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DEVELOPMENT IDEAS AND POLICY



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There is an unusual quality about attempting to assess the impact Wolf Ladejinsky has had on ideas about agricultural development. To Wolf, agricultural development was a poor second to his dominating concern to see the world build a more equitable society in which the humblest farmer or rural labourer would enjoy the full fruits of his labour and be secure in this enjoyment.

Ladejinsky's writings seldom touched profoundly on the issues of generating rural development, that is, of expanding rural output or of transforming traditional agricultural methods by the application of modern technologies. The desirability of or the need for such a transformation did not escape his attention or, on occasion, his comment. But this was not at the core or even near the core of his work.

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Yet Ladejinsky's life and his work were wholly committed to the establishment of the foundations essential for agricultural and rural progress. He did not measure progress on the graph of increased yield; he measured it in the economic dignity of those who farmed. He did not reckon advance in the numbers of new implements sold, or pumps installed, or tons of plant nutrients used; he counted it in the rights of poor people to set and follow their own destinies. Nor did he worry about the economists' debates over utility and welfare; he did worry and even waxed angry over the abuse of power that held people in any form of thrall.

To Ladejinsky, poverty was an evil if it arose from the exercise of social, political or economic power that sanctions the transfer of the fruits of one man's sweat to another who did nothing but hold and exercise an enforceable claim to a share of these fruits. He was dominated by the need to expose the personal destitution of the rural poor and to work for the reforms that would give them an opportunity to recover and hold securely the foundations of pride and self-esteem.

His passion was justice for poor people; his belief was in the essential integrity of the poorest to make wise decisions in their own interests if not restrained by those who would exploit them; his means of giving voice to those who voicelessly pleaded for honest opportunity was to write in matchless expression of the ways of oppression. Long before

poverty became the *avant garde* fashion of development scholarship, Ladejinsky stalked the grimy pathways of hopeless destitution. He wrote with a deep underlying anger, an anger frequently moved to despair when massive wrongs that could be righted with the will to put a few scratchings on a piece of paper were left unrighted by an indifference to exercise that will.

No one can read his writings, no one could come under his personal spell and be unaffected by the reality of the inhumanity that perpetually bears upon the lives of countless, faceless peasants; no one could remain indifferent to the vistas he opened of reforms needed and what they could do if passionately implemented.

Ladejinsky was a visionary. But like the Mogul artists he loved so much, he painted miniatures with an attention to detail singularly lacking in most. And uniquely his miniatures were three-dimensional. Along one axis was the representation of what is, this was set against the vision of what might be, and giving the perception of depth were the policy prescriptions, on occasion, even the detailed steps of field implementation, needed to bring the what is to the what might be — the scratches required on the piece of paper.

The terms 'positive' and 'normative' were foreign to him. Not that he did not know them or understand their use in textbook economic

theory or research methodology. Far from it, I once received a tongue-lashing from him for suggesting that they were useful concepts. To him justice required no search or agonizing. The injustices observable to even the most insensitive bystander required no refined expertise in research technique to lay bare. His normative was common to the moral precepts of all great religions. Simply, do unto others as you would have done unto you if you were them and they were you. He had no need of an objective function to determine what was right and what was wrong and what policy should be. His positivism was the reality he found and described. He wrote in vivid and meticulous prose of the human debasement distilled from soulless actions of creditors, of landlords, of market traders, of politicians, indeed, of all manner of men who exercise the power that social, economic or political arrangements give to one group over another.

Ladejinsky brought a mixture of heritages to his work. His childhood was spent in the intolerant and capricious atmosphere of czarist Russia. In the impressionable years of his adolescence he was surrounded by the turmoil of war and revolution. Lenin's call to the demobilized peasants who manned the Czar's armies, to take their guns and seize the land they had cultivated for so long, founded the Bolshevik Army. It was a call that Ladejinsky never forgot. The land hunger of the Russian peasant assured eager recruits for the revolutionary movement of 1917. He found a similar hunger for land among the peasantry of Asia. And he apprehended similarly eager recruits for violent political change if the peasant was not given full rights to land as his economic security.

