

Dudley Seers: Appreciations and Critiques

Dudley Seers (1920-83): A Personal Appreciation

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On a rainy evening in Michaelmas term 1964, after having heard at our seminar and entertained Eduard Wätjen, a visitor from Danilo Dolci's Centro in Sicily, the telephone rang. It was Dudley Seers, who had just been recruited by Barbara Castle, the new Minister of Overseas Development with Cabinet rank, as Director General of Economic Planning. He asked me whether I would be willing to join him as his Deputy. My enthusiastic response was instantaneous, but various practical matters had to be sorted out first. So I said Yes, if . . . Thus began our fruitful and stimulating collaboration that lasted from 1964 until 1968, and, continued at a greater distance, until his death.

I had, of course, known Dudley from his Oxford days, before he had joined the Economic Commission for Africa. He was then attached to the Institute of Statistics and had a loose connection with Queen's College, but I did not know, or, if I knew, did not attach much importance to the fact, that he had no College Fellowship. I was by then already a Fellow of Balliol, but attended Dudley's lectures held in the Examination Schools. I remember how he brilliantly attempted to vindicate the stagnationist forecasts of the wartime Keynesians. His line of reasoning ran something like this: those who predicted high unemployment after the war did not foresee — and could not have foreseen — the large arms expenditures and the high rates of population growth that were keeping effective demand up. In spite of these unexpected demand-enhancing factors, the industrial countries had difficulties maintaining full employment. Did this not justify the forecasts of Kalecki, Kaldor, Steindl and the Americans such as Alvin Hansen?

His style of lecturing was odd. He spoke in a high-pitched, soft, somewhat monotonous voice, which sounded unexpected, coming out of such a bulky body. But quite apart from the content of what he said, which was always fascinating, the low-keyed manner had a quality in it which mesmerised the listeners. There was, of course, the nose-thumbing attitude to the establishment and its views, which delighted the dissenters. But there was, in addition, a charismatic quality of rock-like independence which was inspiring. This quality was perhaps most apparent at meetings, such as conferences or missions to countries. When Dudley entered a room, without saying or doing anything, just slipping quietly into his place, somehow the temperature, the alertness, and the level of

excitement rose.

Before our collaboration in the newly founded Ministry of Overseas Development we organised, together with John Knapp and Kurt Martin, a conference during the Easter vacation of 1964. It was held in Manchester and the subject was the teaching of development economics. It grew out of Dudley's provocative article 'The limitations of the special case'. John Knapp said that Dudley's article deserved wider discussion 'in the profession' and organised the conference. It was a star-studded meeting, attended by Joan Robinson, Richard Kahn, Nicholas Kaldor, Thomas Balogh, Ian Little, Tom Wilson, Peter Ady, David Worswick, Colin Clark, Alec Nove, Kenneth Berrill, Hla Myint, Everett Hagen, Edith Penrose, Phyllis Deane, John Knapp, Eprime Eshag, Ian Stewart, Robert Cassen, and other distinguished economists, and a sprinkling of anthropologists, such as Max Gluckman. I remember one of the acceptance letters with a postal mark on the envelope which read: 'Dudley for the Zoo'. (Dudley is also a town in Britain.) Dudley's basic point, accepted, I think, by a majority of participants, was that economics, as we knew it, was not relevant to the problems of the developing countries. It was the largely Anglo-Saxon economics of the advanced, industrial, private enterprise economies. The two main reasons for the failure of the economics of this 'special case' to apply to the underdeveloped countries were that their institutions and social structures were different, and that international coexistence of rich and poor countries was crucially important, for good and ill, for understanding their problems. The orthodox approach paid no attention to institutions and viewed the development process as linear.

In the discussion he made two additional points, which show considerable prescience. First, he emphasised the need to study the world economy, which he contrasted with international trade and relations. He said that what I would call the global economy had its own internal structural relations and trends, and that development should be seen in this context.

Second, he made a point to which I shall return later. He said that students trained in development economics 'would be helped to deal with the problems of the United Kingdom, because the issues in

development economics are issues which are relevant to this country too. It would in fact be interesting to study this country as a development problem, using the techniques which have been worked out in underdeveloped areas' [Martin and Knapp eds. 1967:220].

