to my life, since my home country was subject to violent swings in agricultural prices that played havoc with attempts to manage the economy with some stability.” (Lewis 1994: xlii). He later returned to this question.

Development economics

Lewis is very clear that his involvement in the subject area of economic development was, as he says, an “off-shoot of his anti-imperialism”. Here he mentions the experience of being taken to a meeting of Marcus Garvey’s UNIA at the age of seven. How Brother Marcus must be smiling in his grave, knowing that he had a hand in the making of the first black Nobel in Economics!

Although he dates the beginning of his career in development economics to the late 1940s, we can see that he had been preparing himself in this subject long before it had even become a subject, by means of study, research and teaching and later through vigorous debates with the colonial authorities over the Moyne Commission Report and the Economic Plan for Jamaica. A stint with the Caribbean Commission, based in Puerto Rico, resulted in his path breaking articles, *Industrial Development in the West Indies*, published in 1949-1950 (Lewis 1949, 1950).

Lewis critiqued the prevailing economic orthodoxy, which held that the West Indies had a comparative advantage in the export of primary products, and should import manufactured goods. He argued that the overpopulation of the islands provided an economic rationale for an industrialisation strategy based on the export of labour intensive manufactures. Lewis's ingenious use of the Ricardian theory of comparative costs and his copious use of statistics to buttress his case demolished his colonial adversaries, and his recommendations became the basis of industrial development policies in the West Indies in the 1950s. The articles established his reputation in development economics, which now became his central professional preoccupation. He began to travel widely in the Third World on advisory missions.

But he continued to be troubled by the question of what determines the relative prices of industrial goods and primary products: why was the price relationship always moving against the latter? There was also a historical question: why had real wages remained constant in Britain during the first 50 years of the industrial revolution while profits and savings had increased?

The model

The answer to both questions, he says, came to him one day in August 1952 while walking down a road in Bangkok. Assume that the supply of labour is not fixed, as in the neo-classical framework, but unlimited, due to population pressure (one suspects that he was surrounded by an army of vendors at the time). This "will keep wages down, producing cheap coffee in the first case and high profits in the second case. The result is a dual (national or world) economy, where one part is a reservoir of cheap labour for the other."(Lewis 1980: 4) Source?

This flash of insight (based, however, on years of study, experience and reflection) became the basis of Lewis's model of economic development with unlimited labour supplies, launching him

on a path that culminated with the award of the Nobel Prize. Its appearance in 1954, in the words of one scholar, "...created a sensation...it placed the emerging field of development economics squarely on the map of the economics profession, providing it with a set of bedrock working theorems... (that) set the field of development economics apart as a distinctive field of study." (Tignor 2004, , 72: 6p. 697).

In the half century since its publication the model has been critiqued, defended, elaborated and refined (including by Lewis himself) and applied to a variety of situations in several books and numerous articles. In a review published in a special issue of the journal of the Manchester School to mark its 50th anniversary, two scholars conclude, "(its) continuing salience is a lasting testimony to the author's extraordinary ability to combine theory and history into a coherent framework that can aid our understanding of the problems of underdevelopment." (Kirkpatrick and Barrientos2004: 688).

Sir Arthur's own account is somewhat more succinct. Writing in 1979, he says that its publication in 1954 "was greeted equally with applause and with cries of outrage. In the succeeding 25 years other scholars have written five books and numerous articles arguing the merits of the thesis, assessing contradictory data, or applying it to solving other problems. The debate continues." (Lewis 1980: 4)

The terms of trade

Of the many aspects of the model which continue to have relevance today, I want to mention only two. One is its treatment of the problem of declining terms of trade between primary commodities and industrial goods.

This problem seems to have worsened considerably since Lewis first wrote on the subject. Studies by UNCTAD show that the real prices of non-fuel primary commodities have been falling steadily since 1960². To give one example; 'Between 1970 and 1997, the cumulative terms of trade losses for non-oil-exporting countries in Sub Saharan Africa amounted to 119 per cent of the regional GDP in 1997...if non-oil exporters in Africa had not suffered from continued terms

² UNCTAD TAD/INF/PR/45; 18/06/02; sourced from the UNCTAD website 11/03/05

of trade losses in the past two decades, the current level of per capita income would have been higher by as much as 50 per cent³.

Further, the problem is now being experienced by exports of labour-intensive manufactured goods from the developing economies. These were the goods that developing countries were encouraged to produce precisely to escape the consequences of dependence on primary commodities.

