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The Good Life

The Measure of America: American Human Development Report, 2008-2009

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Columbia University Press, \$24.95 (paper) *Claude S. Fischer*

Battles over social policy are fought in the trenches by hardened politicians. But scholars serve, too. They are the ammunition mules, providing the combatants with ideas, arguments, and evidence. Following the ghetto riots of the 1960s, Lyndon Johnson empaneled a committee of wise men who, in turn, retained many scholars to help the president defend Great Society programs against the anticipated backlash from “middle America.” The Kerner Commission concluded on the basis of social science research that the uprisings were the product of poverty and white racism. Richard Nixon spoke up quickly for many in middle America when he charged that the report “blames everybody for the riots except the perpetrators.” Johnson may have wished for a more nuanced report, but he did use it, as he later used the report of a commission on the history of violence in America, to protect his agenda for a larger, more beneficent welfare state. Of course, the backlash came nonetheless—spurred on by the pandemonium that was the 1968 Democratic Convention—and it sent the Great Society into retreat.

That backlash, ridden to power by Nixon and even twelve years later by Ronald Reagan, created a tactical opening for the free market battalions. For a couple of decades now, influential economists have successfully argued that wealth—and presumably human well-being—would be maximized by removing constraints on business: cut taxes, regulations, tariffs, food subsidies, and the like, and entrepreneurship will flourish. And so will we all. The marketeers’ success in shaping policy here and abroad is clear. Clear, for example, in World Bank demands that governments of developing nations stop subsidizing their poor; in the elevation in our courts of a “Law and Economics” philosophy, which seems to consider the bottom line as important as the legal line; in campaigns for school voucher programs; and in a system of corporate regulation that maximizes shareholder returns above everything else, including jobs and community interests. Under such heavy assault, defenders of an activist and equalizing state, of FDR’s and LBJ’s visions, have resisted in part by drawing on social scientists to question the intellectual premises of this market invasion.

The free market, these scholars argue, is a fantasy. Market activities are deeply “embedded” in social relations. You can see that embeddedness writ large in the way government spending decisions and tax codes inevitably favor some investments, industries, and even specific businesses, over others. (The Bush administration, cheerleader of the free market, is a case in point. Hello, Halliburton!) You can see embeddedness writ small in the way businesspeople prefer to deal with friends rather than cold-bloodedly pursuing the maximal deal. Even among commodities traders, the financial is personal. And you can see embeddedness in the many ways that market-driven spending is socially inefficient. Exhibit A: the American health care system. The United States is first in the world in per-capita health spending, twenty-fourth among OECD nations in life expectancy. Critics of market logic have also attacked the standard criterion for identifying success—maximizing wealth, especially as it is usually measured by Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita. Finally, no event more dramatically reveals how the social undergirds the economic than the vast credit bailout the Bush administration proposed for Wall Street in September. (It was a bit like watching Toto pull the curtain back to reveal that the Great Oz was a creature of the professor.)

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One breakthrough in this intellectual counterattack against the marketer is the United Nations' Human Development Index (HDI), a measure of how well a nation is doing. The composers of the index specifically demoted wealth to only one of three equal components in the HDI. The other two components are life expectancy and education (as measured by adult literacy and school enrollment rates). Each of the three goals, advocates of the HDI argue, is equally important to quality of life. The political implication of the HDI is obvious: welfare-state initiatives, such as teacher training and mosquito abatement, matter as much as business expansion. Or, at minimum, business expansion is valued according to its positive effect on education and health. In the international rankings, most recently compiled in 2005, the United States was number two (after Luxembourg) in GDP per capita, but ranked only twelfth on the HDI. We are looking up at France, Finland, and Japan, all the way to Norway and Iceland at the top. Moreover, the United States fell ten HDI rungs in the last fifteen years or so. The HDI thus arms critics of market-oriented social policies, allowing them to argue that policies devoted primarily to economic growth—say, export-oriented agriculture—may do less overall good than policies that combine economic growth with welfare-state goals.

The Measure of America: American Human Development Report, 2008-2009 opens the domestic front in the struggle over defining the common good. *Measure* is an assemblage of statistics by the bushel, terse summaries of social science research, exposés of inequalities, and strong pleas for a progressive agenda. “Written, compiled, and edited” by Sarah Burd-Sharps, Kristen Lewis, and Eduardo Borges Martin, funded by the Rockefeller Foundation and Oxfam America as well as other notable organizations, supplied with background papers by serious researchers, guided by a blue-ribbon advisory committee, and blessed by Nobel Prize-winning economist Amartya Sen, *Measure* makes the case for adopting humane standards beyond wealth and argues for specific programs to meet those standards.

