DEVELOPMENT AS THE RESTORATION OF MEANING

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INTRODUCTION

From World War II to the present, the definition of development has undergone a continual metamorphosis that mirrors a continually changing normative environment. An examination of its past evolution will demonstrate the normative character of the concept. Once the normative basis of development has been established, it becomes more evident that potential interpretations of the concept are in fact limitless. Development is not logically confined to an increasing volume of goods and services or to a reordering of distribution.

Development may have little to do with enhanced material welfare. For example, under conditions of relative affluence, development may be better understood as an amelioration of those social pathologies which are by definition dehumanizing.

Where the availability of food, clothing, shelter, and social services is adequate or superfluous, additional increments of any of these items are unlikely to generate any significant improvement in the quality of human existence. Under such conditions the primary constraint to development may be the loss of meaning engendered by what Max Weber described as the process of rationalization. In that case, development might be most fruitfully interpreted as the restoration of meaning.

NORMATIVE BASIS OF DEVELOPMENT

The claim that development is a normative concept, has been noted by several observers of society (Stanley 1967 301, Myrdal 1968 49, Goulet 1971 452-453, Seers 1973 6).

Though most social scientists might be willing to concede that the concept of development is normative, very few actually reflect that concession in their work. That the pervasively normative nature of development is not generally taken into consideration by social scientists is illustrated by the selective manner in which some aspects of development are labeled as normative while others are treated as givens. For example, in his discussion of how economic development might be defined, Henry Bruton is willing "to identify various characteristics that are generally felt to be desirable — literacy, 'good' housing, life expectancy, and so on — and to define economic development in terms of the extent to which an economy is able to provide these services to its people" (Bruton, 1965: 1). Yet in the same discussion income distribution is rejected as an inappropriate measure, since such a factor "has normative implications that are outside the context of the present argument." Factors that are "generally felt to be desirable," are accepted as givens. Presumably they fall outside the realm of normative evaluation.

One might sympathize with Bruton's inability to recognize the uniformly normative character of literacy, "good" housing, life expectancy, and income distribution. At the time of his writing, income distribution has not yet been admitted as a "self-evident" development objective. In the context of the mid-sixties a concern with income distribution was likely to be associated with leftist political tendencies. The adjective "normative" serves as nothing more than a codeword for that which is radical or merely controversial.

Yet despite an understanding of why some factors are labeled as normative and others are not, we should not lose sight of the more basic phenomenon that Bruton's comments illustrate. That which is novel, innovative, or perhaps threatening is likely to be dismissed as normative and therefore outside of rational consideration. One reason for examining in detail the pervasively normative nature of development is to eliminate such a false distinction as a basis for rejecting definitions of development that do not conform to conventional, currently "self-evident" conceptions.

Specifically, I wish to anticipate and thus preclude the argument that some development goals somehow represent natural or logical manifestations of human growth while others are mere normative whimsies which cannot be rationally sustained. If more viable, flexible forms of social organization are to be fostered, then we must take seriously our ability to choose. A precondition for real choice requires that more than lip service be given to the normative character of development. When all possible definitions of development are

genuinely acknowledged as equally normative, a greater potential exists for actual choice among them. At least some choices are not then subject to rejection after being labeled as normative while others, acquire an aura of naturalness and inevitability.

Another more sophisticated position is that although development is indeed a normative concept it is nonetheless possible to rank its various expressions as more or less reasonable. Such a ranking is in turn based on a putative hierarchy of values. For example, in discussing policy recommendations (a subset of which would be development objectives) Anderson rejects the position that it is impossible to specify what standards ought to be taken into account in the evaluation of alternative policies:

> This, of course, is not the case. To be regarded as "reasonable," a policy recommendation must be justified as lawful; it must be plausibly argued that it is equitable and that it entails an efficient use of resources (Anderson, 1979: 712).

Others have attempted to identify what Anderson refers to as "fundamental considerations" - that is, standards that any evaluative system must meet (MacRae 1977, Klosterman 1976). But whether the proposed standard is "internal consistency" or "the public interest" or some other criterion, the question of its legitimacy as an ultimate standard goes begging. If the unquestioned primacy of such values as consistency, equality, efficiency, or the public interest could ever be established then perhaps other, relatively less desirable end states might be rejected. There is no consensus, in theory or in practice, regarding which values are "fundamental."

