

## CHAPTER I: UNPACKING POVERTY, EMPOWERMENT, AND RELATEDNESS

### I-1 THE WAGES OF POVERTY

The persistent deep poverty and consequent marginalization and suffering of fully half the world's six billion people is a matter of great and ongoing concern. Globally 1.2 billion people are currently estimated to live on less than \$1 per day; and almost 3 billion people, roughly half the world's population, live on less than \$2 per day.<sup>1</sup> Between the rich and poor nations, the disparities are extreme. The top fifth of countries by income have 86 percent of the world's gross domestic product (GDP); the bottom fifth just *one* percent. The top fifth command 82 percent of the world export markets and 68 percent of foreign direct investment; the bottom fifth just *one* percent of each of these.<sup>2</sup> Compounding the difference between even ordinary Americans and the global poor, even the vanishingly small slice of the wealth held by poor nations collectively is subject to great internal wealth disparities between poor and rich similar to those in the United States, or worse.

What does this mean for the truly poor? The case studies in Chapter 2 reveal the some of the ways in which the poor are pushed aside. In Nigeria government officials take kickbacks to sell off forest homelands far from the capital. In Ecuador the financial and political system declares its double standards in a crisis by protecting the assets of the powerful while freezing and appropriating the funds of ordinary bank account holders. In the case of Jubilee 2000 and international debt, we find entire generations held hostage to loans that were long ago funneled into private offshore accounts.

The agenda of global economic development has proceeded through several decades of painful lessons and halting progress, but it has slowly learned important lessons for the task of poverty reduction. Still, the agenda of reducing poverty remains largely unfulfilled. The causes of this failure are legion and are entwined with a vast and diverse array of particular concerns with varying degrees of affinity and overlap, such as the status of women, the harsh impacts of economic liberalization and free trade on the poor, economic concentration, corporate responsibility, labor practices, local disempowerment, race issues, and environmental degradation. I cannot begin to recount all of this here. Instead, I would like to begin by placing the most salient goals of today's poverty reduction agenda alongside those features of our global economy that are most implicated in perpetuating impoverishment.

Now, as to the lessons learned over half a century of globally coordinated economic development: frequent attempts have been made in recent decades to define the essence of poverty and the task of poverty reduction.<sup>3</sup> Generally speaking, this effort has

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<sup>1</sup> Asian Development Bank, "Global Poverty Report," available from [http://www.adb.org/Documents/Reports/Global\\_Poverty/default.asp?p=poverty](http://www.adb.org/Documents/Reports/Global_Poverty/default.asp?p=poverty); Internet; accessed April, 2000.

<sup>2</sup> *Human Development Report 1999*. New York ; Oxford : Oxford University Press, 1999.

<sup>3</sup> These include large-scale infrastructural development (dams, energy, resource extraction, roads); securing "basic needs" (such as shelter, food, and clothing) to meet at least bare subsistence; the "green revolution" in high-output food production.

been a journey from relatively simple formulations to increasingly elaborate ones, culminating presently in the understanding that poverty reduction is a complex process that demands an active strategy of empowerment.

As explained by Alan Fowler in his recent book, *Striking a Balance*, overcoming the complicated condition of poverty is much more than a matter of meeting the basic needs of minimum nutrition, shelter and clothing, as once was thought. It is more than a achieving a some threshold of consumption levels, and it is more than attaining a certain quality of life and the capability, as Amartya Sen says, to fulfil valuable functions within society.<sup>4</sup> Overcoming poverty is more even than gaining control over a wide range of “commodities,” including less tangible things such as education, good health, social standing and security. A person’s completed emergence from poverty, in Fowler’s account, is finally reflected in her overcoming a multifaceted state of powerlessness, in which she cannot achieve key functions because she is unable to influence the control of the commodities she requires. Fowler describes poverty reduction as a hierarchical unfolding of goals, “a process through which people progressively gain control over commodities in a rough sequence related to: survival, such as food, shelter and warmth; well-being – health, literacy, security; and empowerment, in the psychological sense of self-esteem and status, and in the political sense of exerting influence over decisions which affect their lives.”<sup>5</sup>

Today’s development agenda thus recognizes *powerlessness* in society as perhaps the most critical dimension of the problem of persistent poverty. Power, simply put, “is the ability to accomplish purposes or to realize desires.” As such, the exercise of power is not only the raw and dirty work of politics, but “an essential dimension of all life.”<sup>6</sup> The absence of structures and processes for participation, much less control, is an indicator of *marginalization* or exclusion.

Yet, if this empowerment strategy has taken hold in the circles of economic development theorists, it is not at all reflected in the mainstream of economic affairs. If the question is – “How do we create the empowering conditions in which the poor gain the capabilities and participation they need?” – the leading answer today is the competitive free market. The point of the economic strategy for fighting poverty known as the “Washington consensus” – recognized in the developing world as a free-market recipe of “structural adjustment programs” (SAPs) – is to expand the growth economy, with the ultimate goal of creating new investment and business that will create new opportunities and income for those who have the least. By these means, developing nations will gradually reduce the numbers of the poor. These arguments extolling the benefits of the economic growth and technological progress have great power and have largely defined our times. We have just witnessed the passing of an extraordinary century of real progress, and most people have every reason to believe that more of the same is coming. Astounding volumes of wealth have been created and standards of living have risen radically across the globe. Technology development has brought unprecedented health and lifespan to much of humanity, and the spread of such real benefits as electricity, communications, and education has never been so wide, encompassing communities that have long suffered under the yoke of underdevelopment and

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<sup>4</sup> Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

<sup>5</sup> Fowler, 3-4.

<sup>6</sup> Sturm, 20.

exploitation. Many whose grandparents were peasants now live longer and better lives, the partisans of the capitalist mode of economic growth like to say, than the kings of a century or two ago.