Measure sells its project in part by constructing an American version of the HDI and then offering rankings upon rankings of states and congressional districts by their overall American HDI and other statistical measures. As magazine publishers well know, rankings sell—the hundred greatest movies, twenty top cities to visit, forty most innovative colleges, whatever. Here you can find your state's or your congressional district's standing on dozens of dimensions, but most especially on HDI. Massachusetts Congressional District 8, where sits *Boston Review*, ranks sixty-eighth in overall HDI. My Berkeley, California, CD 9 ranks fifty-fifth. But we both languish far below the king of the mountain, New York CD 14, which includes western Queens, Manhattan's Midtown, Central Park, East Side, and Turtle Bay. Turtle Bay is home—by coincidence?—to the United Nations. On the bottom rung is California CD 20, the largely rural Fresno area, home to many poor Mexican immigrants.

Measure also sells its message in a text-book style format with several colors, scores of charts, icons, figures, boxes, and sidebars, and enough boldface passages and repetitions—not to mention an interactive Web site (<http://www.measureofamerica.org>)—to hold the attention of the most distracted undergraduate or politician.

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That message, the compilers tell us, is that we need to replace an understanding of progress that asks “how is the economy doing?” with one that asks “how are people doing?” Then we will see that America is not doing well. It is slipping behind other countries. And it has great internal inequalities, especially by class and race. Redressing those inequalities, lifting the HDIs of places like California CD 20 and of the nation as a whole, will require major

public investments.

Measure is thus that hybrid, the political scholarly document. Such hybrids inevitably contain tensions between, on the one side, the scholars' compulsion to describe the world in all its complexity and murkiness and, on the other side, the policy analysts' need to deliver simple plans and sell them boldly. Yet even before *Measure* is a book of scholarship and a political platform, it is a statement of values.

Measure assumes, as does the United Nations' HDI, that the good life is about three things: living long, going to school, and being wealthy. Most Americans would be dissatisfied with this definition and the results it yields. Although I (and probably you) find Manhattan attractive, most Americans would not consider New York CD 14 the best place to live—even if they could regularly lunch at the Museum of Modern Art and even if they could afford to live there.

When they decide where to live, Americans certainly weigh a community's healthfulness, level of learning, and earning opportunities as important criteria. The American HDI index accordingly puts Connecticut, Massachusetts, and the District of Columbia (treated, for purposes of the book, as a state) at the top of the state list. But Americans looking for new homes also give great weight to space—indoor space in bedrooms and recreation rooms and the outdoor space of yards and access to nature. And they are, of course, constrained in their choices by housing affordability. The top two states for spaciousness and affordability are North Dakota and West Virginia (ranked twenty-sixth and fiftieth by the HDI). Americans also look for neighborhoods that are safe from violent crime. That puts Vermont (fourteenth), North Dakota again, and Maine (twenty-ninth) at the top.

Most Americans value family as central to the good life. All but a relatively few Americans, for example, prefer to be married. The two states that ranked highest in 2000 on the percentage of people fifteen and older who were married were Idaho and Utah (forty-first and twenty-ninth on the HDI). They are also the two states to go to if you want to live where women rarely have births out of wedlock. In one passage, the authors note that children do much better when raised by two biological parents, yet that is not factored into their index. The back of the book lists several dozen social indicators, including relative availability of maternity leave but not incidence of divorce, abortion, or out-of-wedlock births. The magazine *Best Life* made its own rankings of the one hundred best cities to raise a family, drawing on measures that include school test scores, number of pediatricians, divorce rates, and commuting times. Their top three cities were Honolulu, Virginia Beach, and Billings, Montana (in the 76th-, 138th-, and 328th-ranked congressional districts by HDI).

For many, if not most, Americans, faith is also central to the good life. The states where people most often go to church are Alabama, Louisiana, and South Carolina (ranked in the forties by HDI). You may value “community” in the sense of neighbors helping one another. Rates of volunteering are highest in Utah and Nebraska (twenty-third). And, what about just attaining some peace of mind? Estimates suggest you will find fewer depressed people in Hawaii, Florida, and Maryland (sixth, twenty-fourth, and fifth). Some of these alternative metrics appear in the back pages of *Measure*; others require further searching.

Simply, what is “human development” for one person may not be for another. The values of Turtle Bay expressed in the American HDI—which, by the way, weights post-graduate degrees heavily, helping explain why Washington, D.C. ranks so highly—do not necessarily accord with those of most Americans. *Measure* does not address the question of whose values are to be maximized. The book is a difficult sell to average citizens and the politicians whom they elect because it is grounded in the worldview of Manhattan's East Side or—to list the remaining top five congressional districts—of Virginia's eighth, Alexandria, and California's fourteenth, forty-

eighth, and thirtieth: Silicon Valley, coastal Orange County, and western Los Angeles County (from Malibu to Santa Monica to Beverly Hills—human development 90210-style). What might grate the average American is not so much the final rankings—although no one likes to be assessed as mediocre—but the failure to acknowledge the question of whose values we should maximize. Then again, the average American may not be the audience for this book.