The concept of development is potentially extremely variable in content. The manner in which development is defined is limited only by the nature of the end state that is sought. Even within the relatively short post-World War II period, development objectives have been redefined significantly and frequently. Packenham identified three distinct interpretations of development during the period 1947 to 1968. The first approach, epitomized by the Marshall Plan of 1947 and Point Four legislation of 1949, established economic development of under-developed areas for the first time as a national policy. The objectives of American aid soon changed, however, as military defense was emphasized by the Cold War approach. Under the Mutual Security Act of 1951 the main basis for the American aid effort was "to strengthen the mutual security and individual and collective defenses of the free world." The emphasis on security in turn gave way to a concern for political democracy. This concern was embodied in Title IX of the Foreign Assistance Act of 1966, which provided for assuring maximum participation on the part of the people of developing countries by encouraging democratic institutions. Thus political development as defined by the growth of political participation and the building of democratic institutions become a goal of equal rank and salience with economic development (Packenham, 1973. 44, 49, 100).

As different values were emphasized, the way in which development was defined, and consequently the objectives of development agencies, underwent corresponding changes in emphasis and content.

During the period following that treated by Packenham, at least one additional significant change occurred in the way in which development came to be conventionally defined. Equality, which had before been so scrupulously eschewed by development practitioners as normative, was transformed into an unquestioned development objective. Within a decade, what had once been apprehended as falling outside the legitimate purview of development specialists has become a primary area of concern. The newly articulated value placed on equality translated into a new definition of development as increased opportunities and income for a specific subgroup, namely, the poorest segment of a given society. For example, the concept of "broad-based development" as defined by Owens and Shaw (1974 3), meant "the establishment of a set of institutions which would give the underprivileged person in the poor countries an opportunity to participate in the decisions most important to his life and which, furthermore, would link him to the mainstream of modern society." Development objectives defined by such quantitative indices as per capita GNP, newsprint consumption, energy consumption, and number of physicians and hospital beds

per 1000 population became irrelevant, since such statistics masked, or at least did not acknowledge, the unequal distribution of goods and services.

Brazil became the archetype of a nation where development, as measured by the standard of growth in per capita GNP, was clearly being achieved yet where the position of the poorest 40 percent of the population was deteriorating in absolute as well as relative terms. The obvious failure of such a situation to represent any kind of meaningful improvement meant that development had to be redefined. The concept had to more closely correspond either to values that had up to that point been hidden or to values that were newly emergent due to changes in the political and social stances of governments and other institutions. In either case the value-based or normative character of development is confirmed.

There is evident in some calls for a reduction in inequality a certain embarrassment — the feeling that perhaps the invocation of values that previously had been explicitly excluded from the dialogue on development must now be justified on a quasi-formal or intellectual basis. For example, Adelman and Morris (1973, 192) after an explication of the fundamental values upon which they base their recommendations for a more equitable distribution of resources, point out that "these value judgments . . . are consonant with more than one social philosophy." After defining development as the elimination of poverty, unemployment, and inequality, Seers (1973, 7) singles out inequality as as objective in ths own right, as the third element in development.

The appeal to some putative universal standard represents an unsuccessful attempt to deny one consequence of the normative character of development. Its definition can never be wholly based on objective, rationalistic, indisputable premises. The fact that development professionals find it necessary to offer arguments to the contrary is symptomatic of their discomfort in dealing with "non-rational" factors. In the absence of any universally agreed-upon set of values, their arguments merely confirm that evaluative premises underlie the formulation of development objectives. Such attempts to strengthen the admissability of equality as a development objective further illustrate that all definitions of development are derived from a substratum of values of doubtful legitimacy at least in the context of the social sciences.

CONSEQUENCES OF DISENCHANTMENT

If the meanings ascribed to development are limited only by the range of values that might be used to define a desirable end state, then how can we arrive at a definition of development which is conceptually acceptable to diverse perspectives? Unless one is willing to argue that the social sciences are in a position to identify which values or which end states are more legitimate, we are left with the possibility of an infinite number of definitions of development, none more supportable than the next.

