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 Urban Studies 405
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 Final Examination

Question:

What criteria (theoretical and practical) should be utilized for judging the success or value of a religious-based community development project? How, if at all, would these criteria differ from those you would utilize in judging the success or value of a secular community development project. Explain and defend your answer.

America's communities are in decline – or so do most Americans believe, according to sociologist Robert Wuthnow.¹ Traditional communal ties are unraveling as our social institutions are transformed to accommodate the changing realities of modern society. As a result, many people feel that a sense of community that was present not too long ago is now conspicuously absent, leaving them with a sense of loss and lack of fulfillment in their everyday lives. On a more fundamental level, regardless of whether the actual amount of civic participation has declined over the past few decades or whether it has just taken on new forms, it remains a fact that a sizeable percentage of Americans are disadvantaged, disenfranchised and living in poverty. Excluded from sharing the American dream of wealth and abundance, they are faced with existential issues of providing shelter and nourishment for their families and themselves.

It is on this continuum between questions of quality-of-life and matters of survival that community development projects (CDPs) locate their activities. Given an accelerating shift of society's focus away from the community towards the individual and an ever-widening gap between the rich and the poor, their mission today emerges to be as important as it has ever been. Thus, the latent significance of their actions warrants a closer look at how these organizations define their goals. Consequently, then, this essay will attempt to examine possible philosophical as well as practical instruments for assessing the value of both religious and secular community development projects.

By definition, a community development project seeks to strengthen, enhance, and extend the potential of a community. To be able to judge what constitutes such improvements first requires us to gain a clear understanding of the term *community*. Merriam-Webster's dictionary defines community alternatively as “a unified body of individuals,” or as “an interacting population of various kinds of individuals [...] in a common location.” At the basis of the term then, are singular persons that interrelate with each other to form a larger, cohesive entity based on spatial proximity or some other coalescing characteristic. Immediately, two different methodologies to constructively enhance community arise. First, the *individualist approach*: since community is made up of individuals, one can improve that community by helping each of its constituents directly on a personal level. Alternatively, one can take a *structuralist approach*: since a community also can be seen as an organizational body, one can strengthen it on an institutional level, which then in turn will benefit its members.² Furthermore, two different types of communities can be distinguished: the community that

¹ In Robert Wuthnow, *Loose Connections*.

² This follows from the Marxist understanding that while individuals create society, society also in turn shapes the individual. See Michael Zweig, *Economics and Liberation Theology*, p. 24 for an instance of this often-presented argument.

is the target of development and the community of ‘developers.’³ While the primary focus will and should lodge on the former group, secondary effects on the latter group ought not be neglected. Additionally, it is worth investigating the ways in which these two groups relate to each other. The principal question, though, remains: what are the kinds of positive developing actions a CDP should undertake?

There exist a number of universal ideals readily agreed upon by religious, as well as secular, progressive organizations that can act as a broad guideline. Generally, progressive thinkers share the beliefs that community development projects should guarantee basic human rights, contribute to social and economic justice, and restore the dignity and “inherent worth” of the human person by liberating them from oppression.⁴ Furthermore, it is a shared belief that, as long as those most basic issues are unresolved, the accurate measure of the well-being of a community is how its weakest members are faring.⁵ Thus, any project attempting to help communities must ultimately have at its root a strategy to alleviate the suffering of the poor and oppressed.⁶

Accordingly, if one were to follow the individualist approach to improving communities as outlined above, success would be measured quantitatively by how many people were helped to escape the conditions of poverty. This method of evaluation underlies *one* of the primary goals of Habitat for Humanity, as described by Sheldon Rich: decent, affordable housing is seen as an important factor in breaking a vicious cycle of poverty and disenfranchisement – thus, it follows that the more homes get built for the poor, the better. Rich also makes the point that such thinking represents the *sole* goal of many other community development corporations (CDCs) that concentrate on the housing problem.⁷

Likewise, one can look at the personal benefits that members of the helping organization derive from such actions. For members of religious organizations, particularly those of a Christian denomination, aiding the poor will carry the personal benefit of acting according to religious doctrine and belief, and thus, establishing or verifying that one is a good member of one’s respective religious community. However, it will be my argument that religious and secular projects essentially do not differ in this point. Every individual has a personal narrative, and for the present discussion it does not matter whether that narrative is based on religious, humanist or other values. As long as the narrative contains some kind of incentive to engage in certain actions (promise of salvation, a clean conscience, etc.), the individual will derive a genuine benefit from performing those actions. That the emphasis on helper benefit can be destructive to the overall impact of a project has been argued by Baggett who contends that if “voluntarism fails [...] to integrate the (perhaps contrary)

³ In theory these groups are not necessarily distinct, yet in practice they often turn out to be.

⁴ For example, see Michael Zweig’s definition of liberation theology, in *Economics and Liberation Theology*, p.4.

⁵ This follows directly from the universalist position and finds exemplary expression the Pastoral Message of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops on the Tenth Anniversary of the Economic Pastoral. (no pagination)

⁶ Here the sources are too many to mention as virtually every denominational or secular group arrives at this conclusion. Again, examples can be found in the Pastoral Message of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops (no pagination); in Jim Wallis, *Renewing the Heart of Faith*, p. 22; and in Michael Zweig, *Economics and Liberation Theology*, p. 8, among others.

