Stakeholder Theory for Sustainable Cities and Society: A Humanist and Environmental approach for integrating People, Institutions, and Environmental Ecosystems

Teoria interesariuszy na rzecz zrównoważonych miast i społeczeństwa: humanistyczne i środowiskowe podejście do kwestii integracji ludzi, instytucji i ekosystemów środowiskowych

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Abstract: It needs to be clarified in the literature as to how humanism could embrace environmental ecosystems in cities and society. Some scholars argue that Stakeholder Theory could help bridge the environmental ecosystems under a humanist approach. For this reason, this study aims to fill this gap by exploring how Stakeholder Theory and Humanism can be connected to the fostering of sustainable development in cities and society. The main findings highlighted in the urban and societal contexts the role of stakeholder and humanist responsibility, the role of stakeholder consensus about humanist themes and environmental issues, and last but not least important, the need to consider the environment as a non-human stakeholder in social and urban governance. These directions should also be further detailed and explored in the multi/interdisciplinary fields of Sociology, Philosophy, Social Sciences, Humanities, Political Science, and Urban Studies. Therefore, this study provided a conceptual framework of three propositions which revealed that a stakeholder-oriented and humanism-oriented governance can embrace environmental concerns in cities and societies. In this way, consensus, responsibility, and considering the environment as a non-human stakeholder are critical elements in urban and social governance.

Keywords: Stakeholder Theory, sustainability, sustainable development, humanism, environment

Streszczenie: Temat możliwego wpływu idei humanizmu na kształtowanie ekosystemów środowiskowych w miastach i społeczeństwie powinien zostać podjęty w literaturze. Zdaniem niektórych naukowców teoria interesariuszy może stać się czynnikiem łączącym różne ekosystemy środowiskowe w ramach podejścia humanistycznego. Mając to na uwadze, niniejsza praca podejmuje się zadania analizy sposobów powiązania teorii interesariuszy i humanizmu ze wspieraniem zrównoważonego rozwoju w miastach i społeczeństwie. Wynikiem tej analizy było podkreślenie w kontekście miejskim i społecznym roli interesariuszy i odpowiedzialności humanistycznej, roli konsensusu interesariuszy w kwestiach humanistycznych i środowiskowych oraz wreszcie, co nie mniej ważne, potrzeby uwzględnienia środowiska jako interesariusza innego niż człowiek w zarządzaniu społecznym i miejskim. Przedstawione wnioski powinny być następnie uszczegółowione i dogłębnie przeanalizowane w ramach multi/interdyscyplinarnych dziedzin socjologii, filozofii, nauk społecznych, nauk humanistycznych, politologii i urbanistyki. Z tego względu, niniejsza praca przedstawia ramy koncepcyjne trzech propozycji ukazujących, że zorientowane na interesariuszy i humanizm zarządzanie może znaleźć zastosowanie w rozwiązywaniu kwestii środowiskowych w miastach i społeczeństwach. W ten sposób konsensus,

odpowiedzialność i traktowanie środowiska jako interesariusza innego niż człowiek stają się kluczowymi elementami zarządzania miejskiego i społecznego.

Słowa kluczowe: Teoria interesariuszy, zrównoważenie, zrównoważony rozwój, humanizm, środowisko

Introduction

In Science and Arts, theories are created to investigate phenomena. Phenomena are observed events that occur in real life, and one or more theories have propositions that objectively explain empirical phenomena. **Stakeholder Theory** has its origins in organizational management for investigating the phenomenon of stakeholders' networks (Freeman et al. 2010). However, stakeholders' networks are not an exclusive phenomenon of organizations. Societies, cities, nations, and regions also have stakeholders' networks (Freeman et al. 2010; Harrison, Freeman and de Abreu 2015). In cities, **urban stakeholders** are all those who affect or are affected by cities (Beck and Storopoli 2021). These cities could be understood as either organic bodies or municipal organized bodies. The bottom line is that Stakeholder Theory is a multi and interdisciplinary field studied in Cities as a cornerstone of **sustainable urban strategy** and an essential element for the **power of networks** (Beck and Storopoli 2021).