To stay with the status quo is itself a policy choice, one premised on claims about society that are far less substantiated and defensible than those in this book.

If we look at a couple of the HDI's more technical features—briefly, I promise—we can see there as well that decisions which seem merely procedural have significant implications. One would not know from the text of *Measure* that there is a sizeable statistical literature on the construction of the United Nations' HDI. Take the one-third of the HDI that represents wealth. The international version uses, mainly for lack of an alternative, a lousy number—per-capita GDP. (Per capita measures of wealth are lacking because they mask how equally or unequally wealth is distributed. A relative handful of Bill Gateses, Warren Buffets, and Oprahs makes average Americans look richer than they really are.) *Measure* uses instead the median earnings of all workers aged sixteen or over. Much better, but still freighted with issues.

This indicator, for example, ignores the number of people who are unemployed. So the District of Columbia can easily rank first in the income component of the HDI even though it has the fifth-highest unemployment rate (and second-highest poverty rate) in the nation. Furthermore, both the earnings and the unemployment statistics ignore people who are incarcerated. Given that the District ranks highest in crime rates, it probably also ranks high in young men behind bars. In addition the earnings measure lumps together part-timers and full-time workers, which means that communities where many teens work after school—middle-class neighborhoods—consequently do not look as rich as they really are. As a last example of technical pitfalls, the compilers of *Measure* do not adjust earnings for cost of living. What would happen to the HDI scores of Manhattan's East Side or Los Angeles' West Side if one dared include the rent?

These formulas, numbers, and rankings seem largely for show. The bulk of the actual text, rather than the tables, is devoted to summarizing the picture of inequality in America; to explaining why many Americans are shorted in income, education, and life spans; and to suggesting what ought to be done to remedy those shortages. Here, too, the scholar spots some holes. Although a robust bibliography sustains many of the claims, some of the book's assertions have no support in the back pages. And, often, the authors state as fact what remains hotly debated in the research literature—for example, that investing in schools significantly improves cognitive development, that firearm availability causes homicides, or that the quality of neighborhoods substantially shapes the quality of children.

And yet, *Measure* is good enough for government work. That is, despite its myriad flaws, its conclusions are sound and sensible enough to guide policy. New policies cannot await the certainties that scientists demand of one another. The United States is clearly underachieving in its commitment to provide its citizens with life, liberty, and the opportunity to pursue happiness. We are an exceptionally unequal society and in many ways that inequality is widening. (As one example, the money provided for college assistance has been shifting from lower-income to middle-income families.) American inequality injures not only those on the short end but also the nation as a whole. We have much to learn and to copy from other nations. To stay with the status quo is itself a policy choice, one premised on claims about society that are far less substantiated and defensible than those in this book.

This brings us to reading *Measure* as a political document, which it is meant to be, complete with Web site, Capitol Hill briefings, and mission statement:

to stimulate fact-based public debate about and political attention to human development issues in the United States and to empower people to hold elected officials accountable for progress on issues we all care about: health, education and income.

Godspeed. I assume that the phrase “issues we all care about” is intended to claim that these are goals everyone can subscribe to, unlike, say, gay rights or environmentalism. But if *Measure* means to convert the unconverted, it does not try that hard. Not only does it not directly address the question of whose values we measure, but the kind of progress the compilers seek is defined by an obviously liberal wish list: universal health insurance, supportive housing for the homeless, compassionate care for the elderly, gun control, two years of universal preschool, widening the scope of standardized tests, and so on. They do not give serious consideration to the personal-responsibility agenda of activists on the other side, much less to small-government or personal-freedom agendas. Barack Obama lectures black parents to read to their children, but *Measure* proposes sending registered nurses into homes to teach parents how to parent and recommends paying mothers to take their children in for check-ups. Moreover, the authors barely address the price tag for their policies, how to pay for them, cost-benefit analyses, or what the order of priority ought to be.

Do these concerns indict any effort at applying statistical measures to our understanding of the good life? Of course not. Scholars have made great progress in measuring, for example, wealth, economic inequality, upward mobility, academic achievement, crime, and even faith and psychological well-being. Serious public policy discussions need to incorporate such data. What social scientists cannot provide is the final weighting and summing up of all the values we hope to maximize, the single yardstick, the rankings of “best” to “worst.” That is the duty of citizens and their elected officials.

As a political-scholarly hybrid, *Measure* is not likely to persuade people on the conservative—or even the moderate—side of current debates. The scholar’s fantasy of politics as a courtroom where experts present the researched facts and a learned public adjudicates wisely rarely becomes reality. Yet, if politics is more like trench warfare and scholars are the ammunition mules, then *Measure* provides a great deal of firepower. It especially arms progressives with more arguments, evidence, data, and numbers—many, many numbers—to challenge the worldview that adding dollars to the GDP is a sufficient public agenda.

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