Yet this vision of prosperity for all through trickle-down growth also serves to support and justify the same hegemonic order that blithely accepts the utter exclusion of the majority of humanity. There is massive intellectual and material power in support of a status quo which sustains the roots of domination and seems to crowd out humanizing alternatives: not least, the myriad ways in which all Americans depend upon and participate in the benefits. From the perspective of the global poor, more income may indeed arrive in some places and at some times, but the forces arrayed against genuine empowerment remain unchanged. The ability of the great economic powers to hold the center and keep the clamor of voices at the margin is the measure of their hegemony.

In a highly influential book on globalization, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*, *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman writes of a global system with a striking lack of an ethical signposts. The rule of the market, Friedman argues, is that there is no one in charge; you have no choice but to run with the pack. From this kind of scientific, economic, deterministic point of view, there is no source of moral wisdom that might be universally applied; there are only the pragmatic rules of the game – among them, that our many sets of moral values shall compete with each other in their own marketplace, and, if the market be free, that no one set of values may be allowed to dominate (i.e., hold a monopoly). The one universal, in fact, is the market itself; and within the bounds of the capitalist free-market system, the very traditions of moral and aesthetic values are sometimes divided and conquered by self-serving ends.

Those individuals and institutions who hold the greatest wealth, regardless of their benevolent side, tend first to exercise their power to protect and expand their interests. Most wealthy-nation governments act first out of self-interest and are not abashed to say as much – no recent United States president has been so vocal and narrowly focused on acting “in the American interest,” particularly economic interest, as George W. Bush in 2001, but his pronouncement stand within a long tradition.<sup>7</sup> The result of this boldly self-serving attitude is that our leaders regard even the poorest nations first as competitors. No matter that the advantages build on themselves, that this is a competition in which the team with the greatest payroll cannot fail to win. The result is also found in the way that multilateral financial institutions like the World Bank and International Monetary Fund unilaterally impose on poor nations the economic vision of their wealthy-nation donor governments. Fixated on stable future macroeconomic growth in a protectionless open-market regime, slashing government assistance, imposing austerity in the name of efficiency, the resulting plans typically hurt the immediate welfare of the poorest in the hope of future benefit. Yet, during the boom years of the 1990s, that promised benefit never arrived for the vast majority of the world’s poor.

Market thinking has little place for the perspective that Sallie McFague brings when she says, “If the most basic meaning of justice is fairness, then from an ecological point of view, justice means sharing the limited resources of our common space.”<sup>8</sup> Just as we seek in our individual lives to exist in a benevolent milieu of living-together, giving

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<sup>7</sup> Jeffrey Gedmin and Gary Schmidt, “Allies in America's National Interest,” *New York Times*, August 5, 2001.

<sup>8</sup> McFague, 116.

and sharing, so we might seek to live in a common space of social structures and institutions that interact in these ways. Later I will make the case that we live in a world of radically related selves and that the ethical nature of belonging-together presses the case of what justice should mean for us in distinct ways. Great and growing disproportions of wealth and poverty, by which some live lavishly while billions live on a pittance, at best on the edge of malnutrition in the most meager of homes, belies the reality that *communities of wealth and communities of poverty are related to each other* – or, rather, it establishes that the mode of that relation shall be one of domination/subordination. The common terrain of home on earth is *not* shared.

If we return to the facts of income inequality and wealth disparity, we shall see that the very same neoliberal<sup>9</sup> economic growth strategy that claims to have the answer to poverty actually perpetuates poverty even in the midst of rapid growth. Consider the findings in a discussion of income-inequality in a recent Overseas Development Institute (ODI) *Poverty Briefing*. In September, 2000, world leaders at the United Nations Millennium Summit meeting in New York set a goal to reduce by half the more than one billion people living in “extreme poverty” (defined as earning less than \$1 a day, and likely going hungry). The target is to meet this goal by 2015. But the ODI briefing finds that “high levels of income-inequality limit the poverty reducing effects of growth...high-inequality countries will need to grow twice as fast as low-inequality countries to halve poverty by 2015. This is not feasible.”<sup>10</sup>

World Bank data, which assumes growth of 4 percent per capita per annum, indicates that “if all the countries in the developing world were to belong to the high-inequality group, although poverty falls, the target of halving extreme poverty by 2015 would *not be attained*. [But if] all these countries belonged to the low-inequality group then the *target is easily met* and poverty is halved as soon as 2005.”<sup>11</sup> As long as such inequality is the rule, the vaunted goals of political leaders are openly in vain.

Now, this is an opportunity for us in the wealthy nations to pin the blame on someone else: is it not the elites in the poor countries who are holding their own countrymen in poverty? Relational understandings will challenge that scapegoating. The profit incentives of the market economic system itself, flowing from, even imposed by the wealthy nations, ensure that income inequality is indeed the rule. Perhaps it is unrealistic to expect developing-world elites to choose to become more egalitarian when they can look at the same basic pattern in the United States’ domestic economic order. It is clear that those who are middle-class or wealthy in America have little interest in engaging themselves in an economic re-ordering that would deliver the same kind of empowerment to our own country’s poor. The wealth inequality trends in the United States are striking. In 1998 the wealthiest 10 percent of the American population owned 71 percent of all wealth and the bottom 90 percent owned 29 percent (in 1978, those

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<sup>9</sup> “Neoliberal” is the economists’ term for minimally-regulated, growth-oriented free-market capitalism.

