

Arrested Development

The West pours billions into backward countries to encourage economic development. Can it work? I fear not.

I live in Mexico and travel a lot in the “developing world,” most of which isn’t. I ask myself why not. Inevitably I conclude that a country’s progress depends on its human capital. Most countries just don’t have enough. They will adopt the portable forms of Western technology—cellphones, video games, cyber cafés—but not much more.

I wish this were not true. The poverty of countries like Bolivia and Cambodia is not pretty. If giving them billions in aid would transform them, I would favor it. But it won’t.

What exactly causes near intractable nondevelopment? A few reasons are painfully obvious:

First, a lack of interest in schooling. This is different from a lack of schools. You can build schools, but you can’t build a desire to attend them. In many countries, children go to school for three or four years, or not at all, and then care for the goats. Their parents also care for goats, this being all they have ever done. It is all the children will ever do.

I don’t say this to be cruel. I wish it weren’t so, but it is. There is just nothing in many cultures that recommends study. Kids will drop out to care for the goats when free schools are available, when tuition in universities is free.

A fourth-grade education may barely qualify them as literate for the CIA Fact Book, but it is doom in a techno-industrial world.

A second reason for irremediable backwardness, or something very close to it, is the lack of American-style ambi-

tiousness. I know: this sounds like contempt for the downtrodden. Yet it’s true. Pretending otherwise accomplishes nothing.

Pedro, aged 17, living in a village on the slopes of the Andes, thinks only of getting married the next year. He does so, has a kid or two, and that’s the end of his path. He may be very bright and work hard. Yet his world stops at the edge of what he knows. He will play video games in the local *tiendita*, slave away to buy a car, and then spend his life driving around the plaza and honking at his buddies.

By contrast, American kids are exploratory, wait eagerly to go to college on the other end of the continent, backpack through Asia, go for the Ph.D. in chemistry. Goals may change, but there are goals. Americans see life as a progress toward desired ends. The Third World thinks of life as a fixed condition.

And so the human capital in so many countries is wasted hoeing beans—often not because they couldn’t do things differently but because it isn’t how they think. American television, often the only exposure they have to a culture other than their own, isn’t enough to effect change.

Third comes corruption, to a degree that most Americans can’t readily imagine. In many countries, everything is for sale. A blind man could buy a driver’s license from a crooked cop, which is to say any cop. The government sells the country’s resources—teak, oil, whatever it has—abroad and the money goes to

Switzerland. The cops are actual criminals. Corruption rots the society at every level.

The problem is not that corrupt officials exist. Every country has them. The problem is that the culture condones corruption, expects it, regards it as part of communal existence. Corruption, not study, is the ladder up. And of course, pouring billions of aid into a corrupt country just transfers it to the bank accounts of the rulers.

Solving concrete problems is easy or at least possible. Changing a culture is hard.