To Ladejinsky the key question of our time was how to secure for all men the assured right to personal dignity. He believed that dignity arose from equality of opportunity. That suppression of opportunity by the privileged for their own personal gain, whether economic (which was most obvious) or social or political, was an affront not only to those who suffered, but also to all mankind. Ladejinsky saw the poverty of the weak and saw them squeezed by those who were protected by the coercive apparatus of the law and the state. And he denounced it for what it was, he deplored it for what it was, and he called for reform.

Ladejinsky's work is founded upon the study of economic classes, a framework of scholarship that dominated much of 19th century economic thought, especially the thought of David Ricardo and Karl Marx. But he was deeply influenced equally by the liberal traditions of Europe of the same period. He believed that all people were capable of accepting and using intelligently the responsibility of controlling their own destiny, especially so if the rules of national economic affairs included provisions for help in times of extreme emergency and were designed and enforced to prevent unscrupulous exploitation. He distrusted as much the exercise of power by the state over the lives of men as the use of power by classes of privilege. Yet it is clear from his writings that he held hopes that governments could be benevolent, while those who held privilege could not be similarly trusted. The fact that some creditors and some landlords were paternal in handling their debtors and tenants was, on occasion, acknowledged; but it was never accepted as a justification for

institutions that held men dependent upon the whims of others. Likewise, governments could be paternal, but they could also be stupid, inflexible, insensitive, even evil, and the weak needed as much protection from political and bureaucratic caprice as from the vagaries of vested prerogative.

Ladejinsky was an idealist who never compromised his ideals to considerations of pragmatism. He was a realist who knew that social ideals could be attained only by the direct and purposeful intervention of those who held political power. He knew also, and from bitter observation, that such intervention was too often perverted by those charged with its accomplishment, or came too late to be effective.

The final appraisal of Ladejinsky's work rests not on his economic ideas, or on his political or social perceptions, but on his humanity. On his abiding and single-minded concern that all men have an equal opportunity to dignity as a right, not a privilege. I do not believe, however, that he has had or will have a profound impact on the current or even future interplay of development ideas. My belief is not a condemnation of his work. It is a condemnation of those who work with development ideas. Nathan Koffsky once said that Ladejinsky's legacy was that he "asked the right questions." Indeed he did. But his questioning was founded on a value structure too sage for those whose concerns are developmental. I have pointed out that he seldom used the term 'agricultural development' and, I for one, am glad he did not for we would be the poorer had he joined the ranks of those of us who do.

Ladejinsky's work was constrained not by the confines of economic theory, or social modelling, or political analysis. His ideas on rent, on the distribution of economic product, on credit, on market structures, indeed, on the whole panoply of subjects so dear to those who write on rural development, defied textbook orthodoxy with its traditions of theoretical and empirical thought. Only in his early writings is there a passing reference to conventional scholarship. Later, he stood alone. A teacher to those who would listen; a student only of the reality he saw around him.

As such I am fearful that he did little to illuminate the paths of intellectual conceptualization deemed so necessary to bring about modernization in traditional agrarian societies.

I can hear Wolf chuckle at this statement.

It was not his concern. His observations in Asia spanned different cultures possessing widely differing degrees of adoption of scientific agriculture, and yet he found almost exactly the same circumstances of peasant exploitation, injustice and, above all, indignity, in all of these societies. On occasion, he used the claim that development could be accelerated if it were founded on a peasantry free of exploitation. But he dismissed, with I might add the contempt I deserved, my findings that reforms could not be justified on developmental ground when the

correlations between the growth in Indian district agricultural output and the degree of success he found in implementing land reforms were strongly negative. His response was characteristic: reforms were justified by the freedom they gave to the peasantry.

But accepting that Ladejinsky was correctly focused on the right questions — the personal dignity by which men lived — what is his legacy to rural development ideas? It is not an easy question to answer. Superficially, Ladejinsky wrote about poverty, the poverty that arises from unequal claims on the income stream. There is in his work a strong element of a labour theory of value. He gave little space to the questions of capital investment, although in his later years, especially the years following the spread of high-yielding varieties of wheat into the Punjab and North India, he called upon governments to provide a more adequate infrastructure of services and better assured supplies of production requisites for farmers who sought to adopt new agricultural techniques. But of the nuances of capital accumulation, of savings and investment, of rates of return and of interest, he wrote very little.