I got to know Dudley best in the two years when we worked together closely in the new Ministry of Overseas Development, initially against fierce opposition from the regular officials, in the midst of frequent crises, and faced with a very heavy work programme. He had an incredible capacity for concentrated work. Every evening he would take a briefcase bulging with papers home. He needed little sleep. I saw him not only at work but also over lunches and dinners, sometimes in the evenings and over weekends. We worked together on memos and drafts, preparations for meetings and conferences, and later, on an article [Streeten and Seers 1972].¹ He had a rollicking, infectious laughter that came out of the bulk of his Peter Ustinov-like hulk. And yet, in spite of the closeness of our relations and ideas, and days and evenings spent together at conferences abroad, I felt that there was an opaqueness which deflected any attempt to get too near him. It presented a challenge, for I admired and liked him, and wanted to get to know him, and the laughter seemed like an invitation to do so. But any attempt was warded off as if a gate keeper were to say: 'so far and no farther'. Sometimes I wondered whether it was due to a deficiency in me, but others confirmed this difficulty of penetrating to the inner Dudley.

He had a gift for catching in words ideas which caught the imagination. An early review by him of Harrod's biography of Keynes carried the heading 'Elijah's mantle'. He wrote a letter to the *New York Times* criticising the farm lobby, which said that they strove for 'faith, hope and parity, and the greatest of these is parity'. His wit could be quite mordant. I remember, on a visit to the IDS, discussing with him aid criteria and whether human rights should be included. I said, naively, that I was against torture. Dudley replied devastatingly: 'You've come a long way, Paul'. In 1962 he published an article entitled 'Why visiting economists fail', and towards the end of his life, when he opposed development cooperation as neocolonialist, he came near to writing the companion piece, 'Why failed economists visit'. At the same time, he did not have the deductive, analytical ability prized so highly in academia. This may account for his poor performance in the Cambridge tripos, which puzzled those who knew of it and knew Dudley. But instead, he had a freshness, vividness and originality in viewing situations and problems, which made the analytical prowess appear grey by comparison.

¹ This article contains further details about the early days of the Ministry of Overseas Development.

In our days at the Ministry he was much better at the power game than I. He played skilfully for his place in the civil service hierarchy, which had not been altogether clearly defined. This was clearly not at all from personal ambition, but in order to establish the influence and power of the planning staff. It had been left open precisely where the new chief economists stood, which were later to enter other ministries also. Sir Alan Dudley, the Deputy Secretary, was directly under the Permanent Secretary. Civilised and extremely courteous, he was an old-fashioned conservative who felt that he ought to run the show. Dudley Seers established that he came between Sir Alan and the Permanent Secretary, while the regulars wanted to downgrade him to a position between the Deputy Secretary and the Under Secretaries, or, at worst, equal to the Deputy Secretary. Dudley's position determined not only his own slot but those of all the rest of us, so that, for example, my own position would be above that of the Under Secretaries. The confusion occasionally caused by the names of the two Dudleys may have helped. As a result of Dudley Seers' success, he had direct formal access to the Minister. Every submission to the Minister had to show whether the economists agreed with the advice offered. There was, in the beginning of the Ministry, also a good deal of jealousy and accusations of irregularity (if not conspiracy), because Dudley and sometimes Thomas Balogh and myself, saw the Minister outside office hours at weekends, or could ring her up in the evening.

Another ingenious step in working out good relations with the regulars was what would nowadays be called a retreat in February 1965 at Buscot Park, the home of Lord Faringdon. Faringdon was a Fabian and there was some irony in seeing silent footmen fold the *Daily Worker*, return the works of Lenin to the shelves, and the gathered leading administrators and economists eat dinner off gold plates. During that memorable weekend, when the normally dark-suited Under Secretaries sported open shirts and sweaters, we discussed all aspects of policy, with the Minister herself taking a very active part. Sir Donald MacDougall, who was preparing the National Plan, was also present, and told us why domestic projects, such as roads, hospitals, schools and houses, had to take priority over overseas aid. This was said on the assumption that there would be no balance of payments crisis.

On one occasion, when I innocently wanted to leave a certain job, on which there was no disagreement, to Robin Marris, Dudley said: 'See that you don't lose out'. But although he played the game to perfection, he was not really cut out to be a senior government official. He was much better at twisting the tail of the lion or sniping from the side than representing the established and powerful. Gerald Helleiner has

described him as 'the late and great curmudgeon'. Nevertheless, he was skilful in working with the regular officials and gaining their confidence. Unlike our common friend Thomas Balogh, whose criticisms of papers and positions were too wholesale and fundamental, so that the officials did not know where to begin, Dudley was the perfect diplomat. He would work with and through the regular officials, without yielding to their views. Though fiercely resisted at the beginning, the originally hostile Sir Richard King, a very senior official in the Ministry, said at the end: 'I cannot imagine how we ever managed to operate without the advice we get from the Economic Planning Staff', referring to the team of development economists in the Ministry who had been closely integrated into the operations. This was a very high accolade, for the line men of few other institutions I have since come to know would pay such a compliment to their research staff.