Humanism and Environment approaches also matter in Stakeholder Theory (Freeman et al. 2010; Harrison, Freeman and de Abreu 2015). Humanism is a philosophical stream that focuses its attention mainly on human potentialities and capabilities (Davies and Drakakis 2008). Although nature and environmental ecosystems are not the centers of humanism, humanists should not exclude taking care of the place where they live, i.e., Οἶκος in greek "oikos" (Sadowski 2016). Conversely, taking care of the environment also implies taking care of our own mankind, and thus, sustainable development is mandatory for true humanism and future societies (Łepko and Sadowski 2010). Classical,

Jewish, and Christian humanist approaches have much to contribute to the idea of sustainable development (Tirosh-Rothschild, 1988; Sadowski 2016). Considering that more people live in cities, the phenomenon of urbanization calls attention to this issue in cities. Therefore, there is a **knowledge gap** on how humanism could embrace environmental ecosystems in cities and society. Thus, the **research purpose** is to explore how Stakeholder Theory and Humanism can be connected to the fostering of sustainable development in cities and society.

Through a qualitative and epistemological approach, this **theoretical essay** concisely revisited the main theoretical concepts of Stakeholder Theory in Cities, Humanism, and Sustainability Science. This study made some propositions on this topic by arguing that Stakeholder Theory could fill this gap by connecting humanism and environmental ecosystem concerns.

After this introduction section, this study is followed by: First, an overview of the literature on Stakeholder Theory in cities and society; Second, an overview of Humanism; third, a conceptual framework towards sustainable cities and societies by considering the interrelated elements between Stakeholder Theory and Humanism. Finally, I concluded with a synthesis of the study and its limitations.

1. Stakeholder Theory in Cities and Society: An Overview

The five-main constructs of **Stakeholder Theory** are: (1) stakeholder value creation (Clarkson 1995; Harrison, Bosse and Philips 2010; Bridoux and Stoelhorst 2014; Tantalo and Priem 2014; Beck and Ferasso In press); (2) stakeholder salience, which is composed

of the salient attributes of power, urgency, and legitimacy (Mitchell, Agle and Wood 1997; Agle, Mitchell and Sonnenfeld 1999); (3) stakeholder capitalism (Perkin, 1996; Freeman and Liedtka 1997; Freeman, Martin and Parmar 2007; Schwab and Vanham 2021); (4) stakeholder concept (Freeman 1984); and (5) social responsibility (Carroll 1991; Carroll and Buchholtz 1996; Carroll 1999). Recently, another fundamental construct of Stakeholder Theory has been the **Environmental, Social, and Governance movement** (ESG), which has these three aspects as central prescriptions of how organizations should act in society (Beck and Ferasso In press).

Over the years, much work has been done dealing with city stakeholders. However, only recently, with the seminal work "Cities through the lens of Stakeholder Theory" by Beck and Storopoli (2021), the constructs of Stakeholder Theory have begun to be identified, mapped, and conceptualized in cities, urban governance, and urban management. In other words, the term "stakeholder" has been widely used in urban studies literature without considering the strict terms and rigorously the constructs of Stakeholder Theory in cities, mainly in the topic of Smart Cities (Ibrahim et al. 2017; Marrone and Hammerle 2018). Before the work of Beck and Storopoli (2021), there was no clear definition of who could be considered an urban stakeholder based on the Stakeholder Theory in influential literature (high-impact published articles/reviews) of Urban Studies. Thus, anybody and any organization could be understood as a stakeholder until that moment. In sum, Beck and Storopoli (2021) adapted the principles and constructs of Stakeholder Theory used in Business Ethics and Management to the contexts of cities by mapping, reviewing, and organizing the Urban Studies literature developed on this topic.

In cities, the emerging mainstream literature is divided into three: (1) Sustainable Urban Strategy; (2) Urban Marketing; and (3) Power of Networks (Beck and Storopoli 2021). **Sustainable Urban Strategy** highlights the importance of stakeholders' engagement and consensus in fostering sustainable urban development to address urban challenges. **Power of Networks** stresses the importance of stakeholder engagement, stakeholder networks, partnerships, social capital, and relational capital in fostering sustainable urban governance, which is responsible for stakeholder value creation. Finally, **Urban Marketing** underlines the role of urban branding in people's lives, perceptions of the city, and stakeholders' engagement in urban branding affairs.