The fact is that Ladejinsky did not add much to the debates surrounding the economics of agricultural development.

Again I hear his chuckle.

In one sense, I find this unfortunate. It would have been instructive for us all if he had turned his incisive mind and acute powers of observation to assessing more closely the differing elements that comprise the economic negotiation and bargain between landlord and tenant, creditor and debtor. I would have liked an analysis of why he found a difference in the land rents payable by tenants in the same villages in Tanjore District. He said they went as high as 70 percent of output, but he found cases as low as 30 percent. Why? Did it vary with the grade of land? affluence of landlord? differences in farming ability among tenants? There are many questions that one could wish Ladejinsky had asked and reported on. The answers would not have vitiated his central attack on the evils of exploitation, but they would have led perhaps to a more reflective understanding of the conditions surrounding the processes and outcome of economic bargaining. Ladejinsky's powers of observation were more acute than those of David Ricardo's. One can only wish that in his crusade he had given a little more attention to the means whereby rents were determined and interest rates agreed upon. Had he done so, I believe we would be the richer today for we would likely have the findings needed to fill the gaps in Ricardian rent theory, gaps that center around the processes of bargaining under conditions of imperfect competition.

Ladejinsky also sidestepped the questions surrounding poverty. Certainly one cause of poverty is the exploitation of the weaker by the stronger. It will be found in all cultures through rent-racking, loan-sharking, market-cheating, influence-peddling, political malfeasance,

judicial malpractice, bureaucratic corruption, to name but a few sources. Ladejinsky chronicled them all. But he provided little insight into how much mass poverty was the result of exploitation and how much the consequence of the low productivities of traditional agrarian labour. He refers to it in his Japanese work and, more often, in his work on India after the so-called Green Revolution. His references, however, are more *en passant* than serious study. Too frequently, one gets the feeling that he held the 19th century view that the size of the economic pie was relatively fixed, and that economic betterment could be attained only by actions that cut the pie in a manner that gave one class larger slices and the remaining classes smaller ones. That the struggle between classes was a struggle over how the slices were to be cut and allocated; the peasantry having little power to protect their rightful share. The fact that the whole pie could be increased seemed not to impress Ladejinsky until the adoption of the dwarf, high-yielding varieties forced him to acknowledge that something was happening in northwestern India that was adding to farming prosperity. Although he spiced his observations with comments critical of government slowness to support adequately the adoption of new agricultural techniques, his main concern to the last was the exploitation of the rural weak. Even when prosperity rose, he reminded us that there were also costs. Some tenant farmers were dispossessed, the landless labourers did not share equally in the benefits of change, big farmers more than small farmers enjoyed disproportionate increases in income, and so on.

Again, one could wish for more detail. How did the laws the Punjab government passed to protect tenants from dispossession serve their interests when, suddenly, farming became immensely profitable? Could small farmers really bear the costs of learning and risks of innovating with untested practices? Were the disproportionate benefits to large cultivators a phenomenon of exploitation or were they an innovator's profit? Was the actual demand for labour increased or reduced by the widespread adoption of new farming technologies? These are but a few of the questions that spring to mind as one reads with fascination Ladejinsky's accounts of India in the 1970s. They are seldom answered. And because they are not answered, Ladejinsky is not a fertile source for marshalling the evidence critical to assessing the causes and means of eliminating rural poverty.

I definitely hear him chuckle!

Ladejinsky's true concerns never placed economic poverty in the 'center of the piece.' The distribution of material goods was only a symptom. True poverty was the lack of dignity a man or woman or child suffered when access to livelihood could be barred at the will of another. And so long as that poverty remained, it was an affront to mankind even if material wealth were increased by the artifice of development.

Ladejinsky's forays into the sociology of development or even into the sociology of exploitation were rare. In assessing these, I will refer only to his works on India for only here am I on somewhat firmer ground.