<sup>10</sup> Lucia Hanmer et al. “Will Growth Halve Poverty by 2015?” *Poverty Briefing* (Overseas Development Institute, July 8, 2000), 1.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 2. Income-inequality generates a substantial drag on the positive effects of growth: “In the low income-inequality countries...10% economic growth was associated with a fall in the proportion of people below the poverty line by 9 percentage points. In the high income-inequality countries, 10% growth was associated with only a 3 percentage point reduction.”

allotments were, respectively, 49 percent and 51 percent).<sup>12</sup> Since 1977 the top one percent of American households has nearly doubled its share of the nation's wealth, jumping from 20 percent to 38 percent.<sup>13</sup> With respect to financial assets (stocks, bonds, and other non-housing equity) the concentration is even more pronounced. In the United States the top one percent holds nearly half of all financial wealth.<sup>14</sup>

Our American economy is presented from the hegemonic center as the pre-eminent model for economic transformation for the world. It is to the most successful Americans that such third-world elites compare themselves, emulating the lifestyle and aspiring to live up to it. Douglas Sturm argues that the question of distribution is inextricably linked to our perceived ontologies: how the wealth is held tells us how things in the world are actually practiced today and how they are "supposed" to be.<sup>15</sup> J. Mark Thomas says, "Every economic system is simultaneously a system of distributive justice and a moral statement about the right relationship between liberty and equality, the distribution of rewards and punishments, and the relationship between person and community and between stability and change."<sup>16</sup> The relationships between the poor and the wealthy embodied by our system in the United States makes a loud statement. That same message is mirrored by the enormous inequality that holds true between rich and poor nations. In a nation self-consciously holding a small pie, those few individuals in a position to keep up with their rich-country peers have to take an even larger slice of the pie than do their elite companions in the rich countries. It remains easiest to point the blame at developing-world elites for hoarding their profits at the expense of a more balanced and rapid national development. But the relatedness ethic demands that we go further than just blaming politicians and bureaucrats. I am suggesting that we in the wealthy nations might take these facts as an opportunity to discover our own relatedness to that poor-nation inequality dynamic. The development strategy itself is inextricable from the problem, and the chain of command for the enforcement of that strategy runs upward from the multilateral lending agencies, to their wealthy sponsor governments, to their leaders, to us, their electors.

Since market thinking is here to stay, perhaps we should take another tack, and ask what are the purposes of the market economy. Consider the formulation, "*Markets*

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<sup>12</sup> For 1976 data: Edward N. Wolff, *Top Heavy: A Study of Increasing Inequality in America* (New Press, 1996). For 1998 data: Edward N. Wolff, *Recent Trends in Wealth Ownership, 1983-98* (Jerome Levy Economics Institute, April 2000). Both quoted in Chuck Collins et al, "Divided Decade: Economic Disparity at the Century's Turn" (United for a Fair Economy, December 15, 1999). Available from website of United for a Fair Economy, [http://www.ufenet.org/press/divided\\_decade.html](http://www.ufenet.org/press/divided_decade.html); Internet; p. 2-4; accessed March, 2000.

<sup>13</sup> For 1977-89 data: Wolff, 1996. For 1992-98 data: Wolff, 2000.

<sup>14</sup> Collins et al, "Divided Decade." We are living in the midst of an extraordinary shift: "In 1989, the United States had 66 billionaires and 31.5 million people living below the official poverty line. A decade later, the United States has 268 billionaires and 34.5 million people living below the poverty line.... Together, the 400 richest Americans are worth more than \$1 trillion – about one-ninth of the total gross domestic product (GDP) of the United States, the world's richest economy. These 400 people...have about as much wealth as the 50 million households in the bottom half of the population." Collins, et al, 5.

<sup>15</sup> Sturm, 3.

<sup>16</sup> J. Mark Thomas, "The Quest for Economic Justice," in J. Mark Thomas and Vernon Visick, eds., *God and Capitalism: A Prophetic Critique of Market Economy* (Madison, WI: A-R Editions, 1991) 7.

are in the service of humankind.”<sup>17</sup> Day in and day out, a substantial part of human activity and of the earth’s bounty is devoted to productive endeavors which sustain the flow of markets. We all take part in market life. Yet it is in the nature of market incentives that the final benefit of all this activity – the wealth that productivity generates – is distributed unevenly. It appears that some in the global community are in the slow process of trying to set at least theoretical limits on that unevenness. The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) in the 1990s began emphasizing “human well-being as the *purpose* of markets and development. [Most development-oriented non governmental organizations] would assert that people and their values are both the means, ends, and judges of development.”<sup>18</sup> This understanding defines human development as “a process of enlarging people’s choices,” including, at a bare minimum, “to lead a long and healthy life, to acquire knowledge, and to have access to resources needed for a decent standard of living.”<sup>19</sup> For a long time, such a moral claim on markets has done battle with the philosophers of trickle-down economics, who believe that economic growth as such, in almost any form, fulfills the service obligation of markets to humankind.

I have said communities of wealth and communities of poverty are related to each other. How far does this relationship go? Could we say that the poor have a claim on some part of the wealth of the wealthy? The UNDP consensus answers “yes”: accumulated wealth cannot stand by unhelping while poverty cripples many people at levels below critical thresholds of well-being. Perhaps that sense of obligation should be pushed further, and we could say that the wealth of humanity is in some sense for *all* of humanity. But let us hold ourselves only to this emerging consensus that prosperous communities have a role to play in undergirding certain basic minimums for those who are least well-off. The implications of that commitment, I shall play out in the ensuing chapters.