Studies cited by UNCTAD show a marked deterioration in the manufacturing terms of trade of developing countries in recent decades, one going as far back as 1960⁴. What this means is that the labour-intensive manufactures exported by developing countries have now taken on the same characteristics of their primary commodity exports.

The UNCTAD analysis attributes this to the unregulated employment conditions and the existence of surplus labour that prevail in many developing country exporters of these manufactures. UNCTAD argues that this makes it possible for employers to cut real wages by relocating production from one developing country to another, promoting labour competition between countries, and depressing the prices of these exports relative to manufactured goods with a higher technological content.

The essential mechanism identified by Lewis in his model⁵, which is also present in the UNCTAD analysis, is the availability of cheap labour to the export sector due to low productivity per head in the traditional sector. Lewis, in fact, anticipated the developments analysed by UNCTAD. In a remarkably prescient comment made in 1978, he says "...we must recognise that the opening up of the markets of the industrial countries to imports of light manufactures from the tropics is essentially of the same kind" (as the exports of tropical commodities) "*it is an additional opportunity to sell low-wage labour*" (Lewis 1978: 244, emphasis added). Although he had proposed such a strategy for the West Indies back in 1950, his comments in 1978, to which I shall turn in a moment, make it clear that he regarded this strategy as useful only insofar as it could be a lever of technological change and productivity growth.

³ UNCTAD TD/B/50/CRP.3. 10 October 2003; pp. 4-5. Sourced from the UNCTAD website 11/03/05

⁴ UNCTAD Trade and Development Report, 2002; pp. 119-120.

⁵ Lewis's analysis was elaborated in his Wicksell lecture in 1969. It is cast formally in terms of the factorial terms of trade.

In passing we might note that there is even talk these days of 'commodity tourism'. This is where an undifferentiated tourist product--sun, sea, and sand--is offered by many suppliers under conditions that encourage over-investment and excess capacity, leading to price discounting. Tourism too, can behave like primary commodities and experience declining terms of trade.

In line with Lewis's views, it is now generally agreed that the answer to the 'commodification' of manufactured goods and services is the upgrading of technology and product quality, product innovation and product differentiation, and the export of knowledge-intensive and skill-intensive goods and services; and that this points to the imperative of investment in quality education and training to equip the mass of the labour force, for government and private sector investment in scientific and technological research and development, and for an efficient and pro-active state in partnership with the private sector.

The agricultural revolution

Linked to this question is the importance Lewis gave to effecting an agricultural revolution in developing economies. By raising the productivity of domestic food production, the supply price of labour to the commodity sector would increase. This would counter the tendency for declining terms of trade, raise rural incomes, creating a market for the goods produced by the industrial sector and facilitating all-round improvements in living standards.

Lewis regarded the agricultural revolution in developing countries as equally important to the industrial revolution. In his 1950 article on West Indian industrialisation he was at pains to point out that industrial and agricultural development in the region were not alternatives but had to proceed in tandem with one another. Unfortunately, governments in the Caribbean and in many parts of the developing world have often failed to appreciate this simple truth. Everywhere today we are seeing the results of decades of neglect of the domestic agricultural sector, in the form of rural poverty, rural-urban migration and the growth of urban mega-cities with the attendant social pathologies.

Lewis's legacy calls on us to redress the imbalance by raising the return to agricultural activity, by making the conditions of rural life more attractive, by investing in human and physical capital for the agricultural sector and by providing the other kinds of government support needed.

Theory of Economic Growth

Lewis's *Theory of Economic Growth* was published the year after his article on Unlimited Labour Supplies, when the controversy over the model had just begun to rage. As a result I believe the book did not receive the attention it deserves. There was also the fact that the 1954 model presented a single, elegant proposition with which economists could easily deal. (Economists, it has been said, are in love with models.) Lewis, it seems, had managed to overshadow himself.

The book treated growth as a many-sided process. Its scope is vast, with chapters on The Will to Economize, Economic Institutions, Knowledge, Capital, Population and Resources, and Government; each chapter consisting of several sections and sub-sections. The chapter Economic Institutions, for instance, has sections on The Right to Reward, Trade and Specialization, Economic Freedom, Cases of institutions (such as religion), and Institutional Change.