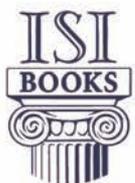
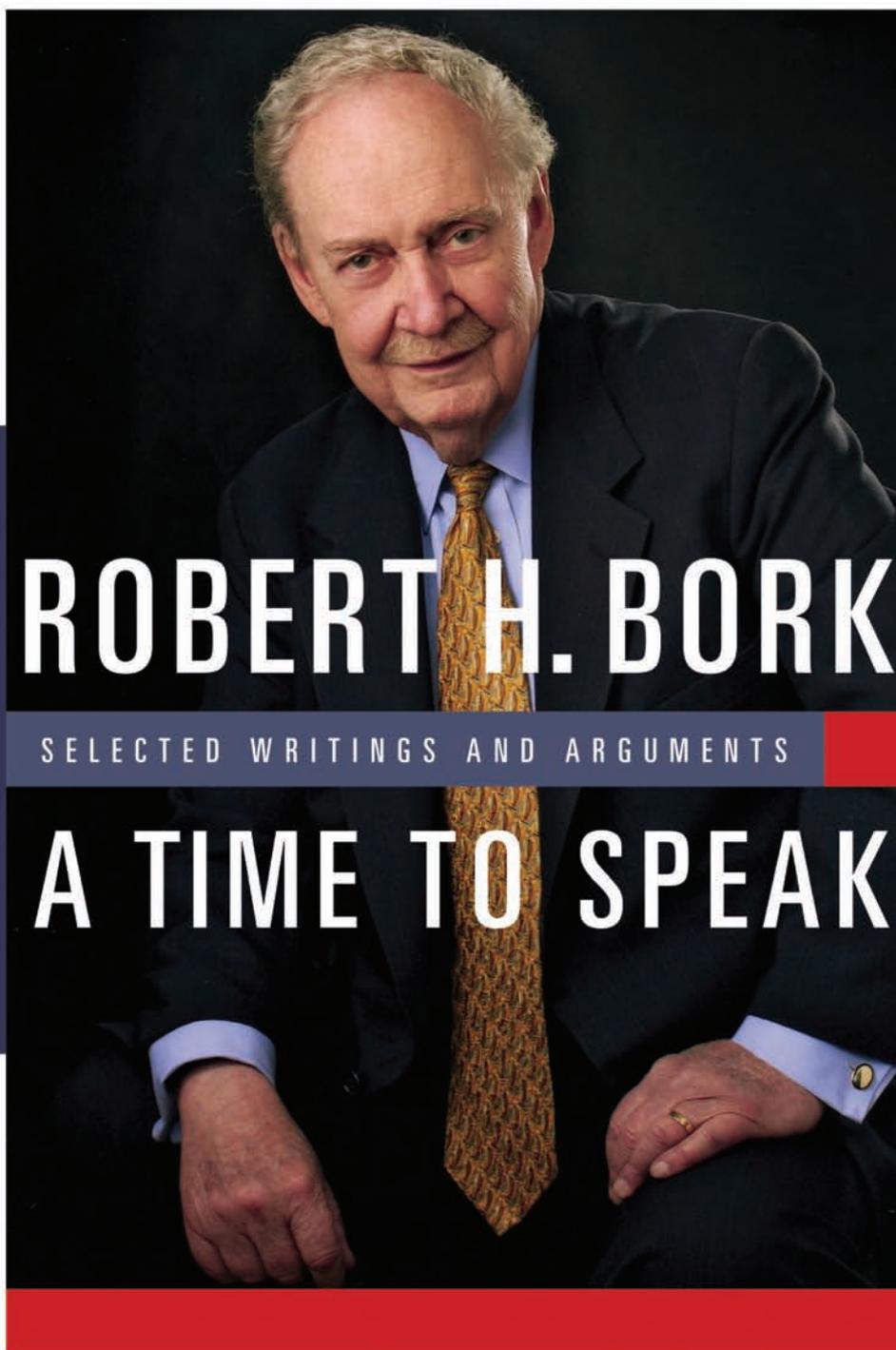
The foregoing problems exist in varying degrees in different countries. For example, Mexico qualifies as Third World but distinctly upper Third World. People in the States ask odd questions (“Does it, you know, like, have paved roads?”) and think the country is primitive. It isn’t. Mexico operates two major airlines, has a good telecommunications system, a reasonably functional national health service, a sharply reduced birth rate, and works (successfully) to end its habit of subjugating women.

Yet though school is mandatory, many children don’t go or barely do. Where I live, my stepdaughter, seriously smart, is regarded as stuck up because she makes high grades in the Prepa, the feeder system for the University of Guadalajara. This is the exact parallel of the charge of “acting white.” (Both Prepa and university are free.) Bare literacy, or none, isn’t going to work in 2040.

When the Army was running its “Be All That You Can Be” ads, I saw a cartoon of a sergeant saying to a bedraggled private who was raking leaves, “But Ferguson, you are all you can be.” Would it were not so. ■

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