First, though, I shall conclude this section by introducing the theological connection between poverty and oppression, as explicated by liberation theologians. “Liberation is liberation of the oppressed,” Clodovis Boff says, restating the relation which Jesus drew from Isaiah in his foundational first public act in Luke: “The Spirit of the Lord...has anointed me to preach good news to the poor...to set at liberty those who are oppressed” (Luke 4:18). Who are the oppressed? For Boff, the “characteristic visage of the third-world oppressed is that of the socioeconomically poor...the disinherited masses of the urban and rural slums” – those who are subject to “infrastructural oppression.”<sup>20</sup> Many people have found it easy to attribute such social destitution to personal vice or to collective backwardness, but liberation theologians such as Boff instead identify *poverty as oppression*. “Oppression,” in these terms, is, minimally, the usurping of any human being’s freedoms and capabilities to develop and grow, in a world in which there is enough for all. It is disempowerment. There are critical thresholds points below which such capabilities are not self-sustaining. In our world today, the most

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<sup>17</sup> Fowler, 6.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>19</sup> Ulrich Duchrow, *Alternatives to Global Capitalism: Drawn from Biblical History, Designed for Political Action* (Utrecht, the Netherlands: International Books, 1995), 245.

<sup>20</sup> Clodovis Boff, “Methodology of the theology of liberation,” in *Systematic Theology: Perspectives from Liberation Theology*, Jon Sobrino and Ignacio Ellacuría, eds. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), 15.

strikingly obvious location of oppression is the materially poor, whom Ada María Isasi-Díaz calls “those for whom the struggle for survival is a way of life.”<sup>21</sup> “Poor,” Clodovis Boff says, is taken as a code for “dependency, weakness, helplessness, anonymity, contempt, and humiliation” – though the poor would not define themselves in such terms. Poverty is “the fruit of the actual economic organization of society,” which exploits and excludes in privileging capital over labor.<sup>22</sup>

The solution, Boff argues, is “an *alternative* social system,” a transformation in which “the poor emerge as the ‘subject’ or agent of the corrective.”<sup>23</sup> Like other writers in the liberation vein, he posits the theological fact of oppression as very much a *this-worldly* reality; and it is likewise with salvation. “Jesus denounced the Domination System of his day,” Walter Wink tells us, “and proclaimed the advent of the Reign of God, which would transform every aspect of reality, even the social framework of existence.”<sup>24</sup>

## I-2 MEANINGS OF RELATEDNESS

I have grounded this thesis in the notion that the empowerment agenda could be greatly vivified by connecting it up with values of relatedness, generating a strong and widely accessible ethic for the global challenge of poverty reduction. I would like now to clarify what I mean when I speak of relatedness. Relatedness is a concept which applies equally to ecological webs, cosmic origins, and social bonds. To help define what relatedness means, Ivone Gebara’s words concerning interdependence are very helpful:

Our interdependence and relatedness do not stop with other human beings: They encompass nature, the powers of the earth and of the cosmos itself....Knowing is a human act... however, the animal, vegetable, and cosmic forms of consciousness are also part of our makeup. This other kind of interdependence does not come to full, conscious awareness, and so it is rarely considered....Once we do recognize its importance...we will be able to care for the earth and all its inhabitants as if they were close relatives, as parts of our greater body, without which individual life and consciousness are impossible....It is not a matter of denying my individuality ...rather, it is an invitation to a deeper perception that includes our greater self...<sup>25</sup>

It is an invitation to what Douglas Sturm calls “the social character of reality”:

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<sup>21</sup> Ada María Isasi-Díaz, *Mujerista Theology: A Theology for the Twenty-First Century*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), 91.

<sup>22</sup> Boff, 15.

<sup>23</sup> Boff, 11-12.

<sup>24</sup> Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992) 82.

<sup>25</sup> Gebara, 52.

“we are not, initially, individual beings separate from all others. We are born in and depend for our very life on a vast context of multiple lines of relationship, biological and cultural, present and past.” Paraphrasing Bernard Meland, Sturm describes us as “re-presentations of the world as much as we are individuals: the sea water flows through our veins; the chemicals and ores of the earth give structure to our bodies; the atmosphere provides us with breath and life; whole civilizations vibrate through our language. At the same time, we bring to each moment the stamp of our individuality.... In short, the fundamental theme of life is individuality-in-community.”<sup>26</sup>

This account is not merely an agreeable reinterpretation of reality. It is based on a wide-ranging, converging set of new understandings. One universal way into relatedness is what theologian Sallie McFague calls *the common creation story*. This is the oft-told story of our world as pictured by quantum physics and contemporary cosmology. It begins with our origins in the explosion-outward of our universe from infinitely small beginnings, the event we call the big bang. “From this beginning came all that followed, so that everything that is is related, woven into a seamless network, with life gradually emerging....All things living and not living are the products of the same primal explosion and evolutionary history and hence interrelated in an internal way right from the beginning.”<sup>27</sup> Expanding the scope even further, Ian Barbour says, “From astrophysics we know about our indebtedness to a common legacy of physical events. The chemical elements in your hand and in your brain were forged in the furnaces of stars. The cosmos is all of a piece.”<sup>28</sup>

What is most especially highlighted by many writers today – and is a body of meaning immediately accessible to many spiritual traditions – is, as McFague puts it, “the radical interrelatedness and interdependence of all aspects [of the common creation story]”: “We exist as individuals in a vast community of individuals within the ecosystem, each of which is related in intricate ways to all others in the community of life.” An “ecological sensibility” grows out of this story, so that “everything that is traces its ancestral roots within it, and the closer entities are in space and time, the closer they are related.” The power of this understanding, once grasped, cannot be underestimated: as Brian Swimme says, “No tribal myth, no matter how wild, ever imagined a more profound relationship connecting all things in an internal way right back from the beginning of time. All thinking must begin with this cosmic genetic relatedness.”<sup>29</sup>

The ethical import of this deep relatedness is a call for an attitude of openness, inclusiveness, and solidarity. The perspective of relatedness is a “both/and” proposition: beings as both autonomous *and* related. Autonomy is affirmed, but connectedness to others is integral to its meaning. McFague says that relatedness does not imply a lack of individuation among living beings – indeed, relatedness is a meaningless concept if there are not individuated beings to relate to one other! A sense of responsibility grows out of an understanding of one’s self as both autonomous and interdependent. Thus, the larger structures and institutional contrivances of the human world do not negate the role of the

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<sup>26</sup> Sturm, 127.