For all his sensitivity to the people with whom he worked and worked among, he shows little understanding or insight into the complex workings of Indian society. He virtually ignored caste as a class variable. An omission that probably resulted in his misunderstanding the docility of Indian peasants in the face of privation and oppression. His mystification of the quiet acceptance of bitter fate by the rural masses in Maharashtra during and after the crop failures and famines of 1972 and 1973 can only be explained by his lack of comprehension of the basic ethos of Indian rural culture and beliefs. It mirrors his disregard for caste and caste privilege as the dominant element in the historical patterns of the ownership, control and use of land and community services in an Indian village. By neglecting caste and its cultural role as the cohesive cement of Indian rural society, Ladejinsky distorted what most Indian scholars would consider the essential nature of the economic interdependence of the Indian village community. He did not believe in the religious foundations of the caste hierarchy, nor did he accept the Hindu karma of 'right action' that is so important to the meshing of reciprocal economic, social and religious obligations among the village caste members so that the community can function as an economic, social and political unit. Ladejinsky brought a vision of European class society to India. He put Indian rural society as he found it into that vision. It was a bold step; a departure from the works of others. But it did violence to the underlying facts and, more importantly, to the perceptions he conveyed for they were not the perceptions of those he wrote about.

And there is a deeper significance to this. The indignation that Ladejinsky experienced by observing the personal degradation of the

Indian peasant was an affront not easily shared by many Indians, both devout and secular. His indignation was held in common with Gandhi-ji and the more devoted followers of that great humanitarian, and with the Hindu reform movements dating as far back as Tulsi Das in the 17th century. But it was and still is an indignation founded upon a value system that is alien to traditional Indian thought and culture.

In Ladejinsky's work we see the classic conflict of cross-cultural values in which absolutes must be questioned and ethnocentrism must be carefully weighed. It is true that traditional Indian thought deplored the elements of personal exploitation that Ladejinsky wrote against. But it would not be true to argue that equal opportunity for human dignity was a right of Hindu birth. Indeed, the whole philosophy of karma assumes otherwise. Station at birth is the consequence of actions in previous incarnations, and the fate that accompanies this station (or position in the caste hierarchy) is the test to evoke proper actions that will be rewarded (or punished) in the next cycle of rebirth after death. Ladejinsky knew all this for he read widely of Indian history and philosophy, but he rejected it as being of little consequence in the face of the evil of economic extortion by a *rentier* class, whether that class was sanctified by religious belief or not.

It is too early in this period of Indian history to say whether Ladejinsky's view is the more relevant to understanding the current evolution of rural society, or whether such an understanding is held still within the

older analysis that gave emphasis to caste interaction and saw caste as synonymous with economic class as a source of cohesion and dynamic stability within village society. My suspicion is that Ladejinsky's studies were made too soon. Hindu beliefs in the cosmic justice of unequal human rights prevail still as the ruling element defining class in village society. It will change in the years to come, but it has not changed yet and it is incorrect to assume it has. From a sociological standpoint, Ladejinsky's work will come into its own in the future. For now, however, it seems more anecdotal history, not social scholarship.

Ladejinsky wrote little about political processes. Instead, he lived them. He had an acute sense of what was needed politically to accomplish institutional change. He had an unfailing eye for political policies that failed in accomplishment because of faulty or halfhearted implementation, or because of obstructionism, or deliberately deficient, or unconsciously defective legislation. He did not hesitate to press his views on top political decision-makers, or to chide them, often strongly, if he felt agreed programs had gone astray. He did not play at politics; he was deadly serious about the need to give dignity to all peasants. While he knew how political leadership could open the way to freedom, he was well aware of the pressures of class interests upon them not to do so and he sought to influence the course set. He had a contempt for those who could, but would not. His respect for those who tried was measured by how well they met his expectations of sincere effort. He strove to give voice to those who would, but could not.

Often he became part of the voiceless for he refused to compromise his standards of the justice he sought and accept the half-loaf of political compromise. His open letters to kings and presidents, calling attention to the facts of betrayal of their weakest citizens found him, like the bearers of ill tidings of old, banished from further intercourse. The list of countries in which he was, at one time or another, declared an unwelcome visitor, invested him with a singular honour, a recognition of his own honesty to himself, to those whom he championed, and to the ultimate interest of the nation itself and of all mankind. His views and his integrity were forces to be reckoned with.