What is required is a "neutral" working definition, a kind of generic definition of development, the terms of which are general enough to encompass all of the previously cited interpretations which have formed the basis for U.S. policy in the past as well as alternative definitions. Such a working definition represents a benchmark, a common starting point against which competing interpretations of development can be assessed. The working definition also identifies an ultimate objective which can be endorsed without reservation by all those seeking development, regardless of how they define the concept.

Goulet (1968, 97) offers the definition that comes closest to meeting all of these criteria: "the well-coordinated series of changes, sudden or gradual, whereby a given population and all of its components move from a phase of life perceived as less human to one perceived as more human."

The criteria for assessing whether conditions are "less human" or "more human" will vary according to the normative position assumed. The value of Goulet's definition is that it helps make clear that achieving development depends first on identifying those factors that limit the attainment of a more human condition in any given social context. The nature of these constraining factors may vary considerably. In the context of the Third World, those conditions that make life less human will be easily identified as the standard targets of conventional development efforts. Being more human necessarily entails "being," that is, existing. And securing the material basis for existence is readily subsumed under Goulet's interpretation of development.

It is in the context of the First World, however, that Goulet's definition becomes particularly suggestive. In those societies that are generally designated as already developed, further development is often assumed to mean more of the same — be it GNP, automobiles per capita, or televisions per household. Yet it is not all self-evident that continuing to enhance material welfare will indefinitely generate a more human existence.

One indicator of the weakness of tying the concept of development to increased consumption of goods and services is the use of the term "overdevelopment" (Chodak, 1973, 115, Anderson 1976, 3). The use of such a term is prima facie evidence of the need to select a new normative criterion to serve as the basis for development. If it is possible to get too much of "the good life" or if the negative consequences of attaining that life begin to outweigh its putative benefits, then the normative foundation upon which the definition of "good" rests much be extremely insecure. The indices of development such as gross national product (GNP) per capita, doctors/1000 and vehicles/1000, contain built-in contradictions. Advocates of such indices must argue either that additional vehicles are to be valued regardless of the absolute numbers involved or that there is some ideal number of vehicles per thousand which defines the good life. Neither alternative is reasonable. In theory it should be impossible to achieve too much development. How is it possible to approach too closely to an ideal, desired state? The phenomenon of "overdevelopment" is a consequence of selecting a normative base which is suspect because of the anomalies it generates. Goulet's definition is logically, superior, if only because it is impossible to suffer from overdevelopment when development is defined as moving toward a more human condition.

The question implicit in Goulet's definition is, "What conditions now impede the attainment of a more human condition?" There is no assumption that those factors that once made for a less human society in the past should continue to determine what development objectives are relevant to the contemporary situation. Rather, the task is to identify what emerging conditions now inhibit the movement of a population from a less human to a more human condition. A legitimate role of social science is to identify those conditions.

Using the twin phenomena of ratinalization and disenchantment, Max Weber identified the source of the tremendous growth in productivity and material wealth that characterized the industrial revolution, as well as a source of the discontent that accompanied it.

The spirits and gods to which were once directed the supplications and inquiries of a fearful and artless people were made superfluous by Newton, Darwin, and Watt. yet even though these demigods of rationality were able to multiply many fold humankind's control over the physical environment, they were not able to fill one gap that the displaced spirits left behind them. They were not able to provide meaning or to demonstrate that the existence of the world or of humankind had any meaning. When the old gods were destroyed, the meaning that they imparted to human existence was destroyed also. The loss of meaning constitutes one of the central themes of both classical and contemporary sociology (Bellah, 1970. 64, Martin, 1978. 53).

RESTORATION OF MEANING AS DEVELOPMENT

It is beyond the scope of this paper to conclusively demonstrate which factors most effectively limit the attainment of a more human condition under any given set of conditions. It is possible in principle, however, to identify what those limiting factors are likely to be within any particular social context. Further, it is possible in principle to argue that the amelioration of such factors constitutes development. What follows is a tentative example of the form such an arrangement would take.

In the context of the First World, the constraints to a more human existence derive from precisely those social pathologies that have been associated with the rationalization of economic production and the consequent explosion of material wealth. Attempts to secure the good life or a more human condtion which are based on an even greater expansion of material wealth will likely only exacerbate those social pathologies. In the industrialized nations the availability of goods and services no longer constitutes the primary factor constraining the attainment of a more human existence. Rather, we must address the social pathologies themselves as barriers to the

good life. Specifically, the dehumanizing sense of meaninglessness becomes a target of development.