The constructs of the Stakeholder Theory of stakeholder value creation and stakeholder salience are also manifested in the emerging mainstream literature. Stakeholder value creation for urban stakeholders is crucial in the three aforementioned divisions of the emerging mainstream literature since it enhances better urban governance and democratic urban management (Beck and Storopoli 2021; Beck and Ferasso in press). Furthermore, Beck and Storopoli (2021) also provided some implications for the construct of **stakeholder salience** in cities: Urban stakeholders could have saliency in power and legitimacy in the face of governments. Thus, as for power, local/regional/national governments need and aim to meet stakeholder needs. As for legitimacy, governments should deal with institutional and societal pressures by exploring sustainable urban strategies, urban marketing, and the power of networks to create value for and be accountable to urban stakeholders. Finally, resources, infrastructure, and socioeconomic and environmental issues can be sources of urgency for urban stakeholders, thus increasing their saliency toward urban management.

The next section pays attention to humanism by presenting a summary and a concise conceptual framework.

2. Humanism: An Overview

Humanism could have many meanings based on complex histories and contexts. Therefore, there is no standard definition of humanism (Davies and Drakakis 2008; Hancock, 2019). Also, humanists can disagree with others. For instance, Jacques Maritain disagreed with the anthropocentrism of Italian humanists because Christians Humanists like Maritain believed that "anthropocentrism is inadequate to provide a full understanding of human personality" (Giustiniani 1985, 194). Significantly, humanism has affected science through humanistic methods, humanistic skills, and humanistic dialogues: "the humanist emphasis on arguing from evidence rather than from first principles may help for the increased references to direct observation" (Blair and Grafton 1992, 539). Furthermore, the primary meanings of humanism were highlighted by Giustiniani (1985), such as:

- First, humanism means 'learned' or 'erudite' in classical Latin, a differentiator characteristic of humans and other animals. However, this meaning is not currently familiar when it comes to humanism.
- Second, *humanista* was the humanities and classical education teacher in Italian Universities in the 15th century.
- Third, humanism as a philosophy of *homo* (i.e., man), which "seems to have appeared first in France in the second half of the eighteenth century, about the same time as it appeared in Germany in its other meaning" (Giustiniani 1985, 175). The philosophy of *homo* can have many different narratives, such as Marxist humanism, Christian Humanism, Jewish Humanism, secular humanism, Heidegger humanism, and so forth. The bottom line is that humanism can also be understood as a philosophy of the affairs that pertain to mankind.
- Fourth, **humanism** could be related to the *paideia* (the Greek term for the educational system of Ancient Greek),

which would be the theory of deontological humanity.
- Fifth, *virtus* (i.e., human virtue) is a humanistic means for leading to power, and *history* is a means to understand how the *virtus* has evolved over time.

The most essential assumption of humanism is that **humans have higher moral and cognitive capacities than other animals**. In this way, Figdor (2020, 1548) stated that "humanism holds that all humans are equal and all nonhumans are inferior to humans concerning the recognition [and] respect they enjoy." Therefore, this vision of humanism assumes a human-centric philosophical approach.

Other relevant studies revealed that **humanism** is an exciting approach to **cultural diversity** (Ollivier 2008), exploring the role of **human agency in human geography** (Simonsen 2013), fostering a **humanistic approach in business and economics** (Pirson and Lawrence 2010), and **human rights** (Gilabert 2011).

After this short contextualization of Humanism in this section and Stakeholder Theory in cities in the past section, the following section presents the study discussion. The following discussion uses a qualitative and epistemological approach by exploring how these two theoretical strands can help to foster sustainable cities, which is also an environmental-friendly approach. Furthermore, it is needed to highlight that sustainable cities should have an equilibrium among the social, economic, environmental, and institutional dimensions of urban sustainability.

3. Stakeholder Theory and Humanism: A Framework towards Sustainable Cities and Societies

Currently, in the digital era, there has been an interesting debate about the role of humanism in a technological society. Messner (2020) connects the humanist approach to the challenges in sustainability and the technological paradigms in society.

