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Building in the margins of shacks: Towards a hermeneutics of recovery

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ABSTRACT

The Paper discusses some of the problems in the world of action and interpretation today revolving around the theme of deconstruction and reconstruction, recovery and freedom. It interrogates the perspectives of the simultaneous death of the subject and the social dissolution of the author and the text in the contemporary order by bringing to the fore the perspective of spiritual criticism on the human condition. It discusses the work of Habitat for Humanity which builds houses for low-income families in the United States by mobilising the spiritual vision of its volunteers. Through a description of Habitat the paper pleads for incorporating building as a mode of engagement of the self to the other and the world in our current perspectives on the human condition which celebrates deconstruction and disintegration.

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[I came in search of] not social or cultural America, but the America of the empty, absolute freedom of freeways, not deep America of mores and mentalities, but America of desert speed, of motels and mineral surfaces. I looked for it in the speed of the screenplay, in the different reflex of television, in the film of days and nights projected across an empty space, in the marvelously affectless succession of signs, images, faces, and ritual acts on the road.. I sought the finished form of the future catastrophe on the road.

Jean Baudrillard (1989), *America,* p.5.

Deconstruction alone is not enough... It must be accompanied by an at least tentative reconstruction grounded in the political and theoretical demands of contemporary world

Edward Soja (1989), *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory,* p.74

Without the energizing effect of spiritual commitments, American values would be little more than hollow ideals

Robert Wuthnow (1988), *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith since World War 11,* p.60

The Problem : Deconstruction, Recovery, and Freedom

In this paper, I discuss some of the problems in the world of action and interpretation today, revolving around the theme of deconstruction and reconstruction, recovery, and freedom. My primary concern here has to do with the pervasive influence of philosophies of deconstruction in the subculture of intellectuals of our times which harp on the simultaneous death of the subject and the social dissolution of the author and the text. The philosophers of deconstruction deride any notion of foundation and prefer to look at the human condition as a surrealistic web of contingencies and a frivolous play of signifiers. In this paper, I intend to interrogate this dominant frame of interpretation of our times by presenting the case of an initiative in collective action and critical reflection which is building houses in 1100 communities in the U.S. and in 43 other other countries around the world. This is a movement which originated in the United States of America in 1976 and now works worldwide. Habitat for Humanity — this movement — builds houses because its volunteers share the faith that to build a house for the one who can't afford to buy or finds it difficult to rent is to build an altar for God. In this paper, I intend to present briefly the "reflexive mobilization of self" (of Giddens 1991) and the "connected criticism" (of Walzer 1986) of culture that is at work in Habitat for Humanity and analyze its implications for a hermeneutics of recovery for the actors and institutions of our times. But before I present the narrative of the actors and the movement, I would like to make the following remarks about the wider issue of reconstruction and recovery, emancipation and freedom in our world today.

Let us begin this reflection with Edward Soja who argues that deconstruction alone is not enough; it must be accompanied by the practical and theoretical demands of the contemporary world. When we take this task seriously — the task of confronting the practical and theoretical demands of the contemporary world — we realize that we have enormous tasks of reconciliation and reconstruction at hand before us. We realize that philosophy and textual analysis cannot sit idle when our communities and forms of livelihood are being systematically destroyed by the globalisation of the threatening logic of speculative capital. We are bound to ask to our interpreters such as Jacques Derrida and Richard Rorty as G.B. Madison does in his provocative *The Hermeneutics of Postmodernity:* "is there nothing for the philosopher to do, after the demise of the metaphysical seriousness, but to be an intellectual *"kibitzer"*, a concern-free creator of 'abnormal discourse; an insouciant player of deconstructive and fanciful word games, an agile figure shaken on the thin ice of a bottomless chessboard?" (Madison 1989: 107). When we confront the challenges in the real world we find that in our recent past, to quote David Harvey, "Radicals within the cultural mass became charmed by fields like semiotics, as if the really interesting thing about the homeless were the variety of coded messages that card board boxes could convey" (Harvey 1991: 69). An urge to meet with the demands of theory and practice in the contemporary world immediately makes us realize that the striving for a "good society" and meaningful life is not over and in order to participate in this striving of reconciliation,

reconstruction, and new creation, deconstruction alone is not enough. As Robert Bellah and his colleagues tell us: "...We are not likely to give up what some philosophers call the hermeneutics of suspicion — the tendency in the West since Enlightenment to call all received traditions into question. But without a hermeneutics of recovery, through which we can understand what a living tradition is in the first place, a hermeneutics of suspicion is apt to be an exercise in nihilism" (Bellah et al 1991: 174).

A reflexive engagement with the challenges of the contemporary world in the context of processes of structural and discursive transformation at work also urges us to realize the close link between the theme of building and the theme of freedom. Parallel to the hegemony of deconstruction in our modes of theorization today is the euphoria about global democratization. But democratization as a formal process evidenced by such attributes as the collapse of the dictatorial system and the conduct of elections for political offices is not the same thing as realization of freedom. What is worse, in this moment of euphoria we confuse emancipation with freedom. But while emancipation is concerned with, as David Apter argues, "reducing the negativity of otherness, as embodied in the colonial, the subaltern, and the prisoner, vis-a-vis the mainstream," freedom is concerned with the liberation of "the mainstream from itself" (Apter 1992 : 162). It is perhaps for this reason that Anthony Giddens (1991) makes a distinction between "emancipatory politics" and "life politics". According to Giddens, life politics is concerned not with hierarchical but generative power and is a politics of reflexively mobilized order and a politics of self-actualization "where reflexivity links self and body to systems of global scope" (Giddens 1991: 9). In the same vein, Ernesto Laclau concludes his provocative plea for beyond emancipation with the following lines: "We are today coming to terms with our own finitude and look the political possibility that it opens. This is the point from which the potentially liberatory discourses of our postmodern age have to start. We can perhaps say that we are at the end of emancipation and at the beginning of freedom" (Laclau 1992: 137).

