

Keith Waddington

I H Smith

Hist. 398R

July 21, 2005

### **An Inspection**

#### **A Review and Brief Analysis of Dr. W Arthur Lewis's "Commonwealth Address"**

Lewis's "Commonwealth Address" is essentially an examination of the motivational forces operative in societies entering into industrialisation, offering comparative analysis that focuses primarily upon the European experience of industrialisation, as well as contemporary conditions and seeking to shed light upon the perils and possibilities of such transitional periods.

Lewis begins by describing the chasm which separates the industrialised nations of Europe and North America from those still underdeveloped. The social peace, passionless politics and harmonious relations between labour and management are common factors of western societies, contrasting conspicuously with the anger of Asia, Africa, the Middle East, Latin America and Caribbean, where divisions of race, religion, language, tribe and class run rampant. Such antagonisms, paradoxically, exist in countries which now claim more wealth than at any time previous.

The trouble and strife of developing nations stems directly, Lewis states, from their very development: it is the forces

unleashed during the early stages of industrialisation which tear apart much of the established social fabric, producing general instability as a new hierarchy and new relationships are formed.

The peace of pre-industrialised societies is maintained by a well established system of inter-relationships with well defined obligations and rights and a hierarchy of authority which maintains status and respect. So long as this system remains in place and unchallenged, relative peace is guaranteed. It is with the advent of industrialisation that this system begins at once to break down, with four new classes: wage earners, capitalists, middle class and professional politicians replacing the previous order. With these new classes comes not merely the new hierarchy, but also the unsettling aspect of new a role and new lifestyle and often geographic and familial dislocation. Accordingly, workers find new and strange employment with new and strange co-workers with perhaps disparate and clashing cultures; capitalists are no longer the moral lepers of more primitive societies, rubbing shoulders with irreligious moneylenders, but person of surprising status and immense power; a rising middle class, placid and complacent, for it holds a monopoly on education and knowing and so enjoys a high standard of living, soon becomes agitated as education becomes more available and their abilities consequently suffer a devaluation.

Beside the instability associated with these new classes, a

general economic disturbance adds tumult to turmoil, for the benefits and profits of industry are not equitably distributed but concentrate in several disparate locus. Where certain wealth does reach the general population, the effect is often relative poverty if not actual poverty--those excluded from the minor bounty find themselves if not worse off, then comparatively so--*comprehendingly* so.<sup>1</sup> The new industries often, according to Lewis, offered higher rates of pay than the older, causing general dissatisfaction of those left behind and establishing a competitive atmosphere where co-operative association had previously existed.

With industrialisation comes the need of high productivity, with the need of high productivity comes the increasing reliance upon machines and labour saving technologies and a decreasing number of actual labourers. Since industry locates itself close to ready resources, towns develop rapidly, enticing rural people in search of work. Soon the labour pool exceeds the labour demand and the unemployed masses begin to foster radical ideas.

Karl Marx, Lewis informs us, ". . . grew up during the early stages of industrialisation . . ." (52) and later recognised all these forces which fostered discontent, failing, however,

---

<sup>1</sup>This process is not particularly an a product of industrialisation but rather one concomitant with rising standards of living and occurred during the Tudor period when agricultural changes profited many but also bypassed others.

to realise that this was a transitional phase, a step towards a better calm capitalist future. Lewis suggests firstly that with a high rate of capital accumulation, unemployment must vanish entirely, with labour shortages the ultimate result. Such labour shortages result in higher rates of pay and ever increasing standards of living. Secondly, economic development means the abandonment of patronage systems, where merit now is the only criteria for advancement. The supplanting of status and affiliation by merit "eliminates the major source of human conflict." Industry then can be seen as promoting equality, for merit means equal opportunity for all irrespective of class. Unions and farmers' co-operatives favour equitable relations and social harmony; tax systems become fair and the poor no longer support the rich; individual rights are respected and justice prevails. The final effect of mature industrialisation within the context of a free capitalist society is to render all citizens members of the middle class: industry requires educated workers and education is equal and universal. Capitalistic Nirvana is attained: a classless society where mutual toleration is epidemic, in which all luxuriate in the dignity provided by industrialisation. Everyone, Lewis tells us, wins, with the single exception of politicians: with life living pleasurable and just, issues fade and their words become mere gasps of redundant and failing rhetoric.

