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## A Comment

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It is scarcely becoming for the authors of a recently published book to air a full-scale reply to a review, however critical. Nor have we done so here. Professor Leys, a notable political scientist, has identified a number of weaknesses in our attempts in **Redistribution with Growth** to integrate the politics of distribution with its economic analysis, and in so doing, he makes several points with which we do not take issue. The following comments are aimed at directing attention back to **RwG** itself, which many readers of the **Bulletin** will not yet have had a chance to study.

First, Leys claims that **RwG** contains “a . . . . distinct assumption that social revolution **ought** to be avoided”. As evidence for this charge Leys does not produce any explicit statement to this effect—there are none—but it is instructive to consider the highly selective quotations he does provide.

In the discussion on land reform in chapter 3, the passage he cites from page 61 of **RwG** (see page 4 of this **Bulletin**) is cheek by jowl with a sketch of a very different, and not implausible, outcome of an initially timid attempt at reform from above:

“A sort of ‘landgrab’ epidemic may result, accompanied by a good deal of dislocation and perhaps violence . . . . the ensuing upheaval would threaten revolution in towns and call private rights to property into question more generally” (p. 60).

The position taken on land reform is best reflected in the following unambiguous statement: “We consider . . . . land reform to be a necessary condition for the type of strategy propounded in this volume . . . .” (p. 119).

Nor can the book be accused of naive reformist optimism. The conclusions of chapter 3, which

Leys considers to be a fair summary of the text, include the following:

“There are a number of regimes for which the strategy proposed in this volume is ‘out of court’. Some are dominated by entrenched elites who will relinquish nothing to the underprivileged except under the duress of armed force. Others have attacked successfully the causes of poverty by means far more direct and radical than those discussed here” (p. 71).

Do these sentiments reflect a preoccupation with preserving the existing fabric of society?

Secondly, there is the question of whether the use of the target group concept entails the rejection of class. Leys would probably accept the distinction between a group being a class **in** itself as apposed to a class **for** itself, a distinction which rests primarily on the group’s state of consciousness and organization. If, in a particular situation the poor are apathetic and politically fragmented (a number of classes **in** themselves), the term target group provides a simple and convenient categorization for (admittedly reformist) policy. It does not follow that the poor are then to be treated as the passive objects of policy, nor does **RwG** argue as much. Indeed, there are a number of references in chapter 3 to the connection between poverty and the consciousness and organization of those who suffer it, the context of an **RwG** strategy included. As for ‘trade unions’ of the poor, Leys is quite correct in pointing out that sponsorship from above can serve as a powerful instrument of manipulation. However, to take a specific example, it is worth noting that unions of the landless and tenants have made, and subsequently defended, important gains in Kerala over almost a decade, and within a political framework which is reformist at best. Perhaps **RwG** is too sanguine and ‘liberal’ about the consequence of official sponsorship; in many countries, the poor would be happy enough to organize themselves without interference.

Thirdly, Leys makes some unwarranted inferences concerning the political import of the weighted index calculations of growth of welfare. As chapter 2 makes clear:

“(These) are essentially ‘illustrative’ to show the potential usefulness of weighted growth indexes in evaluating performance. They are not presented as definitive assessments of country experience” (p. 41).

The text posits a ‘poverty’ set of weights 0.6, 0.3, 0.1 for the lowest 40 per cent, middle 40 per cent and top 20 per cent, respectively, which should be compared with typical weights implicit in GNP growth rates of 0.1, 0.35, 0.55 respectively. How this restructuring can be construed as a political programme of backing small capitalists (who belong mostly to the top 20 per cent anyway) is rather puzzling. The weighting scheme is perfectly applicable even if we take the stronger view that only the bottom 40 per cent should count. The weights are then 1, 0, 0, (which simplifies the arithmetic) and the illustrative results can be read off directly from the third column of table II.1 (p. 42). That this variant was not elaborated in the text had nothing to do with the alleged desire to legitimize an (alternative) political programme; it seemed, at the time, too obvious to merit commentary.

The fourth and final point is in many respects the most important, though Leys confines himself to a statement of position with little prior discussion. It is this: does the acceptance of RwG’s perspective necessarily entail a general programme directed against radical change? It has been argued above that RwG most certainly does not assume that radical change **ought** to be avoided. Having disposed of intentions, the issue is reduced to the effects of an attempted RwG strategy within a reformist setting on the prospects for more profound structural changes.

Whether or not reformist policies will stave off, or promote, a social revolution is a question to which there is no general answer. Pointing, quite correctly, to the inconclusiveness of much of the argument in chapter 3, Leys moves on to the need for analysis which is rooted in particular historical and geographical circumstances. Quite so; the same applies to the impact of reformist policies. Certainly, there is no overwhelming historical evidence that palliative measures delayed or averted revolutions. If anything, experience suggests that, following a long period of repression, the opposite is true. Strong divergences of view among the Left on questions of strategy and tactics reflect the difficulties inherent in this question. For example, Lenin argued forcefully

that Stolypin’s agrarian reforms were capable of defusing the situation in Russia, whereas some modern radical scholars, discussing a different historical situation, believe that such reforms will destabilize the existing order.

Professor Leys does not take an explicit stand on this difficult question, and we do not wish to impute to him the position that reformist policies are always reactionary in an historical sense.

Equally, it would be absurd to claim that the opposite is generally true. Given the present sufferings of the poor and the uncertain prospects for political change over the next generation or more, the case for erring on the side of alleviating poverty now in a reformist setting is not easily dismissed, especially if it does not preclude the possibility of other solutions.

In summary, we reject the idea that nothing can be done about poverty in a reformist context. The available evidence does not support the hypothesis that the material conditions of the poor have been improved in only one type of society, whether socialist or capitalist, nor that those in power in capitalist countries always resist efforts to do so.

On the contrary, from the evidence available for a number of societies, it appears that policies of poverty alleviation can be envisioned in a variety of situations. Our main concern has been to provide an economic framework within which policy makers in countries that are disposed to do so can take more effective action to raise the incomes and welfare of the poor.