Introduction: The Study of Socio-economic Development

MACRO-LEVEL STUDIES

The problem of 'under-developed countries' still looms large on the international horizon. The various armed conflicts, which have flared up in recent years in the poorest regions of the world, bear witness to this. The changing terminology applied to the poorest parts of our globe illustrates the change in approach by the advanced countries to their poverty-stricken neighbours. In colonial times and right up to the Second World War, there was talk of 'backward regions' which at once implied a paternalistic approach and a somewhat moral condemnation. But the emergence of a number of new nations in the post-war period led, in the first flush of self-confidence provided by independence, to strong objections to the stigma of backwardness. They then came to be referred to as 'under-developed areas'. In this context Myrdal remarks perceptively that 'the tendency to think and act in a diplomatic manner when dealing with the problem of the under-developed countries has, in the new era of independence, become a new version of the "white man's burden". . . . The common agreement to change over to various euphemistic expressions for the term "under-developed countries" is an indication of this. . . . One such is "developing countries". This term is, of course, illogical' (1971:25), for it implies that the poorest countries are all necessarily involved in the process of economic growth.

To seek to initiate a universal process of economic development, let alone ensure its cumulative growth, is still only wishful thinking. It will take a lot more research and understanding of the importance of socio-political variables in economic growth before we can hope to know enough to introduce in all the societies of the world the process of cumulative development.

1 These and similar figures in brackets throughout the book refer to the Bibliography, p. 265.
The study and planning of economic growth in under-developed countries is generally regarded as the preserve of economists, most of whom still pay no more than lip service to the important role of non-economic variables in development. Myrdal is one of a small though growing number of leading economists who stress the futility of approaching development problems from a purely economic viewpoint. He says explicitly: ‘the non-economic factors, broad attitudes, institutions and productivity consequences of very low levels of living, are of such paramount importance in under-developed countries that they cannot be abstracted from in economic theory and in planning’. Moreover, he goes on to say that ‘the very act of clarifying what should be meant by “economic” problems or “economic” factors must, in fact, imply an analysis that includes all the “non-economic” determinants. From a scientific point of view the only permissible demarcation – the only one that is fully tenable logically – is between relevant and less relevant factors’ (1971:30).

Constructing development models in purely ‘economic’ terms for economies which are not yet industrialised makes them devoid of all reality. Admittedly, all models are abstractions from reality, but they must at least bear some resemblance to real life otherwise they amount to no more than playing an intellectual game. Myrdal’s suggestion that development studies and planning must be all-embracing of social variables, though laudable in itself, is not very helpful either. Unfortunately, social science is still in its infancy and is not yet in a position to advance a general theory of socio-economic development. Significantly, in this context, Myrdal himself complains that other social scientists have never had the courage really to challenge the economists’ main approach, still less to work out an alternative macro-theory to deal with these problems (1971:37).

As yet our understanding of social processes is too limited to allow for general socio-economic theories to be developed on a macro-level. We are only beginning to appreciate the heterogeneous nature of different societies, of sections within them and of individuals within each group. It is relatively easy for social anthropologists or other social scientists to prick holes in the economists’ development bubbles and burst them, but it is much more difficult, in fact it seems still impossible, to suggest all-embracing development theories which may be universally