

COMMENTARY UPON GIORGIO VITTADINI'S,  
'INTERNATIONAL JUSTICE AND THE ROLE  
OF CHARITIES AND CIVIL SOCIETY, WITH SPECIAL  
REFERENCE TO THE ROLE OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH'

MARGARET S. ARCHER

Professor Vittadini's paper is concerned to make two fundamental points and ones that I believe are fundamentally correct. Firstly, he provides a sweeping critique of the quantitative, unifactoral and mechanistic approach taken by the social sciences in general towards development during the second half of the twentieth century. Secondly, and especially in the latter half of his paper, he shifts the debate away from quantitative and towards qualitative considerations about the process of development. Linking these two elements is a conviction that 'development' should never be taken as a synonym for 'economic growth', nor is it measurable by simple indicators of the latter. The facile elision of these two concepts will be only too familiar to most of us whose training in the social sciences took place during this period. 'Development' is one of those concepts which, like 'health', is by definition a good thing. The difficulty is that 'development', again like 'health', is a holistic, qualitative and evaluative term. Problems arise when analysts operationalise it much more crudely and then advocate policies whose effect is simplistically and supposedly to increase the operationalised term – most frequently GNP per capita.

Three distinct examples are given by Vittadini. These are all instances that undoubtedly proved very influential for both public and private attempts to stimulate 'development' – meaning some aspect of economic growth. In each case, the criticisms Vittadini advances are points well made and points well taken. However, I think there is a more generic critique that can be made of all three, as I will come to after reviewing them briefly.

1. The first instance concerns the growth model endorsed by 'international financial institutions' in advocating and dispensing aid to developing coun-

tries. The basic formula, namely that *increased aid* → *promotes investment* → *fostering development*, was found at the end of the twentieth century to be statistically significantly related for less than one quarter of the 88 countries examined. Yet, why, as Vittadini rightly asks, should it ever have been supposed that aid given (particularly 'tied aid') would translate directly and exclusively into (economic) investment? One main reason explaining why it does not is maladministration, which Vittadini considers to be at least partially responsible both for rising debt and for impeding aid from improving matters.

Here, as I see it, is the first point at which the author's critique could have been more sweeping from the methodological point of view. Why, in the open system that is society, should one expect to encounter such a one-to-one empirical relationship, given the potential range of contingencies that can intervene from the exterior and the numerous internal factors that can destroy it from within? As far as the latter are concerned, there can indeed be bad reasons and relations 'perverting' the anticipated correlation (e.g. parasitism and corruption) but also good ones (such as attending to immediate humanitarian concerns).

2. The second example deals with demographic control as the new recipe for development, one that became popular in the 60s when the growth of the world's population exceeded 2% per annum and was concentrated in the 'most underdeveloped' countries. Again, Vittadini properly asks why a simple reduction in numbers, produced by a 'cash for condoms' policy, should be reflected in economic growth – particularly since this change resulted in only a slight reduction in population size, without altering the levels of education, skills, organisation of production, equipment etc. Once more, no significant, let alone robust, correlation emerged between limited population growth and GNP per capita.

3. Finally, Vittadini examines the panacea of education – the notion that by increasing 'human capital', scholarization would be associated with increased productivity. This expectation, based upon the transference of a statistical association found for OECD countries over a long time interval, failed to be confirmed in developing ones. Although there was a notable rise in years of schooling from 1960-90, this had no homogeneous effect upon the economic growth of the poorer countries. Vittadini's critique points to the inadequacy of employing a *quantitative* indicator (such as years of schooling) with total disregard to the *quality* of the education received (because of the level of teacher training, the non-availability of books etc.).

Correct as Vittadini appears to be on all three counts, I think his case can be strengthened by going a little further. As matters stand, his methodological criticisms are restricted to the use (and often abuse) of single correlation coefficients. In turn, that leaves him open to the methodological rejoinder that all of the social sciences have become considerably more sophisticated in multivariate analysis and can now factor in and partial out a vast range of variables, thus enabling more complex and sophisticated models of the causes of economic development to be advanced.

I deliberately inserted the concept of causation immediately above because Vittadini himself allows the analysts he discusses to employ it – instead of calling ‘foul’. This is not simply to underline what everybody knows about the impossibility of assigning the *direction* of causal influence from a correlation coefficient. It is to make a much more robust criticism of the use of correlations (multivariate as much as bivariate) to establish *causal processes*. That they cannot do. Even the most regularly repeated and replicated association remains nothing more than a Humean ‘constant conjunction’. As Critical Realists have argued for thirty years, no such correlation reveals the generative causal mechanism underlying such findings. Indeed, only the empiricist goes looking for correlation coefficients, which if found, at best set the problem of accounting for the association detected. Conversely, a real generative mechanism may exist unexercised because unactivated or its powers be suspended by contingent interventions. (These issues have been discussed at length by Roy Bhaskar in *A Realist Theory of Science*, 1975 and *The Possibility of Naturalism*, 1979). Critical Realists would restate the problem as one of identifying the relevant generative process(es) responsible for fostering ‘development’. Such mechanisms are not generally identifiable at the empirical level (e.g. as the presence or absence of ‘untied aid’), nor are they usually amenable to simple mensuration (e.g. amount of \$ received in aid).