<sup>27</sup> McFague, 104.

<sup>28</sup> Ian Barbour, “Creation and Cosmology,” in Peters, Ted, *Cosmos as Creation: Theology and Science in Consonance* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 147.

<sup>29</sup> Swimme, Brian, “Science: A Partner in Creating the Vision,” in Anne Lonergan and Caroline Richards, eds., *Thomas Berry and the New Cosmology* (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1987), 87, quoted in McFague, 106.

individual. We have suffered, Walter Wink argues, “tragic illusions about the power of new systems to create new people.” If Soviet communism did not produce the “New Man” (sic), it is, Wink asserts, because, while Marx was right that the self is “the ensemble of social relations,” that is not all that the self is.

The self is that ensemble of social relations which also knows itself to be primordially grounded in being-itself, to have a name uttered over it, or within it, from all eternity. No state, or family, or employer can reach all the way to the core of our beings; and it is this residual irreducibility that makes it possible to resist society, to oppose the Powers, to transcend our own socialization. Much as we might like to lay the blame for all evil on the rise of the Domination System, we cannot do so without at the same time sacrificing responsibility and freedom.<sup>30</sup>

Relatedness, then, is an affirmation of individuation, not an idea that threatens individuality with diffusion into the cosmic soup or the divine One. At the same time, relatedness is a focusing on the undervalued aspect of related individuals: *the relationship itself*. An increasing web of relationships is the other side of the coin of the burgeoning complexity and variety of life in the process of evolution – and this understanding is a corrective to the view that evolution itself is grounded only in competition.<sup>31</sup>

Let us apply these ontological understandings to an ethical question: what ought to be the status of *property* in light of our relatedness? Property, as a kind of claim over things, is itself “a form of relationship.”<sup>32</sup> At the dawn of the modern age, John Locke established, in his *Second Treatise of Government*, his vision of “the State of Nature,” “what State all Men are naturally in”: “a State of perfect Freedom to order their Actions and dispose of their Possessions as they think fit...without asking leave, or depending upon the Will of any other Man.”<sup>33</sup> Locke’s vision of atomistic individuals in a “State of Nature,” each a law unto himself, is not intended to be “real” – he does not argue that any such state of being ever existed. Yet, to the extent that Locke’s thought remains foundational for us, we still do see ourselves as natural individualists. We might believe that our self-determination gains its expression in society only through political and legal means in our relationship to our government. Because of this narrow view, we are missing out on a discussion of what the powers of the economy and our social belongingness ought to mean for us. I will argue later that we fail to see how, as people making common cause with each other, we can empower ourselves and others through our involvement in civil society.

If Locke’s ideal State of Nature is a state of perfect freedom to act as we will, without the consultation of others, I would propose instead that we begin in a state of *community* – in a web of mutual dependencies and obligations. All our freedom is balanced with responsibilities, all our freedom is bound by the limits of obligation and

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<sup>30</sup> Wink, 75.

<sup>31</sup> McFague, 173.

<sup>32</sup> Sturm, 81.

<sup>33</sup> Peter Laslett, *John Locke: Two Treatises of Government, A Critical Edition with an Introduction and Apparatus Criticus* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1960), 4.

reciprocity. We are free to choose what is best for ourselves, but, if we absolutize that freedom, we ignore the downstream consequences of our free choosings. In our freedom, we cannot ignore the relational effects of our actions. Furthermore, we are bound not merely by our relationships and our context; we are biologically bound in the very interplay between our genes and our context (nature and nurture). All of this lends a great poignancy to our freedom, making it yet more valuable, for our freedom is not an imagined sovereign island of total control, a charmed separateness, but, rather, both a constant struggle and an expression of a deeper unity within community.

Locke's State of Nature presents a kind of Eden-like ideal as a guiding conception for something quite different: the actual state of consensual power relations, which is to reinforce the autonomy and dignity of the individual. Without denying the importance of this objective, relatedness, on the other hand, grants a special status to *the relationship itself* as foundational and fundamental.

It is possible to interpret Locke and his "State of Nature" differently than I have. In contradistinction to his individualist vision of rights that sustain our separateness (freedom in the control our possessions; government primarily to protect property), there is a theologically-based communitarian aspect to Locke's thought. The property right assures the preservation of all humankind, as per God's wishes, by assuring equal participation in a community that enhances our lives together. Collective life, by God's intent, is grounded in the necessity of interaction and an obligation of mutual love.<sup>34</sup> Unfortunately, by means of what starts out as a reasonable proposition, the mutual obligations are progressively lost in the dust. There are two main reasons for this. First, if Locke based the property right on natural law, he also subsequently removed all natural limits to that right. If the world is open to the claim of anyone who will stake it, differential appropriation of parts of it is earned by the labor that industrious individuals put into improving it: "As different degrees of Industry were apt to give Men Possessions in different Proportions," the busy man (sic) begins "to enlarge his Possessions." And thus, "it is plain, that Men have agreed to disproportionate and unequal Possession of the Earth." The second reason follows on the first. Locke's agrarian model of production is hopelessly out of step with the economic transformations that followed his time. The world and its economy has changed; what remains is Locke's individualist. Locke's especially productive farmers would convert their surplus of perishable agricultural produce into things which do endure: "Gold, Silver, and Diamonds." As the methods of industrial capitalism grew, the potential for some individuals to capture the finer commodities grew out of all proportion with that of the farmer at his plow.<sup>35</sup> This movement into the cash economy led to what C.B MacPherson called "possessive individualism."<sup>36</sup> Any natural law limits on accumulation that Locke retained have long since been exceeded.

