

Lee Hoinacki

THOUGHTS ON SERVICES

Introduction to April 2001 session of the Oakland Table
and other texts on services

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For further information please contact:

Silja Samerski Albrechtstr.19 D - 28203 Bremen
Tel: +49-(0)421-7947546 Fax: +49-(0)421-705387 e-mail: piano@uni-bremen.de

THOUGHTS ON SERVICES

Lee Hoinacki
[Draft for discussion]

Introduction to April 2001 session of the Oakland Table.

Some, in every American city, are concerned with care. How meet the needs of the old? of the handicapped? of children? of minorities? of women? of men? Care appears to depend on need and, in fact, every person is in some way needy. Or so people are led to believe. Because of this belief, services grow.

Caring services mean institutions; one then asks, How efficient is the institutional response? Has anyone been neglected? or, Left out? Cities are judged according to the quality of their services.

For some years, Ivan Illich has asked questions about these matters. For example, are needs a specific historical creation? What does the study of changes in care over the centuries reveal? For example, does institutional care only appear at a certain moment in time? What is its source? Its character? Where is it going? Does the historical notion of proportionality contribute any intelligibility to these matters?

Illich believes that care has deviated from something beautiful - the meeting of two persons, the growth of friendship - to something ugly - bureaucratized "caring" institutions.

Both classical Greeks and ancient Jews esteemed friendship. But the ethos of these societies did not allow one to reach out to the utter stranger, to someone totally outside one's own folk.

The Good Samaritan introduced a completely new possibility in the way one person relates to another. But those to whom the story was given, who came to be called Christians, found it so unusual, so fraught with chance, that they soon neglected a personal calling to individual generosity, substituting an assured, institutional response to the wounded or broken person. The practice of a radically new understanding of friendship and hospitality, in which one welcomes the stranger to cross one's threshold, was subverted; churchmen and women were the most prominent initiators of the mutation.

In an affluent economic society, the principal absence is the good. The growth of the market, especially in the form of globalization, hides this fact; one must fight to see it. Indeed, Illich calls for a certain renunciation of the values society holds dear. For example, one needs to recognize that the universal desire to know, to see, is corrupted by what was once called the libido videndi: One acts out of a fallen, a wounded nature, now as formerly. Modern wonders do not transform the human condition. Illich assumes that to see the other is difficult, nearly impossible, today; to recognize the good, ever more problematic.

In the light of this history, he invites each modern person to think about friendship. Illich embraces the idea that I do indeed have a need - for the other. Through the other I can come to

exist; I can obtain my self - from the other, from a friend. This is the promise of friendship, realized ultimately in hospitality.

In a market-dominated society, saturated with services, I find myself confused: How to choose? Two paths lie before me: I can consult a counselor, a facilitator, or I can trust a friend.

Hoinacki
Bremen
November 14, 2000

Notes on Services.

I here prescind from etymological, historical, anthropological, and philosophical questions one should, I feel, ask about the notion of services. These questions have a certain priority.

Next come the specific situations in which people find themselves today. I assume that much of the activity in any community involves the giving or receiving of services. Human nature, historical development, and sociological realities make this true.

All discussion going toward critical propositions about services would come next.

When I returned to Germany from Oakland, I came across this short piece by Wendell Berry. Much of what he writes, mutatis mutandis, fits the issue of services, what goes on in a place. His seventeen "rules" might help to throw light on the matter of a critique. (The following is an exact quote.)

Community in 17 sensible steps ...

A few practical guidelines on how to sustain a place-based community.

How can a sustainable local community (which is to say a sustainable local economy function? I am going to suggest a set of rules that I think such a community would have to follow. I hasten to say that I do not understand these rules as predictions; I am not interested in foretelling the future. If these rules have any validity, it is because they apply now.

Supposing that the members of a local community wanted their community to cohere, to flourish, and to last, they would:

1. Ask of any proposed change or innovation: What will this do to our community? How will this affect our common wealth?

2. Include local nature - the land, the water, the air, the native creatures - within the membership of the community.

3. Ask how local needs might be supplied from local sources, including the mutual help of neighbors.

4. Supply local needs first (and only then think of exporting their products, first to nearby cities, and then to others).

5. Understand the ultimate unsoundness of the industrial doctrine of "labor saving" if that implies poor work, unemployment, or any kind of pollution or contamination.

6. Develop properly scaled value-adding industries for local products in order not to become merely a colony of the national or the global economy.

7. Develop small-scale industries and businesses to support the local farm or forest economy.

8. Strive to produce as much of their own energy as possible.

9. Strive to increase earnings (in whatever form) within the community, and decrease expenditures outside the community.

10. Circulate money within the local economy for as long as possible before paying it out.

11. Invest in the community to maintain its properties, keep it clean (without dirtying some other place), care for its old people, and teach its children.

12. Arrange for the old and the young to take care of one another, eliminating institutionalized "child care" and "homes for the aged." The young must learn from the old, not necessarily and not always in school; the community knows and remembers itself by the association of old and young.

13. Account for costs that are now conventionally hidden or "externalized." Whenever possible they must be debited against monetary income.