One illustration of Dudley's skill in the Ministry is how he handled the 'operational' versus 'advisory' role of the new, irregular economists. We were in an ambiguous position, for we represented both professional expertise and political support for the Minister. Initially, the officials wanted to minimise our influence by allotting us the role of 'economic advisers' in contrast to 'operational administrators'. But Barbara Castle wanted us to be at least as operational as the regulars. So Dudley invented the post of 'administrative adviser to (the operational) economists' (to balance and counteract that of the 'economic adviser to administrators'). This post was occupied by Rex Browning, then an energetic, articulate, intelligent young man, sympathetic to our cause. With this move, the distinction became blurred and we were on the way to being regarded as equals, capable of leading delegations, speaking at meetings, negotiating with other departments, approving of memos, etc.

The alliance between the Minister, Barbara Castle, her Permanent Secretary, Sir Andrew Cohen, (the two came to be nicknamed the Elephant and Castle) and Dudley was fascinating. They were very different personalities but produced a powerful mixture. They were united in their dislike of the establishment: Andrew Cohen only with one of his two souls, the other standing firmly in the centre of the establishment; Barbara Castle, the radical. They were united, though for different reasons, in their hostility to Oxford. This determined the location of the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex against the unanimous advice of the advisory committee under the chairmanship of (then) Sir Redcliffe Maud. Andrew Cohen thought that supporting Lord Fulton would support the forces of progress. Barbara Castle had disliked Oxford as an undergraduate and thought it snobbish and reactionary. Dudley had never been

admitted to Oxford's inner circle, and never was elected to a fellowship. But development studies is a service discipline, rather like the middle of a sandwich, deriving its inputs from engineers, agronomists, doctors, physiologists, nutritionists, foresters, and lawyers, and delivering its outputs to policy makers. Sussex was cut off from both inputs and outputs. It lacked faculties of agriculture, law, medicine and engineering, and was an hour away from the government departments of London. If it has established itself as the prime centre of development studies, it is because it has successfully overcome these handicaps. But London, Cambridge or Oxford would have been the natural and obvious sites. Dudley did a lot of the preparatory work for the Institute, and displayed his skill in institution building. The original conception, following the Sinclair Report, was that of a training institute, entirely concerned with development administration, in the image of the British colonial administrators. Dudley shifted the content to include research, with a strong emphasis on economics.

I joined the IDS before Dudley, and when he arrived we easily changed gear from working together in a government department to collaborating in a research and teaching institution. In both cases the beginnings were full of promise and excitement. This is reflected in the fact that three of our early colleagues were called Jolly, Joy, and a young man whom my typist insisted on misspelling as Van Arkadia. Laying the ground for the seminars and the research programme was a jolly, joyous experience in the arcadia of Sussex. Like the Buscot Park weekend that welded a group of people who hardly knew each other into a team, we organised regular meetings at which we discussed each other's draft chapters. The eventual visible product was the book *Development in a Divided World*, but the more important invisible product was a team, better than the sum of its members.

Dudley wrote prolifically, administered the Institute, organised conferences, and led missions overseas, including the famous ILO employment mission to Colombia: the first mission of the ILO's Employment Programme. The resulting Report took pride in never mentioning the word 'growth', although the growth rate implied by the employment objective was, I believe, over eight per cent per year. Dudley had a good sense of how to stir up inert minds, get people to reflect, and put new ideas into circulation. His presidential address to the Eleventh World Congress of the Society for International Development in New Delhi in 1969 on the meaning of development is an example of this. His was an early voice calling for the 'dethronement of GNP' and its growth, and for paying attention to poverty, basic needs, unemployment and income distribution. He was one of the pioneers of the structuralist analysis of Latin America. He proposed

multilateral technical assistance in bargaining with multinational corporations. (Stephen Hymer, the originator of the modern theory of the multinational corporation and another original mind prematurely dead, referred once, at a conference, enthusiastically to Dudley's proposal.) He analysed the Dutch disease for Trinidad sometime before it hit Holland. But the patient being Trinidad, no-one paid much attention or called it the Trinidadian or Venezuelan disease. He showed that the most pernicious effect of the brain drain is not on the professional manpower lost, but on domestic income distribution. In the 1970s he advocated selective delinking and self-reliance, especially reduced dependence on aid, technical assistance, and imports such as oil, basic food and capital goods. He blamed the international system for supporting reactionary regimes, and for many of the obstacles to development.