This transition has only served to intensify the fact about property that has always been the case: property propagates power. In the early twentieth century, Bishop Charles Gore defined "property for use" as that which people need in order to exercise "true freedom" – but he noted that that constitutes "a very limited quantity on the whole."

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<sup>34</sup> Sturm, 100.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 23, 99.

<sup>36</sup> MacPherson, C. B., *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism*, London: Oxford University Press, 1972.

“Property for power,” on the other hand, is what comes with greatly expanded accumulation by an individual or group. This gravitational pull of extensive property begins to effect control of other people “whose opportunity to live and work and eat becomes subject to their will.” So, Douglas Sturm asserts, “Property confers on the owner a power over others.” Property, then, is for Sturm a form of sovereignty. Morris Cohen likewise argues that “dominion over things is also *imperium* over our fellow human beings.” He proposes that, in the public interest, a doctrine of the positive duties of large property owners ought to be developed in the law.<sup>37</sup>

Perhaps this idea that property comes wrapped in duties and obligations would have appealed to Thomas Aquinas, who opposed any concept of absolute property. Aquinas argued that the shared, common use of worldly things is their primary purpose and that individual possession is less a right or privilege than, as Sturm puts it, a “burden or obligation to care for and manage things in an orderly way.” For Aquinas private property is not a natural law, but a convention devised by human beings to facilitate use, and that use should especially inhere to the ones who needs it most – the hungry and the naked.<sup>38</sup> That sense of obligation is a relational understanding of property.

To finish these considerations of relatedness, I shall turn from possessions to persons. In relatedness we are invited to find the fundamental basis of value in the other – we may name or designate that value in countless ways, but the invitation of relatedness is to come to the acceptance, faith, or knowledge that this basis of value in the other is something real. And therefore to care for the other – even the distant and the stranger. Some people perceive the Presence of God in the world and particularly in the Other, and to live in this way is to adopt a theological orientation that emphasizes the reality of this value. Perhaps this is a way of feeling our liberation – or of seeing the world as our deepest intuitions tell us it truly is.

If we are profoundly interpenetrated, then this state of mutuality and interconnectedness has important ethical implications, provoking judgements of right and wrong. The openness of individuals-in-relation carries an ethical call for sharing in life-enhancing mutuality. Thus, as Gebara puts it, “ethics is a network of relationships designed to respect the integrity of all beings, both individually and collectively.”<sup>39</sup> Still, a value of “ethical relatedness” begins with the recognition that the mere acknowledgement of our relationality ensures nothing, for relationships can be and are just as easily suffused with oppression and injustice. Relationships carry the opportunity for exploitation.<sup>40</sup> Invoking relatedness as an ethical reality, though, Gebara says that, even without an appeal to “a transcendent principle or a higher divinity,” relatedness and the interdependence among all beings offer us an act of welcoming from which we may derive our ethics. But this requires a new learning, a renewing wisdom and yearning for justice and freedom.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Sturm, 87.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>39</sup> Gebara, 90-91

<sup>40</sup> Thanks to Rosemary Radford Ruether, who clarified this point in an e-mail to the author, Feb. 2001.

<sup>41</sup> Gebara, 90-91.

How does poverty play into this spirituality of right-relatedness? McFague notes that religions have often spiritualized the meaning of poverty, as if it is an affront to the spiritual nature of humans to ground our vision of right relations in “mundane issues of space, turf, habitat, land” – in other words, “to think physically and concretely about sin.” It might indeed appear that positing such a relationship reduces the nobility of the human to a minimal, physical level. But, McFague continues, it is precisely *that minimum* that “those individuals and nations bloated with self, living the life of insatiable greed, refuse to recognize.”<sup>42</sup> Without incarnating our spirituality in the physical and psychic realities of poverty, the compassion of “spiritual poverty” drops out.

### I-3 THE EMPOWERMENT AGENDA AND WORLDLY POWERS

The protagonists of the case studies in Chapter 2 – in Nigeria, Ecuador, and the Jubilee movement – are leaders who all share a vision of the empowerment of those who have the least control over the resources of the world, a vision of the transforming approach of “the least of these” to the center of the circle. They are not radical in voicing this stance. From debates over welfare reform in the United States to strategies to revamp the mission of the World Bank, today’s widely espoused agenda of economic development and poverty reduction is increasingly focused on the *empowerment of the poor and marginalized*. Indeed, the World Bank, often vilified for its failures to generate real poverty reduction, is, at least in its rhetoric, firmly supportive of the empowerment agenda, even at times contradicting the so-called “Washington consensus,” which does not look beyond strict free-market solutions to poverty.

The global development agenda now recognizes *powerlessness* in society as a foremost dimension of the problem of persistent poverty and empowerment as the route out of poverty. A basic measure of empowerment is visible *participation* in the community and the society, “a process through which stakeholders influence and share control over decisions and resources that affect their lives.”<sup>43</sup> The absence of structures and processes for participation is an indicator of *marginalization*.

Overcoming marginalization is a two-way process that cannot occur entirely at the instigation of the weak; empowerment also reaches a hand out to the powerful, and insists on a new kind of partnership. Again, overturning the exclusion of poor communities is not only a transformation of the lives of the poor, but ultimately a demand for changes in the way those in power conduct public affairs. Those who prosper are not the central protagonists of the work of poverty reduction. The quest for “a place at the table” must be largely a local effort. Yet, as we shall see in the case studies, participatory empowerment is in practical terms a demand for, among other things, better governance, especially governance built on processes for inclusion and accountability in politics. Decisions that have formerly been made behind closed doors need to be made transparently. While such goals as the provision of social services and engendering people’s capabilities to function in society at a high level are very important, so too is the

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<sup>42</sup> McFague, 116.