14. Look into the possible uses of local currency, community-funded loan programs, systems of barter, and the like.

15. Be aware of the economic value of neighborliness - as help, insurance, and so on. They must realize that in our time the costs of living are greatly increased by the loss of neighborhood, leaving people to face their calamities alone.

16. Be acquainted with, and complexly connected with, community-minded people in nearby towns and cities.

17. Cultivate urban consumers loyal to local products to build a sustainable rural economy, which will always be more cooperative than competitive.

From a speech, November 11, 1994, given at the 23rd annual meeting of the Northern Plains Resource Council. Printed in Utne Reader, March-April 1995, p. 71.

Hoinacki
Bremen
October 29, 2000

Service, What Is It?

There are many distinct kinds of service being offered and/or provided today. Among these perhaps numberless kinds, there is probably an infinite variety within each "category" - different sorts of facilitators, or counselors, or other service-providers. So how bring intelligibility out of this confusion?

One possible way may be to examine a particular example of what is called service. The most apt one I can imagine is that of The Catholic Worker. Here I refer to the actions of those participants in the movement who people what the Worker calls, "Houses of Hospitality."

These houses are located in urban neighborhoods that give immediate access to those who have fallen through the cracks, to those abandoned at the bottom.

One of the persons doing this work for over twenty years, Jeff Dietrich, writes,

We are not here to cure the poor or to fix the poor or to mainstream the poor; we are not here to create programs, make converts, raise money, or build great buildings. We are here to enter into the pain of the poor, to expose the wounds that make the suffering of the poor inevitable. We are here to submit to that radical surgery which will take away our hearts of stone and exchange them for hearts of flesh. Anything less than this is pious self-aggrandizement or pompous professionalism.

Dietrich believes that a service program predisposed " ... toward operational effectiveness and quantifiable results tends to cover over the depth of the woundedness." But, looking at the enormity and extent of injustice and misery in our society, one might wish to settle for some "quantifiable results." Otherwise, one is tempted to take refuge in cynicism or some degree of despair. What is the good of handing out a bowl of soup or an article of clothing to one or a few persons? How far will that reach? Dorothy Day writes that such critics

" ... cannot see that we must lay one brick at a time, take one step at a time; we can be responsible for only the one action of the present moment. But we can beg for an increase of love in our hearts that will vitalize and transform all our individual actions, and know that God will take them and multiply them, as Jesus multiplied the loaves and fishes.

In any human society, there is always a bottom. Perhaps from that place one can see.

Hoinacki
Bremen
November 12, 2000

Goods and Services ...

Looking at the world about him and within himself in the 1970s, Ivan Illich tried to point out that one must consider the production of both goods and services in any research touching the condition of the planet. As far as I can tell, those who are called alarmists, pessimists, or hard-headed realists continue to emphasize the plethora of goods, and to minimize or ignore the cornucopia of services.

On these issues, three points must be addressed:

- the origin and character of goods production;
- the origin and character of service production;
- the dynamic symbiotic relationship between goods and services today.

Either directly or indirectly, goods are designed for consumption, or use-consumption. Ultimately, the making and disposal of all goods is determined by economics, that is, someone must invest economic resources into the making, and someone must spend economic resources in their disposal, first as commodities, and then as trash.

To make and to dispose are movements, and thus require a mover, a source that initiates and sustains the movement. Historically, the source is threefold:

- the general acceptance of usury - a moral permission;
- the legitimation of greed and envy - a moral authorization;
- the techno-scientific structures for global marketing - physical devices.

R. H. Tawney points out (Religion and the Rise of Capitalism) that the collapse of the prohibitions against usury in the sixteenth century represents a watershed; the constraints within which economic activity was conducted were removed, allowing unrestrained economic growth to proceed. From this activity, the current ecological disasters flow.

But economic activity requires both human actors and hardware. The formation of the proper actors for runaway or mindless economic development is outlined by Mandeville: If people can come to believe that the seven capital sins are, in reality, legitimate ways of behaving, then only one factor remains missing: the necessary and sufficient tools.

Scientists are affected by both greed and honor. Since they are also intelligent, enough see that, for them, the principal use of scientific knowledge today is to produce technology, whose principal use (again, for them) is to produce profit and fame.

Illich pointed out, thirty years ago, that the growth of goods requires the growth of services. People need to be made to fit in a world full of machines, commodities, and junk; people need to be fixed, to be adjusted, to be coerced to "go along."

Therefore, the growth of the service industries - and there are many, to fit every "need," each whim, all perversities, ennui - is necessary and inevitable. In a world overflowing with

goods, services fill the vacuum in the individual soul: macro-level abundance is paradoxically matched to micro-level emptiness.

Further, this also means that a completely new kind of competition exists today, beyond any heretofore imagined by the most "creative" of entrepreneurs: goods-producing investors are locked in a contest with service-producing impresarios; while one keeps pouring yet more things into an already cluttered and overstocked world, the other tries frantically to put something into a hollow and never-satisfied heart.

Hoinacki
Bremen
November 11, 2000