Lewis acknowledged that the title of the book was misleading, for it suggested that there can be a single theory of economic growth, whereas the factors which determine growth are numerous, each with its own set of theories (Lewis 1955; 5). He apologised for the inevitable superficiality of a book that covered such a wide area, but confessed that it was 'partly irrepressible curiosity and partly the practical needs of contemporary policy-makers' that had driven him to do so (5).

The Theory of Economic Growth remains to this day a tour de force, an enormously useful review of the subjects it covers for the scholar and the policy-maker and a stimulus to further reading and research to any one of them. It teaches us that no one factor is responsible for growth, that no one policy provides the solution, and no one theory provides the answers. It shows in a variety of ways that while Lewis believed that markets and prices do matter, he always saw them as functioning in a specific institutional, cultural and political setting that conditions economic behaviour.

The multi-dimensional and theoretically eclectic approach of this book stands in direct contrast to the claims to universal applicability of neo-classical economics and its derivative, neo-liberal economic policies, popularly known as the Washington Consensus, that established dominance over the economics profession in the 1980s.

May I suggest that no student of economics at the University of the West Indies should graduate without at least some familiarity with this book, as well as with the celebrated model; and that every graduate student in economics should have a critical knowledge of both in some detail. It is not that these are biblical texts. It is rather that they are a vital part of our intellectual heritage as Caribbean people.

Growth and Fluctuations

Earlier I had mentioned that Lewis's work on the history of the world economy had left him with two unanswered questions, one of which he addressed in his model. The other question was addressed in his 1978 book, *Growth and Fluctuations*. Some thirty years had elapsed since the question had first occurred to him, during which time Lewis had obviously been extremely busy.

I also mention this to graduate students, not to suggest that they need to take as long to complete a thesis, but as an example that all interesting and original work is driven by intellectual curiosity; the wish to find the answer to a burning question; the search, so to speak, to prove the existence of a 'Black Swan'.

The question that Lewis addressed in *Growth and Fluctuations* was whether the Great Depression of the 1930s was 'a unique event that had never happened before' or 'merely one of series'. The answer he came up with was 'both yes and no' (Lewis 1994: xliii). This is not as interesting as other aspects of the book. There is his adoption of the characterisation of the world economy as consisting of 'core' and 'periphery' regions and his analysis of the development trajectories of different cores and peripheries. There are his responses to the thesis that the development of the rich countries has created the underdevelopment of the poor countries and that imperialism was the cause of underdevelopment; and there is his treatment of the relationship between trade and growth.

He shows that that some regions of the periphery developed while others did not, and why. He also showed that colonial policies and their impact varied widely as between coloniser and colonised and therefore how difficult it is to generalise the effects of imperialism on development. His overall conclusions reinforced the thesis that the ultimate cause of the poverty of tropical countries is the low productivity of their food farmers; and as regards trade and growth “...the long run engine of growth is technological change, and that trade cannot substitute for this except in the initial period of laying development foundations”. (Lewis 1978: 244-245).

The meticulous analysis in this book and in other related articles by Lewis, provide a needed antidote to the assumptions that underlie the current pressures towards global trade liberalization, assumptions that trade liberalization and trade expansion are always--and necessarily--good for development. Lewis re-focuses the matter on technological change and the growth of output per head. His argument is not ideological, but historical and empirical.

Lewis’s conclusions have been recently corroborated within the framework of the human development approach. The UNDP’s path breaking report, *Making Global Trade Work for People* (2003) has shown convincingly that the presumed links between trade liberalization, economic growth and human development do not necessarily hold, and may even be perverse. The thrust of Lewis’s conclusions, which have been amplified in the UNDP Report, is that trade expansion is not an end in itself, but must be made to serve the ends of development, and that to do so there must be strategic and targeted policy interventions; to raise productivity in the case of one, to promote human development in the case of the other.

This of course runs against the current orthodoxy. As Professor Ha-Joon Chang showed in his book *Kicking Away the Ladder*, many of the interventionist practices that the advanced industrial countries adopted at an earlier stage of their development, aimed at ensuring that trade served the ends of industrialisation, these very countries now seek to prevent developing countries from adopting through the WTO agreement and regional trade agreements like the FTAA. This is why the last UNCTAD Conference asserted the necessity for developing countries to preserve ‘policy space’ in the design of trade agreements.

Industrialisation

I want now to turn, briefly, to some comments on Lewis's specific contributions to thinking and policy on West Indian development. I see these as falling under three main heads: industrialisation, education and integration.