But as we are at the beginning of freedom how does our discourse of freedom prepare us for the intended transformative leap into the future? We are familiar with the modern experience of the degeneration of freedom into narcissistic individualism and the current fight against equality in the name of freedom. To take us out of the current impasse of freedom against equality, Amartya Sen (1989) proposes a distinction between positive and negative freedom. Sen hopes that by portraying positive freedom as the freedom to enhance the "functioning" and "capability" of individuals and negative freedom as preoccupation with only one's individual rights and security, one can make a tight link between food and freedom — a linkage which is deliberately obscured by the reigning ideologies of our times. But even such a reconstruction of the agenda of freedom in the work of Amartya Sen does not take us very far since it is still haunted by the problem of dualism, namely dualism between positive and negative freedom. But there is a need to transcend this dualism and and Sen is not of much help to us here because Sen cannot tell us how the same individual can integrate her concern for negative freedom with positive freedom. This integration is as much a task of self as it is of the social order but Sen's agenda does not have a project of self and is not aware of its transformative capacity to overcome the distinction between positive and negative freedom. Overcoming the distinction between positive and negative freedom both in biography and history is a task of spiritual enlightenment, political transformation, and self-cultivation. It calls for a view of freedom as a process of spiritual transformation where spirituality means an integral change covering the whole space from food to freedom and the agent of freedom as a transformative self (see Pande 1989, 1991; Taylor 1989; also Giri 1995). Such a view of freedom is available in the thought of Aurobindo who presents freedom as a synthesis of yoga. For instance, Aurobindo argues that spirituality "transforms the needs and desires onto a divine work and Ananda." "It transforms the mental and moral aspiration into the powers of truth and perfection that are beyond them. It substitutes for the divided training of the individual nature, for the passion and strike of the separate ego, the calm profound, harmonious and happy law of the universalized person within us" (Sri Aurobindo 1950: 193). For Aurobindo, the discovery of the secret Godhead within us helps us create a universal ground within us where the social distinction between individual and the collective, negative and positive freedom get a new frame of reference for criticism and transcendence.

Is it a hubris to utter the name of God while speaking of politics and freedom? Probably not. It is certainly a sign of recovery of our times that even contemporary political theory is coming back home in search of a ground and a God. Even political scientists have begun lamenting the missing God in our contemporary discourse of transformation. At the same time, some of them also talk of the need for the transformation of our desire in order that individual freedom can be an object of social commitments. For

instance, Claus Offe and Ulrich K Preuss tell us that we face conflict not only between different social groups but also between different kinds of desires — the "inner conflict between what the individuals themselves experience as their more desirable and their less desirable desires" (Offe and Preuss 1991: 166). Insofar as the connection between freedom and spirituality is concerned in no place in contemporary political theory it is better articulated than in the following lines of Laclau:

> If, on the one hand, modernity started by seriously tying representability to knowledge, the constitutive opaqueness resulting from the dialectic of emancipation involves not only that society is no longer transparent to knowledge, but also since God is no longer there to substitute knowledge by revelation that all representation will be necessarily partial and will take place against the background of an essential unrepresentability. On the other hand, this constitutive opaquenness withdraws the ground which made it possible to go beyond the dialectic of incarnation, given that there is no longer a transparent society in which the universal can show itself in a direct unmediated way. But again, as God is no longer there, ensuring through his word the knowledge of a universal destiny which escapes human reason, opaquenses cannot lead to a restoration of the dialectic of incarnation either. The death of the ground seems to lead to the death of the universal and to the dissolution of social struggle into mere particularism (Laclau 1992: 131-132)

But the problem in such a promising agenda of Laclau is that it lacks a project of self-transformation. Though Laclau speaks of the "dialectic of incarnation", there is no reference to self-reflection in his outline. But according to Indian philosopher Roop Rekha Verma, "the dialectic by itself does not explain the possibility of cultural change or a critique of culture... What is important to add in this dialectic is that internalization can be reflective or unreflective" (Verma 1991: 533). Thus having a notion of transformative self as a seeker of freedom is essential to go out of the current impasse of deconstruction and destruction in our search for recovery and reconstruction.[1]

Habitat for Humanity

The above provides us an appropriate background to discuss Habitat for Humanity. Habitat identifies itself as a God's movement and is based upon what it calls "partnership between God and Man". It operates with the Biblical principles of "Economics of Jesus" and "Theology of the Hammer" — the former believing that it is immoral to charge interest from the poor and the latter believing that one has to express one's love for God through the instrument of hammer. Habitat believes that it is interest which locks the poor in a condition of perpetual renting and determines the crucial distinction between living in a shack and owning one's own home. Habitat's mission is "No More Shacks" (Fuller 1986) and it strives towards this realization by creating what it calls a "revolving fund for Humanity". Habitat builds homes and builds communities through the donated money and labour of the volunteers but does not give houses to the homeowners for free. Home-owners are required to pay back their mortgage payments to the local Habitat projects which is utilised for building more houses and widening the circle of gift and reciprocity.