Reacting against the neo-colonial outlook, Dudley stressed the need to have scholars from developing countries examine and criticise British or European policies, and research our own problems, which, he came to think, are essentially the same as those of the developing countries: dominance and dependence, structural inflation, unemployment and under-employment, labour surpluses, X-inefficiency, segmented labour markets, wrong technologies, the Dutch disease (first explored by Arthur Lewis for Jamaican bauxite and Dudley Seers for Trinidad oil), heavy dependence on imports such as petroleum, ill-adapted institutions. On the face of it, this view might appear to contradict his earlier article on the economics of the special case, where he had argued that one type of economics applies to the industrial countries, and a different one to the developing countries. John Toye has pointed out that Dudley foresaw in his 1963 article the benefits for the study of our own societies to be derived from studying the developing countries.² 'Attempting to deal with problems (of the Third World) will end, if the history of economic thought is any guide, by changing the attitude to development in industrial economies and therefore the whole body of economic theory' [Seers 1963 quoted in Toye 1987:508].

Having found that neoclassical economics does not apply to the Third World, he was not surprised to find that it does not apply to the industrialised world either. In 1977, in reply to being criticised for inconsistency with his 1963 views, he wrote:

I was then arguing against transferring theories devised for the developed countries to the Third World. I am now advocating a transfer in the reverse direction: it seems to me that theories devised for the 'developed' countries . . . are ceasing to be appropriate even in the countries where they

originated [Seers 1977 quoted in Toye 1987:515]³

In a provocative essay entitled 'The birth, life and death of development economics' in the volume of essays in honour of Kurt Martin (with whom, and Thomas Balogh, I had given a series of seminars in Oxford) Dudley wrote:

Virtually all countries are suffering now from structural rather than global problems. For very few would an acceleration of growth *per se* be a solution to social problems such as unemployment. All countries face powerful external forces, especially the policies of the transnational corporations, and experience the strains of absorbing modern technology. So insights from the development field could usefully be imported into the social sciences in the so-called developed countries too, which include several where neo-classical analysis and prescription did not once seem obviously implausible. I refer to appropriate technology and concepts familiar in Latin American writings, such as self-reliance, marginalisation, and cultural dependence [Seers 1979:714].

The examples could be multiplied in which an analysis originally designed for underdeveloped countries finds application in the most developed. The Kenya Report for the ILO pleaded for the removal of municipal authorities harassing street vendors. As I am writing this, the street vendors are driven off the streets of New York by the mayor. Could there be a better illustration of the applicability of the lessons learned from the developing countries to our own? The demarcation (jurisdiction) disputes between industrial and craft trade unions have a lot in common with caste attitudes in India. 'Small is beautiful' has perhaps more followers in California than in India or Algeria.

This unified view of the world has not only tactical advantages in getting rid of the paternalistic 'we' and 'they' division, but reflects the gains from development research for understanding our own Western or Northern societies. His later views became what appeared to some of us as increasingly perverse: in line with his advocacy of delinking, he wanted to stop development aid and research on developing countries; he announced the death of development economics; he attacked the Brandt Commission Report not only for fuzzy thinking about mutual interests, but also for pleading for aid and North-South cooperation. Most surprising to me, he praised nationalism, both for the underdeveloped and the developed countries, upheld the national self-interest not as an obstacle but as a help to good policy, and came near to becoming a radical conservative.

Late in life he took to hang gliding. Like high diving

² I am grateful to John Toye for having pointed out both Dudley's presence, and his reply to criticisms of inconsistency.

³ I am grateful to John Toye for having pointed out to me these passages.

and riding on roller coasters, it is an activity that appeals to a certain personality type, which some psychologists have described as one that seeks variety, novelty, intensity and risk. Others have said that heightened concentration is the attraction and that being totally absorbed is itself pleasurable. Complete concentration blanks out everything else and relieves one from all conflicts. The fear drives out disturbing thoughts, and heightens one's sense of being alive. Dudley had that delight in full concentration also in his work.

Others will tell the story of his final weeks and characteristic behaviour in Fiji where, after a flood which had engulfed his seaside cottage, he was found sitting cross-legged on a table surrounded by water, with a bottle of whisky. Feverishly, and oblivious of his surroundings, he was scribbling away on his report. I had been involved in the conception, and, later, on the side of the World Bank, in his and Gerald Meier's project of getting the pioneers of development to remember and review their work. But I had left the Bank in 1980 and was in Boston when he came to Washington. Sidney Chernick, who looked after him in Washington, rang me up and told me of his having gone to hospital. The end came unexpectedly quickly. Death seemed utterly contrary to Dudley's nature.

Not only was he so very much alive, but he made others live more intensively. It is hard for me to recognise that of the many shared experiences that had brought us close together, only one of us is left to remember them.

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