⁷ Sheldon Rich, Guest lecture given in class.

perspectives of those who are supposed to be helped, it can become just another feel-good leisure activity [for the helpers].”⁸

Baggett’s warning raises the question of how helpers and the helped should relate to each other. Here the influential writings of Martin Buber can be illuminating. To characterize human interaction, he introduces the primary words *I/Thou* and *I/It*. In an *I/It* association the self is seen as different from the other, which is merely experienced. Within such an *I/It* association, “nothing in the situation is changed.”⁹ Thus the only way to effectively engage in social activism is by establishing an *I/Thou* connection with those in need, which means relating to them on an equal level. John Berger uses a similar dyad of concepts when he talks about the *naked* subject, which is objectified by a spectator distancing himself from what he gazes upon; and the *nude* subject, to which the viewer relates by identifying their mutual similarities.

Accepting that those in need of help are indeed no different from those able to offer help, one can return to the original question of what kind of measures to take to liberate the oppressed, and see a new course of action emerge. If members of both communities are indeed fundamentally equal, then the source of one group’s suffering cannot be located solely within the members of that group. Instead, one group’s misfortunes and the other group’s fortunes appear to be interrelated, one being the corollary of the other. A memorable quote by Marx should drive this point home: “Behind every great fortune there is a great robbery.”¹⁰ Having come to such a conclusion, one can then try to analyze the source of inequality on a structural level.

Returning to Habitat for Humanity, one can find the notion of equal-level relationships applied in the organization’s second guiding principle: to strengthen and to build anew community by fostering interaction between their lower class homesteaders and the predominantly upper-middle class volunteers in the construction process. However, other progressive CDPs assert that merely encouraging exchange between individuals alone is not enough. According to their standards, Habitat for Humanity falls short of fully realizing the need for *structural* transformation since it does not successfully criticize the inhumane nature of the underlying economic system, which is regarded as the root cause of inequalities in wealth distribution.

Harvey Cox argues that “for all religions of the world [...], The Market [economy] has become the most formidable rival” since it perverts the universal principle of human stewardship over the earth into real estate speculation and commodifies the most basic human functions and needs.¹¹ Robert C. Linthicum refers to a system of systemic evil created by pursuit of money, power and prestige – exactly those values that the market economy holds so highly.¹² Secular thinkers can arrive at similar conclusions, considering that the mainstream economy is “based on an extreme form of individualism,”¹³ that forces all interaction to take place on the objectifying *I/It* level of Buber, which makes meaningful human interchange impossible. Liberation theologian Paulo Freire accordingly urges us to take active part in political action in this matter since “[w]ashing one’s hands of the conflict

⁸ Jerome P. Baggett, *Habitat for Humanity*, p. 138

⁹ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, p.44-45

¹⁰ as told by Jeffrey Dekro during his guest lecture on 04/23/2001

¹¹ Harvey Cox, *The Market as God*, p. 80.

¹² Robert C. Linthicum, *City of God, City of Satan*, p. 42.

¹³ see Michel Zweig, *Economics and Liberation Theology*, p. 21 for this argument.

between the powerful and the powerless means to side with the powerful, not to be neutral.”¹⁴

In practice a number of alternative forms of economic associations have been formed that seek to limit the influence of the capitalist market economy and promote just stewardship of land and equal equity distribution in the production process. The most prominent examples of such projects within the realms of housing and labor, respectively, are Community Land Trusts¹⁵ and the industrial co-operatives in the Basque region surrounding the city of Mondragon.¹⁶ These successful projects have matured beyond the stage of mere experiments and present a viable alternative to succumbing to mainstream economic powers that CDPs should take into consideration if they want to be serious about societal change on a structural level. Once more, the sole difference between religious and secular groups on the issue of reform or revolution for economic justice lies in the fact that religious groups regard the pursuit of economic justice as “a work of faith and an imperative of the Gospel”¹⁷ (or other scripture) while secular groups make similar inferences by examining the realities of human existence. It should be emphasized again that this difference vanishes if seen within the context of an overarching personal moral narrative.

In conclusion, a possible system of evaluation for religious as well as secular CDPs has been outlined that starts with concern for the individual, relates to her in a personal, compassionate way and is at the same time aware of structural inequalities that it attempts to remedy. However, it is important to note that the above argument does not and cannot represent more than one particular opinion from the ocean of possible attitudes on the topic. It is an opinion specific, and thus limited to, the beliefs of the author, shaped by the material presented in class. Arnold Farr convincingly argues that all thought is *situated* – it has a location within a certain epistemic community and can thus never be regarded to be universal, as other communities will not share the same notions of what issues are important and what questions are to be asked.¹⁸ Consequently, it might well be a better use of one’s limited resources not to try to ponder the question about methods of judgment of community development projects, but to instead ask who should decide about this question. Democratization is an important tenet of the progressive movement and its implications should be evaluated at every stage of any discussion.¹⁹

¹⁴ Paulo Freire, *The Politics of Education*, p.122.

¹⁵ as outlined in the video about Community Land Trusts shown in class and the accompanying reading, *The Community Land Trust Handbook*.

¹⁶ as described in the video about Mondragon shown in class.

¹⁷ Pastoral Message of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops on the Tenth Anniversary of the Economic Pastoral. (no pagination)

¹⁸ Arnold Farr, Guest lecture given to class on 04/16/2001

¹⁹ Argument taken from Andrew Lamas’ class lecture on 03/26/2001

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