Habitat has many programs and activities. One of them is called covenant church program, and other corporate partnership. The former builds partnership with interested churches while the latter with corporations in order to mobilize resource and support for its building program. Former President Jimmy Carter leads a Habitat work-camp every year building "homes" in a community for a week. For instance, in 1988, the Jimmy Carter work camp raised 20 houses — an entire neighborhood — in Atlanta. Its leader says about the significance of this work camp for the homeowners: "People whose lives were debased by the violence of poverty now pay taxes and become contributors themselves; suburban volunteers far removed from the pain of material deprivation gain more substance and sensitivity from a hard day's work for the benefit of another" (quoted in Fuller and Fuller 1990: 25)

Habitat for Humanity builds houses in different communities around the United States in partnership with the local affiliates. These affiliates are autonomous and mobilize their own resources to build houses in their respective areas. Habitat affiliates vary in size, resource-base, and texture. Some operate in more favourable environments with little resource problems while others strive with little internal resource of the community.

Here we take the work of two Habitat affiliates as illustrations: the Habitat affiliate in Fort Meyers, Florida, and the affiliate in Pembroke, Illinois. The former works in an environment of wealth and luxury while the latter struggles with little community resource. Lee County Habitat for Humanity, the Habitat project in Fort Meyers, Florida, builds in the "Gulf Shore" town of Fort Meyers. With a large population of retirees and a constant stream of tourists, "it has an air of comfortable affluence" (McDonald 1992: 5). "But for many working people in this town the reality is different. The economy of Fort Meyers and the surrounding Lee County depends almost entirely on tourism. The industry requires a lot of labour, but the jobs it creates are mostly unskilled — hotel and restaurant jobs — that pay only the minimum wage. Thus, while Lee County has a healthy median family income of $36,500 it has a large population of working poor. Affordable housing is a particular problem" (ibid). Demand from wealthiar retirees and vacationers has boosted real estate prices and has, at the same time, lured developers to build expensive homes. As a result, there is a shortage of decent housing for the less affluent.

In response to this need, Lee County Habitat has built three new communities in the past twelve years. Lee County Habitat began in 1979 with the acquisition of twenty acres of vacant county-owned land in an area called Harlem Heights. Since then, it has worked steadily to develop the Habitat North and Habitat South neighborhoods on that site. More recently, it has begun to build in Dunbar a new neighborhood about five miles away. Today, 35 Habitat houses stand in Harlem Heights, and site development is under way that will add another thirty-five homes. The Dunbar neighborhood now has twenty-three Habitat homes with three more currently under construction.

McDonald, writing in *Habitat World,* the bi-monthly publication of the Habitat for Humanity, tells us about this affiliate: "The Heights neighborhood today has a real estate value of $2 million. But for homeowner Dina Rosado, the word 'value' means something completely different. 'Now', she says 'my children have a safe place to play and grow up'" (ibid). But all Habitat affiliates in the United States don't share a similar advantage. Affiliates in small towns and poor communities strive with little. One such affiliate is the Habitat project in Pembroke, Illinois. In this not-so wealthy neighborhood "the work of the affiliate is maintained by people who are struggling to improve their own lives" (ibid). The affiliate book-keeper is Pam Ward, a single mother of six, who owns the fourth home that was renovated by the Pembroke affiliate. The work of Pembroke Habitat is done mostly by volunteers. This is also the case with most of the affiliates where there is either no or very few salaried staff. The former president and the continuing volunteer of another Habitat affiliate in New York—North Country Habitat for Humanity—helps us understand this:

> Most of the work which is done by groups in U.S affiliates is by people who volunteer their time, talents and money. It is a very generous-minded atmosphere which is created by this approach... Habitat appeals to many vigorous retired people, middle-aged to elderly, who want to go on working at something which has meaning and connection with society. Sometimes the skills of older Americans are not well-utilized in our society. I believe that in Habitat projects, many of these people are willing to show their abilities in work that they feel has real value.

Connected Criticism and the Interrogation of Self

Students of reconstructive movements tell us that the discourse of a movement ought not be a mere projection of existing reality, "it must be sufficiently far-reaching to exercise a visionary pull" (Unger 1987: 430). Habitat founder Millard Fuller uses such a language and a style to infuse people with the spirit of Habitat. Fuller begins with his own story. Fuller had become a millionaire at an early age. But as his wealth and reputation were expanding his wife Linda left him. Fuller reconciled with his wife and together they distinctly felt the calling of God for a full time Christian service. They decided to leave all their wealth and to start their life anew. They joined Koinonia Farms, an intentional, self-sufficient Christian community in southeastern Georgia, and started a partnership housing program for the poor workers and sharecroppers of Sumter County, Georgia in 1968. They were influenced by the life and thought of Clarence Jordan, the founder of Koinonia and a proponent of radical discipleship of Christ (Jordan 1964; Lee 1971). This effort grew into Habitat for Humanity in 1976 (Fuller 1977).

Fuller tells the story of Habitat through numerous personal tales which touch the heart of the listeners. When we read Fuller's books on Habitat and listen to his cassettes, we find that this language is not

simply illocutionary and imperative in the instrumental sense but also in a constitutive sense. His books and lectures tell us how he solves human problems employing the perspective of God.