<sup>43</sup> Fowler, 16.

goal of making power accountable – indeed, the former really cannot proceed too far without the latter.

Yet, in practice many of those well-meaning people at the center of power and wealth voice this agenda while often acting as if its implications stop at their own doorsteps. At some point, the protagonists of this study tell us, rhetoric rings hollow, and the vision of empowerment becomes a challenge to those who hold power. Power is relational. Genuine empowerment alters the relationship to one of reciprocity. Yet the empowerment strategy can become code language for a neoconservative agenda which demands that the poor pull themselves up by their own bootstraps, with charitable help but no fundamental change in the relationship. Relational thinking negates that formula by acknowledging that the system that benefits the prosperous so greatly also places an upper limit on the empowerment of the poor and marginalized. We the prosperous – and the system that sustains us – must participate and change as well if empowerment is to be the route out of poverty.

Institutions have their own complexity, their own logic, and their own laws. These are beyond straightforward human control, resistant to the moral concern of a few and at times inextricably oppressive. That perennial inevitability may never have been more true than it is today, for ours is a truly new era of technology-driven management and control. In a way radically different from the past, asserts Douglas Sturm, “a new class of persons has assumed the reins of social control, those whose function consists in the technical direction and coordination of processes of production.” Thus, “our common life has been utterly transformed by a phenomenal increase in the size, complexity, and impact of large organizations.”<sup>44</sup>

This control process feeds very much into the contemporary phenomenon of *globalization*, distinguishing it from past rounds of global expansion and interaction in earlier centuries. It contributes in some ways to what some see as the corrosive effects of globalization. The economist Nicanor Perlas finds that globalization, as viewed from his native Philippines, is a process perverted by “a pathological version of global development.” For Perlas, “Elite globalization, also called corporate globalization, [is] a distorted form of global economic integration, powered by and benefiting only a few... unleashing a dangerous blend of economic, ecological, cultural, and political crises.”<sup>45</sup>

Even for the prosperous, the complexities and problems of the world seem to reproduce themselves at many interpenetrating levels that spring up beyond the accountability of ordinary people. Our own lifestyles are plugged into systems that perpetuate wastefulness and disempowerment in so many ways. We seem to have direct influence on so little of what we would wish to change. Even if we feel certain who or what is to blame for any of the world’s travails, we might find that the obstacles to their resolutions are so structurally embedded, so entrenched at impenetrable levels of power both high and low, that we feel defeated, cut off from the possibility of making the world a better place.

Walter Wink illustrates the problem with a story: a business owner is spiritually reborn and seeks to humanize the conditions of her workers. But she is confronted with

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<sup>44</sup> Sturm, 125.

<sup>45</sup> Nicanor Perlas, *Shaping Globalization: Civil Society, Cultural Power and Threefolding* (Quezon City, Philippines: Center for Alternative Development Initiatives, 2000), 60.

the fixed constraint of cost. “If she deviates too much from the general norm for wages and benefits, the cost of her product will put her out of business. So she must be extremely cautious in introducing fundamental change, because her business is dependent on a world economic system that is utterly indifferent to her ethical concerns....The system is greedy on her behalf....[It] is making choices about who will remain viable in the system.”<sup>46</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr pessimistically noted that “organizations reflect the lowest common denominator of morality of their members, and are therefore less moral than many of the people that make them up.”<sup>47</sup>

In his book *Engaging the Powers* Wink describes what he calls the system of domination and oppression and he interprets Jesus’s rationale in opposing it. He shows how the words of Jesus, sometimes interpreted in ways that make them tangential to the problem of institutions, can be seen as aimed directly at them. In John’s gospel Jesus tells the high priest at his arraignment, “I have spoken openly to the world (*kosmos*), I have always taught in the synagogue and in the Temple” (John 18:20). Wink reinterprets the Greek word *kosmos*, which is commonly translated as “world.” He notes that *kosmos* can be read as referring not to “world” as in our earthly realm, our fallen creation, but, more exactly, to “*the human sociological realm that exists in estrangement from God.*”<sup>48</sup> Wink argues that Jesus’s syntactic parallelism of *kosmos* with the Temple indicates that *kosmos* does indeed have this structural sense, that Jesus is identifying the “world” to which he has spoken specifically with the core religious institutions of Judaism. Wink suggests, then, that the word *kosmos* is better translated as “system,” an “alienating and alienated ethos” that governs human social existence.<sup>49</sup>

Wink’s interpretation rejects the common Christian view that Jesus is saying that the physical world is evil, that he is rebuking “the created order, sexuality, and even [our] own bodies” – an interpretation that Wink says has led Christians at times “to manifest open contempt for efforts at political change.” Consider the difference: no longer is Jesus projecting himself as an otherworldly being if he is actually telling the Pharisees, “You are of this System, I am not of this System” (John 8:23)!<sup>50</sup>

Wink fleshes out his interpretation of Jesus’ intent with an extensive and convincing depiction of the perennial human order as the “Domination System,” a dehumanizing existence under the thumb of powers which rule by the myth of redemptive violence. His depiction of the Domination System derives from his reinterpretation of the biblical “Principalities and Powers.” These powers are neither entirely spiritualized forces (like angels and demons), nor *simply* the institutions, structures, and systems of our social reality. Rather, the “Powers” are both the outer, physical manifestations (buildings, portfolios, weapons, machines) *and* the inner,

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<sup>46</sup> Wink, 78.

