

## **W. Arthur Lewis: A Life in Development Economics**

### **A Review of**

**"W. Arthur Lewis and the Birth of Development Economics" by Robert L. Tignor  
Princeton University Press, 2006**

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W. Arthur Lewis was a remarkable man, and he lived in remarkable times. Born in the West Indies in 1915 at the height of the British Empire, resolved to overcome prevalent racial discrimination through the power of education, he lived through and played his part in the greatest period of decolonization the world has seen. Trained as an economist, he brought the tools of his discipline to bear on colonial and post-colonial development. In the process he helped to create the modern sub-discipline of development economics, winning the Nobel Prize for his contributions. Always an academic, but also always more than an academic, he relished and participated in the application of his ideas to development policy—an activity which gave him pleasure and frustration in equal measure.

Tignor's book attempts to give us the measure of the man in his professional life, with enough insight into personal development to help in this task. He uses Lewis's personal papers, and archival research from around the world, to build up a picture of Lewis at the LSE, in Manchester, at the Colonial Office, in Ghana, in the West Indies, and in Princeton. Lewis comes across as a man of brilliant insight and clear thinking, a man of principle and integrity, but a man of deeply personal outlook and sentiment who rarely showed the world his emotions, and bore the scars of his personal development with quiet dignity while working to ensure that others did not have to suffer the injustices he faced as a young man.

The racial discrimination that Lewis faced in Britain in the interwar years is quite astounding to modern sensibilities. In 1938, when at the age of 23 he was being considered for an appointment at the LSE, the Director wrote to the Board of Governors as follows: "He would therefore not see students individually but in groups. The appointments committee is, as I said, quite unanimous but recognize that the appointment of a coloured man may possibly be open to some criticism. Normally, such appointments do not require the confirmation of the Governors but on this occasion I said that I should before taking any action submit the matter to you." This is only one of many instances highlighted by Tignor. They did not stop Lewis becoming Jevons Professor of Political

Economy at Manchester a decade later, but they shed light not only on Britain at that time but also on Lewis's determination to overcome racial discrimination, for himself and for others, through the power of education and excellence. Unlike other West Indian and African students in London at that time, who were often radicalized to extremes by their experiences, Lewis took a middle-of-the-road path to racial, economic and development issues during the course of his life.

His central contribution to development economics was of course his 1954 model of dualistic development, which he saw as capturing many of the concerns of classical (as opposed to neo-classical) economists. The focus on the rate of saving and investment as the central determinant of development and growth was very much in tune with, and helped to create, the policy environment of the immediate post-war period. The central role of distributional change, indeed, distributional worsening, in generating the surpluses for investment were less remarked upon by many who bought into the Lewis paradigm as a framework for development policy. But Lewis accepted that worsening inequality was an inevitable result of the operation of the process he had outlined. At the same time, in other writing, he emphasized not just physical investment but education as the key to development. These balances and counter-balances in Lewis's thinking and writing are well developed by Tignor. Particularly interesting is the balance Lewis sought between market and state. Tignor highlights how such a centrist view came naturally to one of Lewis's training and temperament, albeit at the cost of criticisms from both ends of the spectrum.

If the LSE formed Lewis as an economist then his experiences at the Colonial Office and in Ghana blooded him in the application of economics to the real, political, world. A significant part of Tignor's book is devoted to the Ghana story, where Lewis went from being a close confidant of Ghana's leader Kwame Nkrumah at Ghana's independence in 1957 to an unbridgeable rift within two years. For his part, Nkrumah, as revealed in letters from Lewis's private papers that are well deployed by Tignor, pleaded that he could not take Lewis's advice on rational economic choices because he had to achieve political balance and momentum. However, Lewis quickly grew disenchanted with Nkrumah's many prestige projects (white elephants, as others might describe them), and became disillusioned with the repression that came to characterize Nkrumah's dealings with his own people. Tignor describes well the process by which Lewis engineered not a resignation but an orderly departure to a new post, because the former would have played into the hands of those who were arguing that African independence had come too soon.

From Ghana, Lewis went on to head the University of the West Indies in the early 1960s, a culmination of his devotion to education and development. Despite the successes—he managed the transformation of the institution from a College to an independent University and became its first Vice Chancellor—one gets a strong sense of disappointments and frustrations from Tignor's account. These stemmed from the roadblocks to political federation within the West Indies, and how the politics of the federation impinged upon the running of an academic institution. Lewis's health suffered badly, and he was relieved to move to a prestigious appointment at Princeton University

in 1963. He stayed at Princeton till his retirement in 1983. These Princeton years were gentler times for him; he was occupied with teaching and research—two of the four publications cited in his Noble prize award in 1979 were published during these twenty years. And yet, even in this time Lewis was involved in some controversy, as his seemingly moderate views on race and associated economic interventions clashed with the more radical tenor of the civil rights era in the US.

Arthur Lewis died in 1991. I had the privilege of interacting with him when I was a Visiting Professor at Princeton in the 1980s. I was in awe of him as an economist, of course. But what impressed most of all was his quiet dignity. His brilliance of mind had mingled with his experiences of the world, which ranged from the scars of racial discrimination in England, through the joy of decolonization, and the triumphs and frustrations of a policy adviser and academic administrator, to the ultimate professional accolade of a Nobel prize in his chosen discipline--a discipline he chose since others were closed to him because of his color. The loss of other disciplines was our gain—we gained the analysis, and the man. Robert Tignor is to be congratulated for this informative and well researched biography of Arthur Lewis—a life in development economics.