

Sen-sational Economist

“Food for Thought” by Jonathan Steele, in *The Guardian* (Mar. 31, 2001), 119 Farringdon Rd., London EC1R 3ER, U.K.; “Portrait: Amartya Sen” by Meghnad Desai, in *Prospect* (July 2000), 4 Bedford Sq., London WC1B 3RA, U.K.

Although a celebrity in his native India since winning the 1998 Nobel prize in economics, Amartya Sen is otherwise little known outside academic circles in Britain and the United States. Yet his ideas have had a global impact. By the reckoning of a fellow economist, Sudhir Anand of Oxford University, Sen “has made fundamental contributions to at least four fields: social choice theory, welfare economics, economic measurement, and development economics.”

Born just north of Calcutta in 1933, on the campus of a university founded by poet Rabindranath Tagore, Sen went to study at Trinity College, Cambridge, in 1953, returning a little more than a decade later to teach at the Delhi School of Economics. His serious scholarly attention in those days was given to social choice, the abstruse, mathematically oriented field opened up by RAND Corporation economist Kenneth Arrow in a 1951 essay showing how hard it could be for democratic mechanisms to reflect a majority’s true preferences.

Grappling with Arrow’s paradox, Sen “returned to first principles on the nature of choice,” explains Desai, who teaches economics at the London School of Economics. A person choosing to buy fish rather than meat may not be asserting a simple preference for fish, Sen pointed out. He may be acting on a whim, or perhaps participating in a meat boycott in support of a meatpackers’ strike. “Sen showed that we must take into account notions of sympathy or commitment in order to understand voting behavior, paying for public goods . . . and so on.” In short, he brought economics closer to the real world. Sen’s 1970 book, *Collective Choice and*

Social Welfare, marked the end of a decade’s work on social choice and “a definitive advance on Arrow’s work,” Desai says. The next year, Sen left Delhi and joined the London School of Economics.

In *Poverty and Famines* (1981), Sen studied the 1943 Bengal famine (and several others). By detailing the weekly arrivals of food grains in Calcutta, he showed that it was not a scarcity of food but the lack of money to buy it that caused the mass starvation. In short, says Desai, “Sen showed that a functioning market economy could leave millions dead.”

In the mid-1980s, Sen left Britain for Harvard University. With Pakistani economist Mahbub ul Haq, notes the *Guardian*’s Steele, he created “the Human Development Index as a rival to the World Bank’s system of ranking countries by classical macroeconomic criteria such as savings rates and GNP [gross national product].” On the new index—which incorporated measures of life expectancy, adult literacy, and income inequality—rich countries with unequal income distribution scored lower than some sub-Saharan African countries. The index soon proved influential in UN, World Bank, and International Monetary Fund circles.

Sen (who is now Master of Trinity College, Cambridge) has in recent decades “made his peace with the market,” Desai told Steele, “though on his own terms and without going all-out for a free market.” Sen himself denies ever having been antimarket. As for globalization, Sen maintains that it is “neither particularly new or a folly,” and that the real problem is not free trade but the inequality of global power.

SOCIETY

How Mothers Find Time

“Maternal Employment and Time with Children: Dramatic Change or Surprising Continuity?” by Suzanne M. Bianchi, in *Demography* (Nov. 2000), Carolina Population Center, Univ. of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Univ. Sq., CB#8120, 123 W. Franklin St., Chapel Hill, N.C. 27516-3997.

Even though many more American women with children have gone off to work in recent decades, today’s mothers

still spend about as much time—an average of five and a half hours a day—with their offspring under 18 as mothers did in 1965. So

time diary studies show, reports Bianchi, a sociologist at the University of Maryland.

How can that be? Mainly, she maintains, because mothers today, for the most part, continue to do what they must to ensure their family's well-being, as well as their own.

For one thing, many working mothers cut back on outside work when their children are very young, Bianchi notes. Only one-third of new mothers return to full-time work within six months of their child's birth, or "remain firmly attached to full-time work during their childbearing years."

At the same time, Americans are having fewer children, so mothers are able to give more individual attention to the children they do have. In the past, not only did mothers with larger families have less time for each child, but they often called on older children to mind the younger ones. They also did more cleaning and cooking than today's women. Now, even stay-at-home mothers do less housework than in the past—25 hours a week in 1995, compared with more than 37 hours in 1965. Working mothers, who did nearly 24 hours of housework a week in 1965, have cut that to less than 18 hours.

Working mothers have also cut back on volunteer work, leisure pursuits, and even sleep. In a 1998 study, working moms reported having 12 fewer "free time" hours a week than the stay-at-home mothers

reported, and getting six fewer hours of sleep.

(A recent, much publicized University of Michigan study, based on children's time diaries, kept with parental aid in some cases, found that working mothers with children ages three to 12 in 1997 spent only 48 fewer minutes a day with them than stay-at-home moms did—and about the same amount of time as stay-at-home moms spent in 1981.)

Even stay-at-home mothers aren't with their school-age children much of the day, of course. And in recent decades, moms have increasingly waved goodbye to their younger "preschool" children, too. In the late 1960s, less than 10 percent of children ages three to five were in nursery school or some other form of preschool. But by 1997, the number was several times greater. Fifty-two percent of the children of working mothers were enrolled in preschools (including child care settings with educational programs)—and so were 44 percent of the kids of stay-at-home mothers. With fewer brothers and sisters today, Bianchi observes, children "are often judged to 'need' prekindergarten socialization to launch them on their educational careers."

For children lucky enough to live in intact families, she points out, there has been a bonus. Married fathers spent nearly four hours a day with their kids in 1998, an hour more than they did in 1965.

Whom Do You Trust?

"Producing and Consuming Trust" by Eric M. Uslaner, in *Political Science Quarterly* (Winter 2000–2001), 475 Riverside Dr., Ste. 1274, New York, N.Y. 10115–1274.

What ails the American civic spirit? The leading school of thought today is that as people have cut back their participation in voluntary organizations, their trust in others—so vital to a community's health—has declined. "Joiners become more tolerant, less cynical, and more empathetic to the misfortunes of others," maintains Robert Putnam, the author of *Bowling Alone* (2000) and a seminal 1995 article of the same title. He believes that when individuals take part in civic organizations,

their trust in people they know leads to trust in those they don't know.

Uslaner, a University of Maryland political scientist, is skeptical. Joining with people much like oneself in a bowling league or a fraternal or religious organization, he argues, does not promote trust in strangers. We learn that kind of trust, essential for a civil society, "early in life from our parents, who impart to us a sense of optimism and a belief that we are the masters of our own fate."