In this way, Messner (2020) interrelated the importance of fostering sustainable development with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the Agenda 2030 and the importance of building consensus about the societal future. As previously presented in the section "1. Stakeholder Theory in Cities: An Overview", the **consensus** is a critical element of **Stakeholder Theory**. In this way, it would be possible to hypothesize that **consensus could be a helpful instrument in humanist urban governance**.

Another connecting point between humanism and Stakeholder Theory is that, in a dilemma between **shareholder orientation** *versus* **stakeholder orientation**, shareholder orientation is an economism-based approach and **stakeholder orientation is a humanism-based approach** (Pirson and Lawrence 2010). According to Pirson and Lawrence (2010, 554) explained the differences between the economism and the humanism-based approaches:

> Despite many popular misconceptions, humanism as a philosophic tradition, and utilitarian economism have very similar roots. Humanistic philosophy also takes the human individual as its starting point and emphasizes the human capacity of reasoning. It is therefore equally hostile to any form of collectivism. In contrast to economism, however, humanism assumes that human nature is not entirely a given, that it can be refined, through education and learning. In addition, the ethical component remains a cornerstone in humanism in that it attributes unalienable rights to everybody, independent from ethnicity, nationality, social status or gender. Humanism addresses everybody and is universal in its outreach. … Economism views the human being as a fixed entity, predetermined by its utility function which is stable. This economic man (homo oeconomicus) is utterly self-serving and only interested in maximizing his immediate utility. Economic man is therefore only engaging in transactional, short-term oriented encounters

with others. His engagements are interest based and other people are a means to an end.

The bottom line is that **Humanism** and **Stakeholder Theory** are connected, and it can not only help to foster better businesses and society but also be useful in fostering sustainable cities and communities. Therefore, the **consensus** is a tool used in stakeholder-oriented urban governance that should be considered in building humanist cities. And thus, Consensus is a critical element in stakeholder collaboration.

The human being is central to humanism. Humans live in cities, regions, and nations, or even better, on the earth's planet, which is spread out in the *Via Lactea* in the Universe. For this reason, it is sensible to argue that salient humanism does not ignore the fact that **mankind should take care of the environment**. If we, as humans, ignore the place where we live, are we being humanists? Do we not depend on the well-functioning of the place where we live? First, it is needed to point out that true humanists try to simultaneously conserve and foster socio-economic progress in society in a reasonable manner. In this way, the challenge for our cities and society is to build a **consensus** for making policies and systems that embrace all the dimensions of **sustainability**. Importantly, this assumption can be applied to secular and religious humanists, such as Jewish and Christian humanists. For instance, in the book of *Bereshit* (transliterated from the Hebrew בְּרֵאשִׁית) or *Génesis* (transliterated from the Greek Γένεσις), when the Creator assigns a mission to Adam (Hebrew: אָדָם) to take care of all the fauna, flora, and all the earth environment, it is a divine concession and a privilege to the mankind to take care of one the most beautiful creations of the Supreme Creator, who created Adam in in His own image and likeness. After developing this complex rationale, I propose that:

Proposition 1: Humanists are stakeholder-oriented by nature, and thus, they consider

taking care of the environment because they are conscious and converge about the fact that they depend on the well-maintenance of the habitat they are inserted into.

One way of taking care of the environment is by considering the environmental issues and challenges mankind faces today, such as climate change, environmental pollution, etc. In these terms, Stakeholder Theory has extended the construct of **Stakeholder Proximity**, which considers the environment as a non-human stakeholder (see Driscoll and Starik 2004). Why? Firstly, it is crucial to revisit the proper concept of **who** (i.e., concrete world concept: the people) or **which** (abstract world concept: the environment constituted by non-human things, institutions created by people, or even non-living things such as the natural landscape) can be considered as a stakeholder. In short, by considering the literature contributions since Freeman (1984) to the current paradigm (Freeman et al. 2010), a **stakeholder is who/which is affected or affects the achievement of the organizational/system goals in terms of power, legitimacy, urgency, and/or proximity**.