Underdeveloped countries might look forward to all this--and perhaps more. During their prefatory period, however, unrest

necessarily runs rampant. Politicians profit from the jitters created by the sudden and shocking effects of new industrialisation. Authoritarianism offers fast and easy solutions, offering minority groups as objects of sacrifice to the god of bigoted justice.

Lewis points also to the entrenched landowning class in some countries as another source of unrest in industrialising nations. The landowners control of peasants and surfs greatly exceeds that of the capitalist over his workers and may necessitate actual revolution to break his iron grip. Dictatorial capitalists, alternately, because of their limited control, are a much meeker bunch and their reform might be managed without recourse to such drastic measures. "In this respect, the countries of the British Commonwealth are extremely fortunate."(56) Most political parties in these countries are leftist and are dedicated to social progress--as opposed to the tyranny that prevails in many other industrialising lands. Although compromise generally replaces confrontation in the nascent industrialising corners of the British Commonwealth, there does exist, however, a niche here and there of politicians whose own personal prosperity renders them hostile to rapprochement. Such as these are the unwholesome bedfellows of authoritarianist and anti-democrats. The need then is for democratic leaders willing to compromise and respect rather than target minority groups; and it is the morality of the industrialised world which will offer both influence and example to others and allow for a successful

transition from developing to developed.

Politics world wide will gradually be supplanted by more pragmatic administration; the growing middle class will recognise and abide by the philosophy manifest in "traditional values of service, fairness and industry"(60) rather than financial carnality. With "patience and compromise"(60) proxy for "vanity and anger"(60) the capitalist future awaits with justice and dignity for all.

Certainly the immediate response to "Commonwealth Address" is to wonder if W. Arthur Lewis is perhaps related to C.S. Lewis, for the world he describes seems more like Narnia than the one we inhabit. It is only when we note the date of publication--1963--that the pieces of the puzzle begin to tumble into place. The fifties and early sixties were certainly a time of great optimism: with living standards ever increasing; with social inequality seemingly on its way out the back door--with few realising it would shortly return down the chimney, dirtier than ever; with unemployment a word barely employed. "Commonwealth Address" is a product of its time, of optimism unbound and of profound Eurocentrism. If we understand Lewis's optimism in reference to the context of contemporaneity, this does not mean, however, that we should excuse it.

"Industrialisation raises the incomes of all who participate in it,"(50) is itself a peculiar and fantastical notion that Dickens at the very least might question; but it is based also upon strange precepts: new industries pay more than old--

despite the fact that we are later told of available labour outpacing the creation of jobs. In such circumstances we might expect new industries to take full advantage and offer lower wages than industries already established. Another extreme example of Lewis's misplaced optimism is the incredible statement that, "Status has no place in a market economy." We can only hope the owners of Rolls Royce motor cars are not too shaken by the news.

Besides the rosy picture Lewis paints of western societies, which often seems, indeed, more like a veritable rose garden of superlatives and compliments, the "Commonwealth Address" also provokes a certain jocular unease, for Lewis seems to practice a remarkably imbecilic arm-chair anthropology greatly reminiscent of the romantic prattle of Rousseau in his *Origins of Inequality*. In this respect we are told of pre-industrial societies and their social structures, as if there were an archetypal pre-industrial society which describes all others. If Lewis possessed even a smattering of facts instead of a surplus of feelings, possessed even a vague notion of the diverse and complex pre-industrial societies extant, then we might easily expect three quarters of the text to disappear into edited oblivion.

Seriously and strangely at odds with all the peremptory faith in future posterity, there is, nevertheless, a nostalgic quality to the text. "The employee finds himself working with strangers, not colleagues of his choosing . . ." (48) is suggestive by opposition of a bygone rural era when men worked

arm in arm with bosom buddies. Similarly, feudalism is seen as a system resplendent in generous "paternalism" and "protection."

The best we can say, in the final analysis, is that Lewis is quite correct in stating that the initial stages of industrialisation are indeed times of trouble, but this pedestrianism borders upon the redundant. Much like the agricultural revolution that preceded it, industrial revolution causes fundamental changes in society, provoking reaction to reaction. Lewis, taking a stance antipodal to Marx, makes use of Marx's historical methodology, visualising a future which is clear only to the eye of the beholder.