It is not only that the language of a transformative movement has to use personalized parables, any current effort at transformation must also involve a "personalist program" (Unger 1987: 175). According to Roberto Unger, the "personalist program" of transformation gets manifested in participating in the "exemplary conflicts" of our times that involves housing. Habitat presents its solution of Christian love and sharing as a radical one. The following narration of Milliard Fuller shows what it means to solve "exemplary conflicts" by involving a "personalist program". Once a pastor of a church came to Clarence Jordan and asked for his advice in resolving a dilemma. The pastor was concerned about the low wage of the janitor who had a big family of nine to take care of and had a long way to drive to work. Despite his passionate plea to the deacons for raising the janitor's salary they were not forthcoming since they were not able to raise the budget of the church. Jordan asked the pastor whether he made more money than the janitor and whether his family was smaller compared to his. When the pastor replied him in the affirmative then Jordan told him: "Well, why not just swap salaries with him? That wouldn't require any extra money in your budget. You live right here by the church, so you don't have any commuting expenses, and you have only two children while he has eight. Surely you could live more easily on his salary than he can" (quoted in Fuller 1980: 66). Fuller tells us about this story:

> John, a white man, turned whiter. He hadn't expected that kind of solution. Clarence was aware of his discomfort. "What's wrong, John? What's wrong with that solution? Is it contrary to Christian doctrine? There's nothing at all wrong with it, Clarence, from a Christian point of view. That's why it upsets me! (ibid)

The above is an example of the resolution of a conflict where an actor considers himself as a part of the problem. Fuller tells such stories all across the United States and creates a constituency for his moral criticism. For both Clarence Jordan and Millard Fuller, to see social problems from a God's perspective means that one cannot abdicate one's responsibility. Such an engagement involves a total criticism of one's self, culture and society where the familiar institutions of society appear as "instances of problematic justice" (Habermas 1990: 108). Fuller draws upon both Bible and his knowledge of other societies to criticize the contemporary American lifestyle of affluence and greed—one which is, for him, also devoid of compassion. He tells his wealthy Christian partners in North America: "Many of our African Christian friends lack the material things of this world, but they have much to teach our affluent Christian world about true values in Christian life" (Fuller 1977: 113). He argues with his fellow Americans that homelessness is a violation of the lofty meaning of the "American dream". The following is an illustration of his argument with his fellow Americans:

> God does not mean for his people to go hungry or to do without adequate clothes and shelter..."Whoever has two shirts must give, one to the man he has none, and whoever has food must share it. "A few years ago I spoke at a meeting at a large church in Florida, using this text from Luke for my talk. I knew that many people in that church had a house in Florida and another one (or two) up North. So I decided to make the scripture as relevant as possible.
>
> I wonder if this teaching of John about shirts could also be applied to houses?' I asked but I really didn't expect an answer... But one men did respond. 'Mr. Fuller, excuse me.xxx I think your analogy between shirts and houses is unfair. After all, a person can't really wear more than one shirt at a time, but he-uh-he-' (Fuller 1980: 94-95).

Fuller told his interlocutor that the teaching of Jesus is as much applicable to the example of houses as it is to that of shirts. Fuller employs the idiom of the "Kingdom of God" to pursue his critical strategy of what he himself calls "educating the conscience of the world" about the stupendous problem of global poverty housing" (Fuller 1986). Fuller's criticism of the existing arrangement and his vision of transformation makes him a "connected critic," to borrow the words of Michael Walzer (1988). Walzer makes a distinction between the "connected critics" who make their point or fall to earn their authority "by arguing with [their] fellows" and the marginal critics who are never meaningfully related to their own culture and suffer from the problem of "ambiguous connection" (Walzer 1988: 32). When we read closely the texts of Fuller, which are sources of evocative or sentimental mobilization for sympathetic citizens of the United States as well as for many around the world, we see such a "connected criticism" at work.

Motivation and the Contours of Meaning :
Some Habitat Narratives of Participation

In the United States the work of Habitat is carried out mainly by the volunteers. There are of course some paid staff in Habitat affiliates as well as in the Habitat headquarters at Americus but the "employees" of Habitat identify themselves primarily as volunteers rather than as mere paid workers. Therefore their tie with Habitat is much more than the tie of "work" and "exchange" one notices in modern organizational life.[2] It is their dedication to the cause of "No more Shacks" and their faith in God which brings them to work with Habitat at a substantially low salary, and many times even without any remuneration.

The volunteers of Habitat come from different backgrounds. Young, old, middle-aged and retired people—all are found in Habitat. The young and middle-aged who are in search of a different life-style or more meaningful work-engagement by which they can contribute to their spiritual growth and social development find an attractive space in the mobilization of Habitat. For the retired people, Habitat provides a scope for meaningful spending of time rather than just "playing golf."

Volunteers of Habitat invariably feel that opportunities for job, education, and housing are decreasing in contemporary American society. They particularly feel appalled by the deplorable housing condition in the contemporary U.S. and have been attracted to Habitat because is strives to solve this problem and encourages "the needy to improve their situation." They attribute various causes to this problem. For some, it is caused by high interest rates, increased cost of building and widespread unemployment while for others "Reaganomics" is the main cause behind this.

