

Poleman, Thomas T.

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● ON CONFERENCES AND THEIR PROCEEDINGS:
I CAN'T BELIEVE I READ THE WHOLE THING

by

Thomas T. Poleman

July 1973

No. 73-16

NEW YORK STATE COLLEGE OF AGRICULTURE AND LIFE SCIENCES
A STATUTORY COLLEGE OF THE STATE UNIVERSITY
CORNELL UNIVERSITY
ITHACA, NEW YORK 14850

DEPARTMENT OF
AGRICULTURAL ECONOMICS
WARREN HALL

25 July 1973

This little essay appeared as a book review in the March 1973 issue of International Development Review, the journal of the Society for International Development. As the book away at which I flail was the proceedings of the 1971 World Conference sponsored by the Society, I have to salute the Society: first for sending the book to me and then for publishing such uncharitable thoughts.


Indeed the Society seems a most civilized body. Directly the review appeared, one of its editors wrote to compare my hatchet job with the 167 pages of Arthur Koestler's The Call Girls. Ignorant of that work, I strained to think of possible linkages between my thoughts on development and Koestler's on the oldest profession. Was it that certain among the practitioners have contrived to make a fascinating subject tedious? Or had it something to do with the demise of labor-intensive employment?

Neither, it turns out. Koestler's call girls work not on their backs but in the seats of trans-oceanic jets: the academics waiting for that "long-distance telephone call from some professional busybody at some foundation or university-- 'sincerely hope you can fit it into your schedule--it will be a privilege to have you with us....'" We all know them; some of us are them.

The book abounds in quotable quotes, all the better since it's us he's laughing at. A new Parkinson's Law: "Foundations have to spend their funds. Sponsors must find projects to sponsor. Program directors must have programs to direct. It's a perpetuum mobile which circulates hot air." Or on titling the conference, choosing participants, or post-cocktail deliberations over what may possibly have been said.

There's even something for the agrarianly inclined. Unhappily there's not much pornography, but anything that can equate a symposium with a field full of cows, "each with a bell round its neck, each tinkling a monologue all for itself," cannot be utterly devoid of redeeming social value.

I commend it to all


Thomas T. Poleman

Andrew E. Rice, Editor
International Development 1971
Development Targets for the 70's: Jobs and Justice
Dobbs Ferry, N.Y.: Oceana Publications
1972, 121 pages, \$6.50

If conferencemanship--the slashing repartee, the concealed yet not concealed yawn, the brash attack on convention, all injected in such a way as to insure your being invited back--has been raised to an art form, the conference organizer and the editor of the proceedings still labor under major handicaps. No matter how carefully they define a theme, delineate sub-topics, and choose participants, they just are not going to get everything they wanted. Some speakers will do them proud, but some, inevitably, will fudge their title and discuss an interesting but unrelated subject, and others will have the effrontery to disagree with the whole business.

Buying a proceedings issue is therefore a speculation; you really do not expect to win them all. That this volume, the proceedings of the 12th World Conference of the Society for International Development, is no exception is all the more unfortunate because it addresses itself to a topic of great immediacy and because, to reduce "nearly three days of discussion, in more than thirty large and small sessions" to 121 pages, the editor clearly labored above and beyond.

"Jobs and Justice: Development Targets for the 70's" sums it up rather neatly, but I would substitute "imperatives" for "targets." It is a commonplace now that rapid growth can be a reality in most developing countries. The limited application of the scientific method to food production has revealed enormous potential for change in agriculture--potential already recognized to exist in the industrial sector. The problem is in implementing change in such a way that it will be labor demanding.

Thus far this objective has proved elusive. The new agricultural systems so far introduced have been capital intensive and highly specific in their applicability, limiting direct income benefits to comparatively few; while, pronouncements about "intermediate technology" notwithstanding, it would seem that industrialization must be capital intensive in order to compete. Two groups of disadvantaged have consequently risen: those bypassed by progress in the countryside and the unemployed of the towns.

How large these groups are is anybody's guess--David Turnham's paper details some of the difficulties in attaching numbers--but a third to a half of the labor force might cover the mark in most countries. What is clear is that their misery may stand in the way of effective programs to limit population growth and also act as a brake on effective demand for further agricultural and industrial growth.

This paradox of poverty amidst progress has come to be generally recognized and it is tidily summarized in David Morse's introductory paper. That growth alone will not suffice warrants continued stressing: just as generals are always ready to fight the last war, so the development establishment would be super-human were a portion of it not applying the remedies of decades past.

What bothers is the shallowness of the solutions offered. Of the six papers (and five summations) which follow Morse, only the one prepared by Mahbub ul Haq breaks new ground. And even he, after noting that "we are assembled here to discuss a problem whose nature and dimensions we simply do not know" and that "it is time that we stand economic theory on its head and see if we get any better results," ultimately disappoints. How his upside-down world would operate is less than clear. Mao is certainly the genius of the age, but does he really "treat the pool of labor as given; [combining it] with the existing capital stock irrespective of how low the productivity of labor and capital may be"?

For the other contributors, where they touch on employment generation, they do so in terms of traditional prescriptions: labor-intensive exports to developed countries (it has always seemed to me that the world market for baskets was overstated, though Haiti, with baseballs and blood, may prove me wrong) and labor-intensive rural revitalization. The latter seems invariably put forth as the only realistic solution, but with, one suspects, minimal conviction. The capital-intensive nature of the Green Revolution aside, who can point to a growth situation in which agriculture's share of the gainfully employed did not fall?

That economic growth should bring in its wake major problems of social stress is inescapable. It happened first when the Neolithic gave rise to the great Classical civilizations and again 200 years ago when enclosure and the New Agriculture ushered in the Industrial Revolution and its attendant problems of poverty, exploitation, and joblessness. What is less certain is whether the developing countries of today must of necessity experience their own Age of Revolution, just as the West did two centuries ago; or whether the unacceptability of conflict can force on the West the role of agent of evolution. In its call for the latter, the Society's conference has weakly sounded an uncertain trumpet. Perhaps it could do no other.

Thomas T. Poleman
Cornell University