1 The Scale of World Poverty

The Third World has reached the end of its age of optimism. In the twenty years after the Second World War, as the countries of Africa and Asia moved, one by one, bloodily or peacefully, to independence, men hoped that with self-government would come prosperity, that development would gradually abolish poverty and malnutrition, and that the new countries would join the old ones, 100 or 150 years later, in progress towards decent living standards for the mass of their people.

It is not easy, in the rapidly curdling atmosphere of the fourth quarter of the twentieth century, to recapture the mood of the fifties and early sixties. Yet it was heady at the time. Recrimination about past relationships between colonial powers and the newly independent states seemed less important than the new start which was being made. Those people in developed countries who cared about the Third World had the comfortable feeling that at last their governments were doing the right thing, that a new era of equity and peace was beginning. And they wanted to help.

As for the leaders of the new nations, many of whom had suffered hardship, humiliation and imprisonment on the road to independence, their excitement was almost tangible. The raising of the new flag, the playing of a new anthem were both an end and a beginning. They might have echoed the lines of Wordsworth at the time of the French Revolution:

Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive, But to be young was very heaven.

As often happens in human affairs, the event has not lived up to the expectation. The wine of freedom has soured, just
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as it did during the French Revolution. This does not mean that independence was not right. But freedom has not brought prosperity. The masses of the Third World, in Asia, Africa and Latin America still exist in poverty. About half of them — 1000 million human beings — live in countries where the per capita income is less than $200 a year.

We are now entering a quarter-century in which the world will face recurrent food crises. Yet perhaps half of these 1000 million poorest people are already hovering on the verge of starvation, and some estimates suggest that 10 million are in imminent danger of death. But how, even, does one know whether such rounded statistics measure the actual perils of the world’s poorest people, when a widespread drought or some other natural disaster, or the failure of a few key crops, in their own countries or in the Soviet Union and China, could kill far more?

Behind this gathering gloom is the fact that about 300 million human beings are either unemployed or have not found sufficiently productive work to maintain life above the poverty line. Before the year 2000, another 1000 million people may be added, by the increase in world population, to this roll-call of the desperate. Providing work for these people is the only way to alleviate the most crushing poverty.

The failure of expectations has produced both despair and anger. Internationally, it has sent the Third World and the rich countries of the West into a downward spiral of recrimination (from which the Communist countries, a little unctuously, exclude themselves). The West is critical of how the developing countries conduct their affairs. Too much creed, say some. Too much greed, others reply. The ruling élites of the Third World are seen as often corrupt, always too little concerned with the gross inequalities within their own societies. In reply, the West is charged with being restrictive in trade, mean in giving aid, and generally obstructive to the progress of the poorer nations.

Within the developing countries, failure in economic progress has produced political instability, frequent coups, a few terrible civil wars, the constant threat that new nations will break up into their constituent tribes, and a steady erosion of the Third World’s infant democracy. As I write,