The volunteers of Habitat deplore the fact that "hard working men and women cannot afford to live comfortably much less have a place of their own" because of the housing crisis and the "pessimistic attitude" that it gives rise to among America's working poor. Some of them say in unambiguous terms that "it is a scandal to have homeless amid such affluence" and wonder if "the country has lost its connection with God even though there are many who claim to know." They believe that this nearly intractable problem can be solved by raising the consciousness of all concerned—government and people. Some of them believe that the affluent should "lead a simple lifestyle so that others can simply live." For the volunteers of Habitat, the problem of housing cannot be solved by governments alone but by the "grass-roots participation of all our citizens."

It is also interesting that some of the volunteers were in real estate business before joining Habitat while some others had difficulty in finding a house to stay—one of them saying that she "grew up in a run-down home and was ashamed to bring friends home." Another volunteer, a former Methodist minister, tells us that during his young days he had a Habitat-type assistance in owing a home which is an "unforgettable experience" in his life. Those who left their real estate business to join Habitat say that they don't "operate well in the profit motive" and find their work as realtors "frustrating and stressful." They work with Habitat for no salary and in some cases with considerable less pay but find in their work a "tremendous source of satisfaction."

Over the last nineteen years of its existence Habitat has drawn many seeking souls to its path who come from many different backgrounds and with different aspirations and motivations. They tell us many different stories which cannot be easily put into either an aggregate picture or fit into neat ideological / sociological categories. I present below the stories of some of them which hopefully can provide us a sense of the innumerable volunteers who now make up the striving called Habitat for Humanity.

Let us begin with Jane (a pseudonym; in fact all the names in this essay are presented as pseudonyms), an engaging female volunteer from Burke, New York. Jane tells us that though her community has a staggering housing problem there are no homeless in her community even though there are people who live in homes that have been condemned. About her own situation vis-a-vis housing she tells us: "It has sometimes been difficult to find a good apartment or house to rent, but generally we have been able to succeed by virtue of considerable effort." It is in this context that Habitat plays for her a significant role. She agrees with the Habitat philosophy of building for people in need, and not asking them to change their faith. It was the opportunity to get involved in actually trying to do something for the poor housing—"the opportunity to implement my beliefs in action"—that attracted her to Habitat. She says that she works with Habitat for nothing because in it she realizes both her "self-aspiration and social goals." Jane says

that while "much Christian work seems detached from the needy" Habitat is truly a "hands-on-involvement." Habitat has not only made her aware of the housing problem but also influenced her relationships with other workers. She has found more friends while working at Habitat. Habitat has broadened her outlook on life. She thinks that it enables her to use her skills and reveal the best of herself, in spite of the frustration that comes from the knowledge that not all of her actions are successful.

43 year-old Julia is another volunteer, who left her real estate business to work with Habitat. She came to know about Habitat ten years ago during the time of Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter's Habitat work-camp in Bronx, New York. She says that she does not "operate well on the 'profit motive' " and found her work as a realtor "sometimes financially rewarding and sometimes not, but almost always frustrating and stressful." She quit her "high-paying job" (this is how she describes her previous work in the questionnaire) to work part-time at a low salary with Habitat. Her husband's good income and the "tremendous satisfaction" she derives from her work with Habitat facilitated this turn in her life.

Julia is not alone in having left a profitable career in real estate to volunteer for Habitat. Many volunteers came from high-paying jobs, an experience which provides them sometimes a negative frame of reference to positively relate to Habitat's goal of making a difference in the housing situation.

Hillary is a 51 year-old retired realtor. She first heard about Habitat four years ago from her son, who had been drawing house plans for the local Habitat. She has been associated with the local Habitat for the last one and one-half years as a committee member, a board member, and as an executive director. She appreciates Habitat's vision and practice of "uplifting families." In her words: "A person cannot think about their spiritual life if their physical life is 'roach infested.' What better way to demonstrate our Christianity than through a building program for all people and all faiths?" She is specifically attracted to "Habitat's concept of using volunteers" and to the fact that the "building program is being funded by contributions from churches and individuals."

Before working with Habitat Hillary was volunteering for the Salvation Army through which she could meet many homeless. Though she says that her life has not been adversely affected because of her service for Habitat she has at the same time reached a point, as she tells us, where she needed to make a decision as to the amount of time she could spend as a volunteer. Her current reflection has been partly triggered off by the loss of earning she has incurred after leaving her previous job.

Hillary is an Episcopalian. About the nature of Habitat as a Christian initiative, she comments: "Habitat's mission is visible for all to see. We do what many others only talk about. Quoting a Bible verse will not keep a family warm in the snow or dry in a rainstorm. The need to help others is very strong in many people and there will always be those who need our help. Habitat's evangelism reaches all people connected with the program, not just the families being helped."

33 year-old Mark, the executive director of the Habitat project in his area, is another engaging interlocutor whose views we should hear. He had worked as a program director of the Minneapolis Red Cross for four years. He thinks that there have always been two types of evangelism: "evangelism that 'talks' and evangelism that 'does." For him, "Habitat is a 'doing' evangelism, which is the best way... and its work is greatly needed in our contemporary world." It is because of this that he "gladly" left his other jobs to become the executive director of the local project. Now that he is with Habitat he realizes that his work "integrates his faith into his daily life." In his words: "My experience with Habitat has certainly been intense: I would say it is one of those rare 'peak experiences in my life." For him, "The source of this lies in the fact Habitat helps poor families stabilize their lives and climb out of poverty."