This deeper critique is implicit in Vittadini’s account *both* of the response of super-national agencies to the failures of development policies in the twentieth century and in his own advocacy of ‘charitable’ interventions. The two require examining in turn. They are both important because they signal a new approach to ‘development policy’ in the new millennium.

Beginning (symbolically, at least) with the acceptance by Jacques Delors, in 1996, that education constituted no ‘miracle cure’ for ‘underdevelopment’ and reinforced by the prescience of *Populorum Progressio* (1967), which had insisted that ‘development’ should never be reduced to a synonym for ‘economic growth’, a new approach was endorsed by inter-

national authorities: the UNO Millennial Development Goals stressed attending to the formation of 'good institutions' and the World Bank adopted a 'participatory approach'. Yet, these initiatives remained 'top down' in the sense that their interventions effectively defined 'participation' as working through indigenous elites. In that sense, these initiatives remained empiricist. The elite 'participants' were simply those who empirically had managed to attain elite status – through whatever historical machinations. The defect was the fairly obvious one that such policies merely reinforced the existing power structures and working through them merely enhanced the ability of the 'rich' to benefit, meaning that their 'participation' did nothing foster an increase in communal 'social capital' distributed throughout these societies.

Conversely, Vittadini, speaking from and on behalf of the *Fondazione per la Sussidiarietà*, counterposes a 'bottom up' or 'sharing' notion of 'participation' – one which simultaneously eschews the simplicities of 'economic growth' as a goal and replaces it with the fundamental and qualitative notion of development of the whole person (as distinct from 'human development') through projects to be realised consensually. There is much to admire in such initiatives but there are also problems, some of which Vittadini honestly acknowledges and others that have to be confronted if subsidiarity is to become the springboard to development with a human face.

(a) Vittadini accepts that his own version of 'participation' is also ineluctably entangled in the existing pattern of elites and their command over resource distribution in communities. The conundrum is that elite members are the only people – especially in rural areas – who can face both ways and communicate effectively with external philanthropic agencies and members of their own communities. But, in working through local leaders, 'participation' is severely reduced. His 'solution' is to re-orient project design and management towards a partnership with these communities themselves – a direct partnership between community members and the external charitable agencies.

However, the viability of such a strategy of partnership, one fruitful for the common good, is predicated upon the assumption that 'the rural community' retains a patrimony of common values – a living tradition' (p. 13). Yet, this cannot be taken for granted. Whatever may have been the anthropological case about solidary tradition in the past, many rural communities are now struggling with the intrusion of antithetical values and seeking syncretically to hold on to something of their historic normativity.

For example, the Masai people of Kenya/Tanzania are torn between enabling their children to benefit from schooling and yet for their males to remain warriors-in-form – something made even more difficult by the Kenyan Government's prohibition on the killing of lions, which was the traditional centre-piece of boys' initiation. Equally, girls who have done well at school often take jobs in towns as is now permitted. However, what is negatively sanctioned is to fall in love with an urban young man, to frequent Christian churches or those of other faiths, and to regard their earnings as their own property. For the time being 'things hold together', largely through compromise and concession plus generous amounts of adaptive syncretism. But this 'concessionary consensus' is frail and threatened – and could collapse if, for example, young women rebelled against the enduring practice of female circumcision. In short, common values or normative consensus cannot be treated as a given – factions and fragmentation often make these frail foundations upon which to build.

(b) Laudable as it is to start from the person and his or her own subsidiarity, one should pause to ask how this involvement of individuals will issue in societal change. Vittadini's response is basically reliant upon 'aggregation' ('valorizzando e generando opere e aggregazioni che nascono dalla società come primo fattore di sviluppo' [p. 17]). The author is clearly too sophisticated to be endorsing the old formula of individualism: 'a better society comes from better people'. Nevertheless, although he talks about the need for sustainable projects, once the Charity's intervention is over, he says little about the equally pressing need for local projects to coalesce into new institutions – the building blocks of an effective civil society in the future. Developments at the *meso level* seem imperative; otherwise we, and, more importantly, they the people, are left with a yawning gap between a small, limited and defenceless local project and the *macro level* Leviathans (national or international). These local initiatives cannot even rely upon hiding behind the skirts of the *terzo settore* charity, which itself is incapable of protecting them against such potential adversaries.

(c) The above serves to introduce the last point. Everywhere, the 'third sector' (humane agencies, non-profit organisations, the voluntary sector) exists marginally and insecurely between the Market and the State. It is constantly endangered by 'colonisation' from market forces, whose incorporation can be mistaken for 'recognition' but turns out to be a process of commodification as the original initiative is assigned monetary value and enters the cash nexus. Equally, it is threatened by control and regulation by State bureaucratic agencies – fundamentally destructive of the founda-

tional notion of 'from the people to the people' (p. 14). This is the eternal problem for the 'third sector' everywhere – how to retain a sturdy independence sufficient to repulse such incursions. In the most general terms, I am sure Vittadini is on the right lines when he concludes that the answer lies in 'l'inizio dal basso di un nuovo movimento per la giustizia' (p. 17). However, that only serves to pose a bigger question: what can be done to foster authentic social movements in developing countries – ones that are themselves sturdy enough to resist political incorporation by self-interested forces and to resist economic incorporation by equally self-interested market forces?