The industrialisation strategy he outlined in 1950 proposed the export of labour intensive manufactures, for which foreign investment would be invited to come into the region; hence the label, later coined by New World economists, "Industrialisation by Invitation".

By the 1960s Lewis had concluded that the upward push in manufacturing wages resulting from the demonstration effect of a high wage sector (bauxite in Jamaica, petroleum in Trinidad) was undermining whatever chance of success his proposed strategy might have had. His advocacy of an incomes policy to keep wages in line with productivity, and later of devaluation, followed from this.

The New World Group and the plantation economy theorists argued that foreign capital in the form of multinational corporations was not part of the solution, but part of the problem. Lewis did not agree, as his attitude to foreign capital was highly eclectic—it was fine, provided that the conditions were right. This is an ongoing debate⁶. In any case, for the reasons already discussed, it seems unlikely that Lewis in 2005 would be advocating the same industrialisation strategy that he did in 1950.

Education

On education, Lewis tells us that he "never joined the bandwagon for spending unlimited sums on higher education, partly because Egypt and India made me sceptical as to absorptive capacity and, also because a sense of responsibility, during my term as Vice Chancellor of the University of the West Indies, made me reluctant to ask the minister of finance for one cent more than I could

⁶ See my other article in this volume, "W.A. Lewis, the Plantation School and Dependency: An Interpretation"

justify. So my articles on education used the manpower budgeting approach”(Lewis 1994: xlviii)source?.

My own sense is that this approach has since gone out fashion, and that the current thinking is that expansion of higher education is a necessity to maintaining competitiveness in the age of global market liberalisation.

Regional integration

Arthur Lewis was a nationalist, but he was also a regionalist; indeed he was a regionalist *because* of his nationalism. He saw clearly that the small states of the West Indies would find it easier to cope with the wider world as part of a single federated entity. Insular independence would be a sham, virtually a contradiction in terms.

One of the sadder episodes of his distinguished career arose out of his attempt to broker a federation of the eight remaining members of the original West Indian Federation following the withdrawal of Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago, an attempt that brought him much frustration and ultimately, failure and disappointment. The *Agony of the Eight*, the title of his book on the subject, was also the agony of Sir Arthur.

Today, we are still trying to complete the customs union for which Sir Arthur called in 1950, and to create the economic substance of the kind of regional unity for which he and others of his generation worked so tirelessly. I am referring, of course, to the Caricom Single Market and Economy (CSME). The progress of this project, first launched in 1989, has been slow and uneven and subject to several set-backs. Yet the direction and the forward movement are clear.

Were he with us today, Sir Arthur would probably be subjecting the CSME to the kind of incisive and lucid economic analysis that made him famous. Almost certainly, he would have pointed out that the small internal market, even of an integrated region, would be insufficient to support production on an efficient scale, because this is what he did in 1950 and it is even truer today. He might well have argued that the real economic justification for the CSME would have to be its role in facilitating the expansion of extra-regional exports and in stimulating technological change, going on to investigate the conditions that need to prevail for it to work in this way.

As to the politics of its implementation, he might be wondering if we have learnt any lessons from the past. His account of the ‘agony’ shows that West Indian leaders of the time were handicapped by a lack of vision and statesmanship and by reluctance to give up at least some of the illusory powers of island sovereignty in return for acquiring a more meaningful collective regional sovereignty. Without such qualities, completion of the CSME will continue to be elusive.

It would be a fitting testament to the memory of Sir Arthur Lewis if a seamless economic space were created in the Caribbean in time for the next Lewis milestone, whenever that may be.

In conclusion

William Arthur Lewis was anti-imperialist, a nationalist, a regionalist, and a social democrat. He stood for those things, and *then* he was an Applied Economist. His work calls us to place our professional training at the service of our community.

He was profoundly influenced by his mother, widowed with five sons, four of them minors, when Arthur was seven years old, a woman who was ‘unsurpassed in the ways of stretching income, with the highest integrity, unshakable courage, unlimited faith in God.’ (Lewis 1994: xxxv). From her he learnt ‘to make the best of what we have’ (Lewis 1994: 1); and he always “took it for granted that that anything the Europeans can do, we can do” (Lewis 1994: xlix).

By his life and work, Arthur Lewis tells us to take responsibility for the future of our region, and to have supreme confidence in our ability to accomplish.

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