Grace is another Habitat volunteer. She lives in the inner city in a "room" provided by the local affiliate as part of her "voluntary stipend" and her income is below the taxable range. At the same time, she doesn't think that she has made any sacrifice in working with Habitat. Rather her experience has been just the opposite—an wonderful experience of working with "an organization which enables one to try to live out one's conscience, where there's virtually no sacrifice of values!" She says: "Being from the white, privileged, educated minority, I will always be middle to upper-middle class. My choosing to be below taxable income is yet another 'privilege,' i.e., *voluntary poverty*" (emphasis added).

Grace feels that "we are all interconnected by a God of Love who has set forth various ways and means to manifest her / himself." She has the following graphic metaphors to share about Habitat: "I wish I knew how the housing crisis can best be solved. Habitat has a very effective philosophy—kind of like the Amish barn-raising parties where everyone from the community comes together to help their neighbor build their own barn".

Understanding the Significance of Habitat : Dilemma, Movement and Transformation

The actors of Habitat embody an urge to do something to make a difference in their own lives and in the lives of those for whom they build. But even joining Habitat out of a deeper conviction to find meaning in one's life is not without doubt and dilemma on the part of the actors. This is even true of those who consider their participation with Habitat to have been definitely a turning point in their lives. Rick Hathaway, a former General Electric engineer from Massachusetts and now the director of Habitat Affiliates, is one such. His participation with Habitat, he says, has been a turning point in his life. He worked with GE for five years. Then he took a year off and built houses for Habitat in Lynn, Massachusetts. It was then that he decided to leave his job and work full time on the staff at the Habitat headquarters. It was a challenging decision for him, since it meant "leaving a lot of security." He remains fully aware that he has left a well-trodden and secure path, and I think he experiences some ambivalence. Rick's story sensitizes us to the dilemmas and doubts that accompany the process of self-transformation as initiated by one's participation in social movements, so persuasively captured in McAdam's study of the Freedom Summer (McAdam 1988).

Nevertheless, social movements are processes of ongoing self-transformation, which can change movement actors into critics of culture (Bright & Harding 1984). One gets an intimation of a critical consciousness among the Habitat folks at Americus, the headquarters of Habitat. In commenting on contemporary American Society, Sky—a Habitat volunteer—declares that it is becoming a credit card society which for him is also the "sign of the beast" (his words). As he envisions it, this might become a society where currency would become superfluous while the access to exchange would be more and more restricted. Sky thinks that eventually power and control could be concentrated in the hands of a few[3]. Another volunteer who identifies himself as a "hippie"[4] says that the United States is heading for a civil war. In his words: "If this happens, then people will realize the practical significance of liberation theology." Many volunteers, not all of whom are necessarily wealthy and able to afford a "voluntary poverty," feel that their participation with Habitat has given them a less "materialistic perspective" on life. They articulate what Inglehart (1990) calls a "postmaterialist" perspective on life which does not consider money and power as the sole measures of good life. This is put into practice by What Unger (1987) calls the "personalist program". With hammers in their hands Habitat actors bring their "personalist programs" to bear upon the unfoldment of self, culture, and society. Habitat actors do not just wait for the government or a more significant other to arrive and solve the problems of shelter; they pick up their hammer and go to build. They also share their resource with the local projects and enjoy leaving their well-paying jobs to either volunteer with Habitat or work at substantially low salary. Their "voluntary poverty" helps us appreciate what Unger says: "The citizen renounces... because his concessions are transfigured by the affirmative inclinations and attachments" (Unger 1987: 379).

Giddens (1991) provides us a perspective to make sense of the aspirations of Habitat actors vis-a-vis their search for a more meaningful "career". Giddens argues that to understand not only individual but also society in our "late modern age" we will have to take seriously the "reflexive project of the self", which "consists in sustaining a coherent, yet continuously revived biographical narrative" in face of the "multiple choices filtered through abstract systems" (Giddens 1991: 5). Such a project involves the choice of a particular life style "among a diversity of options" (ibid).[5] A reflexive mobilization of self is also at work in the life of the actors of Habitat for whom their house-building engagement is a significant marker of their "life style". When actors under late capitalism are by and large robbed of their power to synthesize and conceive of their life as a meaningful totality this life style gives Habitat volunteers an opportunity for solidarity and "de-differentiation" (Habermas 1984: 25), an alternative to the "internal colonization of the lifeworld" (Habermas 1987). As Dorris Poole (1993), a volunteer at Habitat International headquarters, who left her job in an insurance company after nineteen years of service to work full time with Habitat, tell us: "I really feel that Americans today live a compartmentalized lifestyle. We don't want our jobs, our religion, our friends, our social lives to mix together. Coming to Habitat has given me a more integrated lifestlye."

Reflexive mobilization of the self involves both conflicts with the existing system—new conflicts now emerge along the seams "between system and lifeworld" that target at roles created by "the media of money and power" (Habermas 1987: 395)—as well as movements for reconstruction and affirmation. In Habitat we see such moves at work which in their own ways try to deconstruct the monolithic language of money and power, "work and exchange" (Unger 1987: 431). What we also see in Habitat is how new forms of religion and spirituality help in this deconstruction and reconstruction by trying to "directly address issues of the moral meaning of existence which modern institutions so thoroughly tend to dissolve" (Giddens 1991: 207).