For this reason, it is supposed that non-religious or religious humanists consider the environment as:

- First, as a **legitimate non-human stakeholder** in which urban and societal systems can affect or be affected by the complex interplay among human and non-human stakeholders;
- Second, as an **urgent non-human stakeholder** when it comes to the topic of climate change and other environmental issues since humankind has not taken care enough of this stakeholder;
- Third, as an **influential non-human stakeholder** that often cannot be perceived as powerful by the economic and utilitarian forces, that can decrease the quality of life of humans and other species due to environmental issues silently and gradually. Much of the power of the environment as a non-stakeholder

could, for instance, be explained in air/water/environmental pollution that can spread diseases affecting humankind, the fauna, and flora. Although the environment is a non-human stakeholder without apparent financial power of influence, it can also influence economic activities with droughts and other climate issues. It is so powerful that some species have disappeared, a clear demonstration that humankind has not taken care of the environment; for religious people, it could also be a demonstration that humankind has not respected the privilege conceded by the creator to take care of the environment.

- Fourth, as a **non-human stakeholder geographically proximate to humankind and other species**, directly and indirectly affecting human activities and vice-versa.

Of course, humankind can still appropriately use the environment to foster economic development through industrial and agricultural activities. However, **responsibility**, as also discussed in the section "1. Stakeholder Theory in Cities: An Overview", in these activities is a crucial element in all governance systems for sustainable development, including the urban one. After all these rationale developments, I propose that:

Proposition 2: The environment is a legitimate, urgent, powerful, and proximate non-human stakeholder of which humankind needs to take care of it with responsibility, and thus, we can foster sustainable development in cities, regions, nations, and social complex systems.

Furthermore, responsibility can be a driver for sustainable development and, thus, the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of Agenda 2030. According to Beck and Ferasso (2023), the contribution of stakeholder capitalism and stakeholder-based strategies have been inconclusive on how "stakeholderism" can contribute to achieving the SDGs 6 "clean water and sanitation," 14 "life below water,"

and 15 "life on land." This way, "further research development by considering non-human stakeholders and the environment" (Beck and Ferasso 2023, 1). Furthermore, in the context of stakeholder value creation and urban sustainability, Beck and Ferasso (in press) identified that the current status of this context reveals *weak sustainability*, *unsustainability*, and *the need for better integration of the environmental dimension.* In this way, *responsibility* as a humanist ingredient also existing in stakeholder-oriented strategists could help overcome major urban and societal issues. Thus, I propose that, in theory:

> Proposition 3: *The responsibility of stakeholder-oriented strategists and humanists is a critical tool that integrates Stakeholder Theory and Humanism and fosters sustainable development of cities and social systems and better conditions for all human and non-human stakeholders.*

Therefore, Stakeholder Theory and Humanism have a long pathway to unfold as two converged and interrelated approaches. In a nutshell, this study highlighted, in the urban and societal contexts, the role of stakeholder and humanist responsibility, the role of stakeholder consensus about humanist themes and environmental issues, and last but not least important, the need for considering the environment as a non-human stakeholder in social and urban governance. These directions should also be further detailed and explored in the multi/interdisciplinary fields of Sociology, Philosophy, Social Sciences, Humanities, Political Science, and Urban Studies.

Conclusion

This study achieved its purpose by providing a conceptual framework of three propositions of which revealed that a stakeholder-oriented and humanism-oriented governance can embrace environmental concerns in cities and societies. For this, consensus, responsibility, and considering the environment as a non-human

stakeholder, are critical elements in urban and social governance.

The findings revealed that the environment could be a legitimate, urgent, powerful, and proximate non-human stakeholder. These salient attributes of the environment should be further explored in future studies. However, it is possible to argue that: (1) the environment is a legitimate stakeholder since there is a complex and natural relationship between the social and environmental ecosystems; (2) the environment has urgent themes to be addressed, such as climate change, environmental pollution, among other environmental issues; (3) the environment is robust since it can exert silent or non-silent power in economic and social ecosystems, such as droughts, climate human migrations, and drastic changes in human and non-human lives; and (4) the environment is a geographically proximate non-human stakeholder to social and urban systems, and thus, it affects and is affected in a direct/indirect manner to social and urban systems.

The main limitation of this study is the qualitative and epistemological approach employed by the researcher. Although the author made efforts to conduct an objective analysis, it is possible the existence of some subjective element in the discussion and analysis.

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