But, again, Ladejinsky provided little for the political analyst or the scholar of political affairs to gnaw upon. His political feel was intuitive. It was not conveyed in his writings or even in personal conversation. His refusal to compromise closed to his view much that could have been recorded about the processes by which privilege is retained or abridged. His records reveal much about the bureaucratic means of implementing or sabotaging reform programs, and we are all indebted for his many penetrating insights on how bureaucratic behaviour influences the application of legislation. He did not leave a comparable record on the machinations of political intrigue and decision-making, a task he left to others. But he knew how politics made impotent the zeal for reform, and he hated its shortsighted inhumanity.

In working with bureaucrats, Ladejinsky may have made his most practical contribution. He was a superb manager, perhaps not of people — there is little to judge him on in this aspect of management — but certainly of program design. His observations often led to conclusions of how policies could be made more effective by better field techniques, techniques that he outlined in considerable detail. He had an unerring eye not only for what needed to be done, but, more importantly, for how to do it. Only in Japan did Ladejinsky come close to being given administrative responsibility. In one sense, it is a pity that he was sheltered from this phase of engineering change; a pity because he would likely have excelled and it would perhaps have sharpened further his field observations. In another sense, it was probably a good thing that he remained an untested administrator; his likely success would have robbed us of his future scholarship and given us instead another competent manager, albeit a rare one who was also sensitive and dedicated.

In his later years, Ladejinsky did struggle with the interaction of the social and legal institutions that set the rules for tenurial debt and market relationships, and the institutions and services required by farmers to increase their productivity per unit of land and per unit of labour. His struggle was without resolve. He believed in the power of collective peasant action and supported the cooperative movement as a vehicle for that action. He deplored official production programs for their heavy-handedness and opportunity for corrupt bureaucratic practices. He expressed little confidence in the capacity of governments to move correctly

and with alacrity. But I think he left substantially unanswered the relation between the reform of exploitive practices and the provision of investment for output growth. He called attention to the distortions of private incentives that can and do arise when production costs are borne by the tenant in inequitable relation to his rental obligations. In his post-Green Revolution writings, he forcibly pursued this point.

It was in these writings also that he laid bare the extramural institutional framework that must be provided to support the production growth of small landowners and tenant cultivators. Credit and the cost of credit, market access and the costs of marketing farm products and purchasing production factors, forcible use of landlord credit and supplies, inequitable cost-sharing between landowners and tenants, off-farm labour opportunities for small cultivators, are but a few of the elements that his pen revealed in incisive detail. Again, however, the detail left much unanswered. The diseconomies of providing external production services to small farmers is well documented in development literature. It is not clear how the descriptions Ladejinsky gave and the policy measures he advocated would reduce these diseconomies. He did not provide the economist or businessman or bureaucrat much upon which to build a nonsubsidized development program.

In summary: the Ladejinsky legacy to ideas about agricultural development and to policies for its implementation is not easily assessed. His work has added great richness and depth to our understanding of the human interplay that is the heart of traditional and developing rural societies. But his work is not an easy guide for the narrow, disciplined scholar of development processes or for the development engineer unconcerned about bringing about social reforms. The questions he grappled with are too profound to play that role. He was an observer, not a theorist. And the observations he recorded were given value from his own unique wide-ranging intellect, not from the confining boundaries of systematic scholarship. All the diversity of human experience crowded his pages. But except for those facets that stirred his own deeply felt passions, he seldom sought to classify it, to select from it studied samples of findings, to isolate these and reflect upon them. Instead, he brought to his work a fervour, a driving sense of mission, a faculty for discriminating between good and evil, a deeply held and unshakeable philosophy against which the actions of men were seen and judged. He needed no theory because he knew right from wrong and gave loud, clear voice to each. One cannot read him or have known him without a sense of being belittled in the face of greatness. In truth, his legacy is to remind us that there is a right and wrong that springs from a universal humanism; that narrowness and intellectual debate and selective scholarship will muffle and becloud the sense of justice and charity we all know to be fundamental to human existence. Ladejinsky did ask the right questions, and he gave us the

right answers. This is his legacy. We are the poorer if we ignore it; we are the richer for having known him and for his sharing with us his indignation, his understanding, his insight, his hope, and, above all, his humanism.