Involvement with Habitat provides its volunteers an opportunity to come to terms with their life crises and actualize their life aspirations. In other words, their Habitat engagement helps them in their "identity formation". But the process of this "identity formation" is complex. The identity of Habitat volunteers is crucially dependent upon the performance of the homeowners. Homeowners must repay regularly, which help Habitat volunteers to feel secured in their identity of belonging to a movement where their money and labour is not given either as a dole or a charity but becomes a link in an ever-widening circle of "Revolving Fund for Humanity". They feel threatened when the homeowners default. In order to secure this identity from all probable threats the actors of Habitat would not hesitate to impose their own middle-class identity upon the homeowners by insisting on the destruction of the dilapidated trailer of a selected homeowner. This, in fact, is a rule in Immokalee, Florida where I carried out my fieldwork. Some of them also would not feel the prick of conscience in throwing out a defaulting homeowner to the streets of Chicago in a cold winter night (that this actually happened in the Chicago Habitat affiliate was once reported widely in the newspapers in the United States about which Habitat World had also written a commentary) or suggesting to take out the roof of a poor farmer's Habitat house (this was suggested by an international volunteer of Habitat in a project in India during the drive for the collection of mortgage payment from the defaulting homeowners), thus blurring the thin separating line between vicarious and creative identity formation.

It is perhaps for this reason that there are some volunteers in Habitat who articulate a disenchantment with it. A Habitat couple who had served for three years as international partners in two different Habitat projects in East Africa tells us: "Participation in Habitat has made us cynical about developmental efforts in general. The arrogance of the First world people overrides many of the benefits. This experience has confirmed our belief in the need for true grass-roots development, which Habitat is not". They further add: "...Habitat is a good model if it can be freed from the control of the middle class, both in the United States and in the Third World". Another volunteer of Habitat who works in a project in Peru also tells us: "The organisation is a paternalistic disgrace in Peru where a bunch of rich snorts feel very good about themselves for helping those `poor people' get a material good, while the poor themselves are allowed no meaningful participation in the program and, far from being taught that they can improve themselves, are led to believe that they can only get ahead through the beneficence of rich Peruvians and North Americans. My impression is that the projects in United States vary, but that in general they aren't much better than Peru." The following statement of Habitat homeowner Margaret Dellucenay of Eckhart, Indiana, helps us understand this: "After a while, reality struck and I found that these Habitat `angels' were really just ordinary people. They didn't always understand me and I just could not figure out what they didn't like about me. They would ask me my opinion and would get very upset when I give it to them" (quoted in Fuller and Fuller 1990: 57). It is perhaps for this reason that a recent commentator of Habitat has written: "...apart from the bickering over whether to pay bigots to change their habitats or to hope that the zealots will live like missionaries out of the goodness of their hearts, the marginality of the poor remain in the margins and spaces of the text.. Those inhabiting the world of greed invite the marginal people "in"; those inhabiting world of love go out to meet the marginal people, to minister to their needs. In both cases, the marginal people are out there, ripe for domination because their needs must be met from without by the resources of the greedy middle class folks or loving middle-class folks" (Corlett 1989: 9).

Towards A Hermeneutics of Recovery

We began this reflection with an interrogation of the discourse of deconstruction and with a plea for understanding the urge for recovery and building in the life of actors and institutions in contemporary societies. Habitat articulates a different agenda of self-criticism and rebuilding of the built-environment than

that provided by the discourse of deconstruction. But its complex embodiment, especially the continued urge of some volunteers to control the life-space of the homeowners, suggests that Habitat is not a pure counter-example of the narrative of self and society deployed by deconstruction. Probably in interrogation of any theoretical metanarrative, examples do not work as pure evidences to support or refute a theory; a creative engagement with them help us to be critical of our taken-for-granted assumptions and the reigning ideologies of the time, and widen and deepen our universe of discourse (see, Giri 1994; Lieberson 1992). As complex as the process of "identity formation" at work and the embodiment of the vision of "No more Shacks" in Habitat is, the significance of Habitat for what its actors perceive as the destruction of the U.S moral economy and the redemption seen in building houses cannot be discounted. The actors of Habitat are appalled by the processes of economic, political, and social change; they seek to arrest this disintegrating process and create new sites of integration by building houses. By building houses for the less privileged they not only build communities but rebuild themselves—rejoin several disjointed fragments in their own lives and arrive at a new synthesis.

In their recent moral critique of institutional arrangement in the contemporary United States, Robert Bellah and his colleagues tell us that contemporary American form of life minimizes seeking of any "larger moral meaning" and Americans have pushed the "logic of exploitation as far it can go" (Bellah et al 1991: 43). In this context, they plead for a new paradigm for the actors and the institutions of the United States—what they call the "pattern of cultivation". This paradigm of cultivation refers to the habit of paying attention to the needs of one another and building of communities. Attention is described here normatively which refers to pursuing goals, and relationships which give us meaning, and is different from 'distraction' and 'obsession' (ibid). For Bellah *et al* (1991: 273), "Attending means to concern ourselves with the larger meanings of things in the longer run, rather than with short-term pay offs. The pursuit of immediate pleasure, or the promise of immediate pleasure is the essence of dislocation. A good society is one in which attention takes precedence over distraction."

