Lewis’s achievements were extraordinary, but they emerged from a haphazard rather than a planned process, and indeed his career can best be seen as a series of improvisations. Having planned to be an engineer, he became an economist. Having made a success of being an industrial economist, he was then overtaken by the challenge of constructing what at first he called colonial economics and then development economics. Having made a success of development economics, he felt an obligation to give something practical back to the Afro-Caribbean communities in Manchester, Ghana and the West Indies who were not fortunate enough to have the opportunities he had had, and in attempting to do so he got his fingers burnt more than once. Retreating from these bruising experiences, he did not return to development economics, but rather expanded his work on global economic history; in so doing, however, he did not scale the heights he had in the 1950s but was forced to settle for something more modest. The award of the Nobel Prize in 1979 took him by surprise when he thought he had been forgotten, and gave his career an appearance of inevitability that the reality completely lacks.

While Lewis’s work on industrial economics at the LSE gave him the necessary platform, it is a Fabian Society pamphlet written at the age of 24, before the Second World War, Labour in the West Indies (Lewis, 1939) that gave him his vocation. This extraordinary manifesto, and in particular the lengthy policy programme contained in its coda, contains nearly all of the ideas about development that were to make him famous. Just as important, it embodies Lewis’s determination to act on those ideas. Having explained the concept of a poverty trap, or vicious
circle of poverty, as it applies in the West Indies, he then added the words, ‘But there is no vicious circle for men of determination.’ These words provide the key to the first half of Lewis’s life. At the same time as he was elaborating and formalizing his picture of what kept poor people poor, he was working with his bare hands, both in Britain and in the developing world, to change that state of poverty and oppression.

Partly as a consequence of this contact with the real world, his picture of the developing world and how it needed to be reformed becomes, during the 1940s and 1950s, progressively more globally-oriented and less radical. The word ‘revolution’ is in fact mentioned once, in Labour in the West Indies, as a description of what the developing countries of the West Indies need to do in order to realize their potential, and then disappears from his vocabulary. In Colonial Economic Development (1944), and more fully in Colonial Development (1948), Lewis breaks with neo-classical economics, and rejects ‘the economics of marginal utility’ in favour of ‘the economics of laws, institutions, tenures, nationality, race, religion, ideology and kindred determinants of economic equity and of the rate of economic progress which were banished from the economic textbooks and seminars as disreputable topics over seventy years ago’. But these pamphlets were never published; and by the time Lewis’s view of the development process reached its definitive form, in ‘Unlimited Supplies of Labour’ (1954) and The Theory of Economic Growth (1955), the revolutionary language has gone, and marginal utility has bedded down comfortably alongside the institutional factors that determine the wealth of nations. Indeed, the apex of the whole pyramid, the open-economy section of ‘Unlimited Supplies of Labour’ and its formalization of the case for industrialization achieved through protection, rests on marginal-utility principles. Lewis had realized that, to explain market imperfection, in the labour market and elsewhere, the principle of marginal utility does not need to be thrown away but only the ‘limitations of the special case’, to quote Seers’ (1963) famous phrase, recognized. Much of microeconomics since the 1940s has consisted of a coming to terms with this extension of basic motivational principles to economies that do not ‘behave’, but it was Lewis, with Rosenstein-Rodan, who in the mid-1940s set the ball rolling.

Embedded in Lewis’s view of development are four propositions, which underlie not just his published work on development but also all of his policy advocacy work. The first of these has already been introduced, namely the idea that free markets and laissez-faire cannot be expected to work in proportion as economies are poor. The second is the idea that, in the face of declining income terms of trade, poor