

Measuring the Quality of Life in the U.S.: Political Reflections

The Measure of America: American Human Development Report, 2008–2009. By Sarah Burd-Sharps, Kristen Lewis, and Eduardo Borges Martins. New York: Columbia University Press and The Social Science Research Council, 2008. 256p. \$75.00 cloth, \$24.95 paper.

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Reports from abroad on the American condition have a special place in the canon of social commentary. There is Lord Bryce's *American Commonwealth* (1888), Gunnar Myrdal's *American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (1944), Werner Sombart's *Why Is There No Socialism in the United States?* (1906) and, of course—the standard setter—Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* in 1835. What makes these works touchstones is not just the quality of the analysis or the fame of their authors but the privileged status they have come to enjoy as works of external reflection and criticism. For a people prone to ignore the rest of the world or see abroad only a mirror image of themselves, Americans have always had a surprisingly soft spot for the foreign observer willing to discourse on what makes their nation unique.

Now comes *The Measure of America: The American Human Development Report, 2008–2009*, billed as “the first-ever human development rankings for U.S. states, congressional districts, and ethnic groups.” The authors—Sarah Burd-Sharps, Kristen Lewis, and Eduardo Borges Martins—are all Americans. Their headquarters is in New York, not Paris or London. And yet they come to their task with a mission from abroad—and with a bit of the missionary spirit as well. The grounding for their effort comes from the United Nation's Human Development Index, based on the pioneering work of Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen. The Human Development Index provides a measure of social well-being distinct from the most commonly used measure in cross-national rankings, gross domestic product (GDP) per capita. By combining national statistics on life expectancy, literacy, school enrollment,

and, yes, GDP per head, it is meant to capture the broad quality of life for a nation's citizens.

The American Human Development Index is a variation on the standard UN measure, constructed by the authors to permit finer-grained analysis of affluent nations. (It looks at college completion, for example, rather than literacy.) The basic purpose, however, is the same: to provide an alternative to average economic output as a barometer of the health of society. And by looking at the United States through the prism of an index used to examine and compare nations across the globe, *The Measure of America* (that is, the Report) becomes a powerful, if incomplete, outsiders' critique of a nation that has lost its focus, of a political elite that has allowed increasingly hollow claims about unbridled economic gains to serve as an excuse for failing to address fundamental social problems.

The Report is not an elegant piece of writing. It is a slickly designed pamphlet whose prose is the tough sinew that connects charts and call-out boxes. Its graphics look more comfortable on the Web than behind its bright orange cover (the Website for the project credits an “internationally recognized Visual SenseMaking firm,” and the SenseMakers certainly earned their keep). If Toqueville had had bar charts, he might never have coined those beautiful phrases. But the graphics deserve respect on their own terms, and they tell a fascinating, if dispiriting, story.

For all its wealth and power, the United States is a mediocre human developer—an unimpressive position it has only recently come to occupy. In 1980, we were behind only Switzerland on the UN's standard Human Development Index. Five years later, we were still second, though to our northern neighbor Canada rather than to the Swiss, a position we held in 1990, too. But then our ranking plummeted: from second in 1990 to sixth in 1995 to ninth in 2000 to twelfth in 2005. Still the top-ranked country besides little Luxembourg in GDP per capita, the United States now must content itself with the cheer “We're Number Twelve” in human development.

Yet the cross-national rankings are only a tiny part of *The Measure of America*. The main show is the extensive analysis of human development across U.S. states and

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congressional districts. The central message is depressingly familiar: Disparities of race remain huge, educational opportunities depend more on who your parents are, and economic inequality—and related health disparities—are huge and growing. These gaps cleave not just people but places: Mississippi and Massachusetts may as well be Mars and Venus when it comes to human development. The U.S. federal structure that has so captivated foreign observers from Tocqueville on shows itself once again to be a central reality of American social life. You may not be what you eat, but you are where you live.

All of this is presented clearly and quickly, with a definite leftward slant but few distracting ideological digressions. A set of sensible, if sometimes vague, policy prescriptions follow each diagnosis of the problem, and the messy details of the analysis are left to a hefty methodological appendix.

So why describe *The Measure of America* as incomplete? The absence of deep analysis will no doubt concern some; the user's guide prose and flashy graphics may annoy others (though fewer and fewer in this age of the Webzine). But the real hole is the lack of a sustained exploration of the role of politics and public policy in explaining the distressing trends and disparities uncovered.

A graphic at the start of the Report shows the “capabilities” of individuals emanating from a combination of “culture,” “religion,” the “economy,” “community,” “laws,” and “politics.” But of law and politics (or culture and religion, for that matter) we hear nothing. In this respect, the ranking of congressional districts is a bit of a bait and switch. We expect a discussion of how our system of representation or disparities in participation feed into the massive intranational inequalities that the Report finds. Instead, the district-level analysis is an entryway into another nifty call-out box that shows how vastly different the lives of people in the Bronx are from those who reside in uptown Manhattan.

This is a missed opportunity. Human development is certainly more than economic development. But it is more than good health and education as well. Among the capacities that stir our concern, the capability to shape our own destiny through political participation and influence should have a special hold on our imagination and action, not least because it is so central to our judgment about who gets to decide what the Good Society is. By leaving out the political dimension almost entirely, the Report unwittingly feeds a trope all too common in contemporary discourse about American inequality—the shallow fatalism of socioeconomic determinism. The United States did not plummet down the international rankings willy-nilly. It was pushed over the human development cliff by the failure of our politics to respond to shifting economic and social winds in a manner that upheld the broad opportunity and security that observers from abroad once extolled (even as they puzzled over its production or lamented its

limits). As a work of applied social science, *The Measure* deserves an A for diagnosis, a B for prescription, and a C for explanation.

The authors' lack of concern with the political roots of current social problems may not be unique or fatal. But it is telling, and ultimately disappointing. It is telling because it reflects the dearth of research done within political science (and allied disciplines) that situates contemporary American politics within the broader cross-national picture, analyzes the larger political economy of political behavior and process, or maps the longer-term historical development of present patterns. To gain a sense of what could be done, one need think only of the community power debate of the 1960s and 1970s—which, for all its digressions and misdirections, never lost sight of the fundamental question of “Who Governs?” Or inspiration could come from contemporary writings on comparative political economy, work that has traced out the big structural differences across national political economies (while, unfortunately, mostly treating the United States as an afterthought or stylized foil). Within the subfield of American politics, stirrings of change have flowed from a renewed interest in the causes and consequences of economic inequality. But even this work has not escaped the narrow focus (both methodological and topical) of much of today's American politics research, which has produced valuable insights of growing precision but only within certain well-trod tracks, such as electoral studies, legislative politics, and public opinion.

In the end, the Report's cramped concerns are disappointing because we have plenty of disquisitions on the troubles of America, however persuasively those troubles are highlighted with novel, and novel presentation of, evidence. No commentator can realistically aspire to stand alongside Bryce, Myrdal, Sombart, and Tocqueville. But we badly need commentators who emulate these authors' greatest contribution: linking the evolution of America's civic democracy—the civic democracy that, beyond all else, defines the American ideal—with the evolving state of U.S. society. At a time of backlash against the problems showcased by *The Measure of America*, it is time we reclaimed this astute outsiders' perspective on the American social order and cast our eyes anew on a crumbling civic culture too long neglected by analysts and elites alike.