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A Center Outside Itself Where the University Finds Itself

By Jason Taylor

Big universities in cities, so far as I can see, have given no thought or imagination to the unique establishments they are. Typically they either pretend to be cloistered or countrified places, nostalgically denying their transplantation, or else they pretend to be office buildings. Of course they are neither.

Sometimes a neighborhood, too small to function as a district, gets the benefit of power through possessing an exceptionally influential citizen or an important institution. But the citizens pay for their free gift of power when the day comes that their interests run counter to those of Papa Big-wheel or Papa Institution. They are helpless to defeat Papa in the government offices, up where the decisions are made, *and therefore they are helpless also to teach or influence him*. Citizens of neighborhoods that include a university, for example, are often in this helpless fix.

Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (350, 166-67)

If we are to think about our institutions in relation to our location, then Jane Jacobs calls our attention to two common forms of thoughtlessness: 1) the failure to consider well the kind of place we are; and 2) the failure to consider well the places of which we are a part (indicative of a broader lack of social knowledge, awareness of social ecology). Together, these form a single challenge: to center our thinking on how the places we are and the places we are in are co-constitutive, how they shape and are shaped by one another.

Many of our institutions – including my own, Regis University – have made engaging in place-based initiatives or becoming anchor institutions a part of our work and our identity. We often put forward such work as a significant improvement upon approaches to community engagement which are geographically or functionally more disparate. What might it mean, then, for our institutions to undertake initiatives in the places *where* we are?

The kind of place envisioned and actualized in El Salvador by Fr. Ignacio Ellacuría and others – the Central American University (UCA) – offers us important resources for responding to that question. Ellacuría contended that the university is a social projection. This contention can be understood as both descriptive and normative. Factually speaking, the university, as a social force within a social reality, will shape that reality. Normatively speaking, the university, as a social force within a social reality, ought to strive to shape that reality for the better, for something always greater.

This claim is consistent with another claim frequently attributed to Ellacuría, that a university has its center outside itself, that the university is an eccentric institution. As an eccentric institution, the university discovers itself in a place beyond itself; the university must project itself beyond its boundaries – physical or otherwise – to find its true center.

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In an interview in *America* (Sept. 30, 2013), Pope Francis offers indirect confirmation of this line of interpreting Ellacuría. Speaking of the Jesuit order, Francis says, “The Society of Jesus is an institution in tension, always fundamentally in tension. A Jesuit is a person who is not centered in himself. The Society itself also looks to a center outside itself; its center is Christ and his church.” The temptation, continues Francis, is to settle for a false center that disposes of this tension: “If it [the Jesuit order] looks too much in upon itself, it puts itself at the center as a very solid, very well ‘armed’ structure, but then it runs the risk of feeling safe and self-sufficient. The Society must always have before itself the *Deus semper maior* [God always Greater].” Strikingly, Francis goes on to assert that the inward-turning examination of consciousness helps the Jesuit order to avoid turning in on itself: “This tension takes us out of ourselves continuously. The tool that makes the Society of Jesus not centered in itself, really strong, is, then, the account of conscience, which is at the same time paternal and fraternal, because it helps the Society to fulfill its mission better.” From this perspective, place-based initiatives, in our context, can be instruments of institutional examination, affording thought and imagination about the uniqueness of our establishments less vulnerable to the social pretense criticized by Jacobs.

Ellacuría himself gives us language to name the poles of the tension that Francis describes. In Barcelona in 1989, 11 months before his execution, Ellacuría weighs the significance of the quincentenary of the arrival of Europeans in the Americas. There, Ellacuría criticizes in the church the “subtle tendency to prefer and prioritize its ‘institutionality’ over its ‘mission,’” and subsequently locates and criticizes this same tendency in the Jesuit order and the UCA as a Jesuit university. They too are equally liable to prioritize institute over mission:

In large part, the church was carried along by this reasoning: “right now I cannot carry out my mission, which is to proclaim the kingdom of God in accordance with the message of Jesus, because to do so would put the ecclesial institution at risk, and that must be avoided above all. When the time is right, I shall carry out my mission”

(*Essays on History, Liberation and Salvation*, Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 32).

From this perspective, place-based initiatives, in our context, can be instruments for managing the ever-present risk of reducing desire to the terms of safety and self-sufficiency. Besides helping us to avoid self-enclosure, they might very well help us to build capacity, before times of conflict, to avoid the unhappy discovery that we are situated under a standard marked not only by avarice and arrogance but also by the pusillanimity of a Papa Bigwheel.

To conclude, what might it mean for the places that we are to undertake such initiatives in the places where we are? I think it means two things if we assume that our institutions live lives of ethical drama comparable to that described by Fr. Ellacuría and Pope Francis above. First, it means that a university must flee a false center where identity is constituted primarily in terms of self-preservation. The key question is not, “How will we survive?” which expresses the social projection negatively. Rather the key question arises when the university seeks its true center in a place where identity is constituted by the question, “Who and how are we in relation with others?”

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