In Habitat we see such an idealism at work. If the actors in Bellah's conversation on good society express their idealism through the idiom of cultivation, the actors of Habitat express it through the idiom of "love in the morter joints." The paradigm is a paradigm of building—building homes and building communities. Fuller talks about pursuit and building as appropriate models of the care of the self—as appropriate modes of being in the world and self-engagement. Like Bellah's actors Fuller also presents his idea of pursuit normatively and argues that "a spiritual dimension to our various pursuits is essential to make sense of what life is all about" (Fuller 1992c: 4-5). Fuller speaks simultaneously of "pursuing peace and building up one another" (Fuller 1992a) and challenges for "building a better world" (Fuller 1992b). Many commentators of the emergent American consciousness also point to a pervasive spiritual urge within a section of the population so that critical exhortations from interlocutors such as Millard Fuller do not fall only on the deaf ears. For instance, one observer tells us that a strong social ethic, which is, "an activist form of mystical endeavor, for it supports transformative work in society as an outgrowth and manifestation of transformation of the self" is emerging as a major component of the new spirituality (Albanese 1993: 138). Another observer of contemporary American religiosity argues that the religious scene is characterized not only by "pastiche styles of belief and practice," but by a "profound searching" (Roof 1993: 165) which is "not so much that of navel gazing, but a quest for balance- between self and others, between self-fulfillment and social responsibilities" (ibid). It is noteworthy that in his remark on this emergent social ethic and spirituality, Roof mentions Habitat for Humanity.

The paradigm of building which xcfsanimates movements like Habitat for Humanity has a potential for recovery—recovery of meaning in individual lives as well as recovery of communities from the threatening logic of speculation where speculation on profit takes an upper hand over the human need for a decent shelter. This paradigm of building also embodies a hermeneutics of recovery for our ways of world-making and frames of interpretation. The disintegration of built-environments in advanced industrial societies has gone hand with the rise of deconstruction in social theory and anti-foundationalism in American philosophy. But "... in challenging all consensual standards of truth and justice, of ethics, and meaning ... deconstructionism ended up, inspite of the best intentions of its more radical practitioners, reducing knowledge and meaning to a rubble of signifiers" (Harvey 1989: 350). "it thereby produced a condition of nihilism," (ibid) which in turn has made the need for a "heremeneutics of recovery" urgent in the theory and practice of the actors.

In Habitat we see such a heremeneutics at work. A heremeneutics of recovery requires trust in one another and communities which sustain us and give our interdependence a moral meaning (Bellah 1989; Bellah *et al* 1991). If as a result of economic decline and post-industrial transition contemporary United States is now "falling from grace", then Habitat's vision of "No More Shacks" and its paradigm of building is a sign of recovery. It is undoubtedly true that it is just a sign[5] and has not yet become a symbol. Still its potential for engaging Americans in a heremeneutics of recovery cannot be missed.

[This paper builds upon my doctoral research on Habitat for Humanity and on my thesis, "In the Margins of Shacks: The Vision and Practice of Habitat for Humanity," completed at Johns Hopkins University, U.S.A. in October 1994. This paper was earlier presented at Center for Theoretical Studies at University of Essex, U.K and I am grateful to Professor Emesto Laclau, Ms. Noreen Herbert, Dr. Aletta J. Norval, and members of the audience for their insightful comments, incisive questions, and warm hospitality. My thanks are also due to my colleagues Drs. Manabi Majmudar and M.S.S. Pandian for their comments on this paper. However, I alone am responsible for whatever gaps which still exist in this. I also invite comments and criticism from the readers and my address is: Dr. Ananta K. Giri, Madras Institute of Development Studies, Adyar, Madras 600 020, India. Telefax: 91-44-4910872, Email: SSMIDS@REN.NIC.IN]

Notes

1. This is as much true in contemporary post-industrial societies as it is in the "primitive" societies of "gift" and "exchange". Contemporary post-industrial societies are characterized by the proliferation of collective goods, which requires an ability within the actors to overcome the temptation of being a free-rider in their use of collective goods and to contribute meaningfully towards their creation, maintenance, and appropriate imagination (see, Benjamin 1981). As Mark Warren argues, "Public material goods present unique opportunities for self-transformation when compared with other goods" (Warren 1992: 21). But the bane of modern political theory is that it fails to understand that a theory of discourse is not a theory of self-transformation. It fails to understand, as Unger (1987) argues, that the citizen of the empowered democracy is the empowered individual. Unger argues that democracy is founded on the perpetual readiness for renunciation on the part of the citizens. But this renunciation is not perceived as a sacrifice by the citizens not only because of "the guarantee of immunity afforded by a system" but because of a spiritual commitment to transformation. In the words of Unger: "Its higher spiritual significance consists in the assertion of transcendence as a diurnal context smashing" (Unger 1987: 579).

2. I owe this formulation to Roberto Unger's insightful observations on the participation in transformative movements (see Unger 1987).

3. In his comments on politics of style in contemporary American culture Stuart Ewen (1988) also warns us of the dangers of a credit card economy.

4. This reminds one of McAdam's (1988) view that the Sixties activists, in a changing political context, are aligning themselves with newer types of activism which Boyte (1980) calls "The Backyard Revolution".

5. In this regard, what Giddens (1991: 9) writes deserves our attention:

> The reflexive project of the self generates programs of actualization and mastery. But as long as these possibilities are understood largely as a matter of the extension of the control systems of modernity to the self, they lack moral meaning... [Yet] It becomes more and more apparent that lifestyle choices, within the settings of local-global interrelationships, raise moral issues which cannot simply be pushed into one side. Such issues call for forms of political engagement which the new social movements both presage and serve to help initiate.

6. About such religious movements, Bellah and his colleagues have written that "their witness is a profound and moving gesture of hope; but it remains a gesture, a sign but not a pattern for transforming the whole of society" (Bellah *et al* 1991: 33).

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