If the requirement for meaning is an essential component of human existence, then the pursuit of meaning would perforce appear to be a potential dimension of development. Development, defined as the movement of a population from a phase of life perceived as less human to one perceived as more human, might well be expressed in terms of the restoration of meaning. In a society where meaninglessness engendered a less human existence, the restoration of meaning would constitute development — that is, would foster a more human existence.

Once meaning is accepted in principle as one possible dimension of development, we are confronted with the problem of what form a development program might take. A call for the restoration of meaning as a societal objective might justifiably evoke a certain amount of uneasiness. Some of the nastier expressions of romanticism have been characterized by similar appeals. For example, the volkisch ideology which was so central to Naziism was an attempt to self-consciously resurrect certain nonrational elements of German culture. Teutonized concepts such as soul, soil, blood, and race were invoked once more as a source of meaning and purpose. Hitler's analysis was that the German people had been "filled with a devine discontent" which led them to seek "a deeper meaning in life" (Rhodes 1980 101).

In light of the Nazi experience, a concern with the excesses that might be associated with attempts to restore meaning is understandable. A concern with excesses, however, should not result in a wholesale dismissal of all such attempts as romanticism or fascist ploys.

Other self-conscious, but more rationalistic, attempts to generate new sources of meaning have yeilded mixed results. The secular holidays of the French Republican calendar, designed to replace Christian celebrations labeled as irrational, were themselves perceived as arbitrary and devoid of inherent meaning (Zerubavel 1977 873). Such "manufactured," "rootless" celebrations are inimical to festivity and meaning alike (Pieper 1963 57). Comte's religion of society likewise failed to inspire. The need for a theodicy cannot be satisfied through an analysis of that need.

DISCUSSION

The Nazi period may have demonstrated that the intellectual and political costs associated with attempts to restore meaning can be exorbitant. The work of Weber and Comte may have demonstrated the inability of analysis to reverse the process of disenchantment. Such costs and failures, however, do not negate the value of reconceptualizing development as suggested here. For example, an adequate comprehension of the growth of ethnonational groups or the persistence of religious groups is impossible without an appreciation of the latently universal motivations behind them. These movements and groups cannot be fruitfully portrayed as aberrations or as temporary throwbacks in an otherwise steady evolutionary progression from less rational to more rational forms of social organization. Rather, their existence manifests a basic human need, the acknowledgement of which may become increasingly necessary to an understanding of behavior, especially in those environments where material needs have become less pronounced. Such phenomena as the resurgence of Islamic fundamentalism (Niapal, 1981), the sacred status accorded to ecological principles (Rappaport 1971.. 41), and attempts to form a Basque, or Welsh, or Inuit nation may be understood in part as reactions to the process of disenchantment and rationalization. Such phenomena represent a search for a more meaningful, and thus more human existence.

To the extent that conventional development efforts foster those conditions which give rise to a loss of meaning, they may actually engender a less human existence. Certainly meeting basic subsistence needs constitutes a legitimate development objective. Once such needs have been met, however, it is not clear that further development, that is, a more human existence, will be secured with additional increments of goods and services. Development becomes a much more useful conceptual tool when it encompasses meaning as a legitimate need. One practical consequence of such an expanded conception of development may be that development programs will be less likely to enervate the humanity that they were ostensibly designed to nourish. Even if we cannot, "create meaning" (Weber, 1949 57) we cannot be more mindful of those

already existing institutions where the process of rationalization has not yet been thoroughly effected.

In 1978 the Ontario Milk Marketing Board, the only purchaser of milk in the province, concluded that the use of milk cans represented an "out-moded, inefficient" method of transporting milk (Ontario Milk Producer, 1978: 6). Their decision meant that Old Order Amish farmers would have to install bulk tanks or stop dairying. Either response entailed an additional threat to the continued existence of the Old Order communities in Ontario. These communities represent islands of meaning in a secularized world. The decision to prohibit their use of milk cans is an example of a needless obeisance in the direction of a narrowly defined conception of development.

By being less dogmatic about what constitutes development we will be less likely to bring about the gratuitous destruction of communities where meaning still flourishes.

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