

Communications and Change *

by Robert Theobald

I am making this tape in Phoenix, Arizona and I am going to make it just about a month before you hear it. It is difficult to do it this way but a lot easier than having to go all the way to Papua, New Guinea; it is taking me, with the help of some friends, about three or four hours to make the tape. To come to Papua, New Guinea would have taken me a couple of days for travelling and a couple of days to get over the fact that I had been travelling in each direction, and basically I would have lost a whole week. That is all right if I could have afforded the time to stay and talk with you, but at the moment I am so busy that I would have flown in and out and that really wouldn't have done much for any of us. I wanted to make this tape because I am convinced that the whole concept of flying here and there is done in large part because we haven't yet recognised that we can use communication, that we can send tapes and pictures and that we can indeed talk to somebody on the other side of the world by telephone as easily as we can talk to them in our own living room. But we are still wasting money flying people around. It is very interesting that a Foundation was willing to fly me to Papua, New Guinea, but not willing to provide money for other forms of communication, for example, to produce a film that could have been used again and again, not only in your own part of the world but perhaps in other parts of the world to talk about the issue of development.

So I want to talk this morning about the fundamental issue of how we should see development, to try and help you begin this Waigani seminar in such a way that you can decide what routes are open to a country like yours in trying to get development and what routes are in fact closed. Up to now most Western experts have been telling you that the only way you can hope to get development is to do what the Western world has already done, that is, to industrialise,¹ that you have to pass through all the stages to economic growth and that somehow or other you will eventually catch up to countries like America and England. There are a number of flaws in this thesis, flaws which make it almost impossible for you ever to catch up, if that is the route you take.

The first of the flaws is a very practical one: the average annual income per head in a large number of developing countries is about \$100, while in Europe and America it is somewhere between \$2,000 and \$3,000. The increase in average income per head in the United States each year is now

*This paper was prerecorded on tape. The speech has been corrected but the "spoken" style has been preserved. After it was presented to the seminar, the speaker took part in a discussion by a long-distance telephone connection. This was made possible by the cooperation of the Department of Posts and Telegraphs, Papua, New Guinea.

¹See, for example, Rostow (1966).

equal to the annual income per head in a country like Papua, New Guinea. Therefore not only is the gap widening but there appears to be no conceivable way in which the gap can eventually close; so what we are actually saying, if we talk in these terms, is that it is inevitable that the countries now rich will continue to keep their lead over the rest of the world for an indefinite period.

The second problem with the model and with that way of thinking is that historically countries which have done well have jumped stages of growth rather than gone through the same ones as the countries which have been moving ahead of them. For example, Britain first developed the steel industry, but Germany then used the most advanced technologies that had been developed in England and jumped ahead of England in steel production. You see this same pattern again and again; countries coming along behind can benefit from the mistakes other countries have already made. Unfortunately, we in the West seem determined that you should go through the same set of mistakes that we went through. It is as if we are afraid that maybe you will come up with a better way of living, that will allow you to get there faster than we can.



It is very difficult to overestimate the cost of the industrial era. We destroyed the life of many human beings because we said that the only way that we can industrialise is to force people to live as cogs in a machine, to break down the values and concepts and the patterns which made life worth living and to turn human beings simply into workers. We are now reaching a stage where we are beginning to say: 'But we want to move back' or 'We want to move forward again into a real family life'. We want to recreate community and society. We are therefore moving away from the patterns of the industrial era which we are still trying to teach people in the developing countries. In the same way we are trying to create agricultural patterns derived from industrial-era agricultural patterns: we are not facing up to the fact that there are some very grave dangers in what is called the green revolution.