<sup>47</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1932), 129. From Wink, 83.

<sup>48</sup> The term *kosmos* is equally relevant to the wider communities of living nature and to ecological ways of knowing. Nor, by any means, is the relationality paradigm presented here limited to *human* nature, even if our immediate concern is narrowly focused on human poverty and deprivation.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 51-52.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

spiritual reality (corporate culture, collective personality) of the great institutional entities which simultaneously sustain and subvert human life.<sup>51</sup>

Wink notes that the Powers are not to be thought of personalistically – “reduced to the categories of individualism and...imagined as demonic beings assaulting us from the sky.” This obscures their institutional and systemic dimensions by mystification. The spiritual forces of Eph. 6:12 – “For our struggle is not against human foes, but against cosmic powers, against the authorities and potentates of this dark age, against the superhuman forces of evil in the heavenly realms” – are “*the interiority of earthly institutions or structures or systems.*” The social message of the gospel contends with “the inner *and* outer manifestations of political, economic, religious, and cultural institutions.”<sup>52</sup>

The New Testament then is a “drama about the intertwining of good and evil in all of historical reality,” which Wink sums up in the instructive phrase, “The Powers are good, the Powers are fallen, the Powers will be redeemed.”<sup>53</sup> Whether we are speaking of government, businesses, or civil institutions, none of these entities is intrinsically or purely bad or good; they are quite “natural,” necessary, and inescapable organizing forms of mass social existence. They are not to be overturned. Rather, it is the *character* of these three realms that must be continually monitored and, however possible, reformed, renewed, coaxed to *serve*.

Such an analysis can give us guidance in understanding the institutional realities with which we are faced in the task of empowerment. The disempowered conduct their own empowerment; those in power can help, but should not direct the process (nonetheless, we can achieve societal changes that the disempowered cannot – if we can overcome our own complacency). But both groups face a common problem: there are limits to the control any individual, or even group, can exercise over the powers of institutions and massive social structures. Accordingly, I am not going to make expansive claims for the possibilities of institutional change – it must be preceded by the hard work, and hope, of persons-in-community. Personal transformation is a good starting point insofar as its character is solidary, not solitary; insofar as it relates outward to structural change. Social change, the end goal, needs the foundation of many individual personal changes, so one may initiate transformation by starting with oneself and then feeding the results into changing the larger social framework (I would note in this connection that empowerment thinking does not deny, but rather affirms, that one needs others-in-community even to effect self-transformation: the influence that the newly-empowered wield is expressed in its ability to evoke a positive response). The key for social transformation is that personal change itself must be achieved with one eye looking outward to the larger social unfolding. In other words, no strategy of personal growth alone is sufficient.

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 77-78.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 65.

## I-4 EMPOWERMENT THROUGH CIVIL SOCIETY

In contrast to past approaches to poverty reduction which relied narrowly on government programs – or simply on economic growth – the new empowerment agenda relies on the emergence of the participatory, collaborative realm called *civil society* into the foreground, as the most appropriate vehicle to carry the empowerment agenda forward. What is meant by the term “civil society”? The term may be used to connote the shared civil values of a society generally, but I will apply a more specific usage, in which civil society is equated with “cultural power.” In a theory put forward by Nicanor Perlas, described in his recent book *Shaping Globalization*, there are three contending institutional powers that reside in the world, determining the direction of its development: government, business, and civil society. Regarding its institutional form, civil society

is made up of...cultural institutions ...[including] non-governmental organizations (NGOs), people’s organizations, youth and women’s groups...the media, religious groups, foundations, voluntary organizations, professional groups, academe, and others whose direct and dominant activity does not involve business or government operations.<sup>54</sup>

Perlas offers a visionary account of the potential for a reorganization of the global institutional order, on new terms of a “tri-polar world.” He calls this process “threefolding.” The key to threefolding is the emergence of civil society as one of the institutional powers alongside the long-established forces of government and business. This recognition gives rise to “cultural life as an autonomous realm within larger society.”<sup>55</sup> Prior to the development of this tri-polar order of powers as an acknowledged reality, there are already “three realms in social life or three subsystems in society – cultural, political, and economic.” This is said to hold true of all societies, no matter how small or ancient. For Perlas, the interaction of these three realms generates an emergent, higher-level organizational field that that we call the “social.”<sup>56</sup> But these realms are not the same thing as the institutional powers that come to be identified with each. Each institutional power derives its legitimate force and energy from its respective realm of society, having its own “natural habitat,” and none ought to have a monopoly of power.

Achieving the right relationship between the three institutional powers depends first on achieving the right correspondence between them and their respective realms of society. The health of a society depends on the mutual recognition and support of each of the realms by the others, so that each may develop without adversely impacting the others. As such, each of the three institutional powers may “represent” the realm of society in which it is active:

[C]ivil society represents culture; government represents polity, and business, the economy. Business cannot truly represent the interests of culture or polity. Nor can civil society truly understand the detailed

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<sup>54</sup> Perlas, 19-20.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 3-4.

workings of the economy or truly represent the political system. Nor can government articulate economic or cultural aspirations.<sup>57</sup>

Each institutional power has the right to criticize another for intruding on its habitat or for bringing harm to people or nature (the ecosystem that they all share and are sustained by). Yet, Perlas contends, the institutional powers are often not even aware that there is a realm to which they should responsibly limit themselves. Perhaps government goes too far in legislating morality; or business distorts the fabric of a community, through the exploitation of its people or resources. Perlas contends that a better world will result when these boundaries are better understood and adhered to. Partnerships between different realms can generate great dynamism, but the boundary conditions must be well thought-out to avoid co-optation or domination. Each sphere has its own virtues. If business generates wealth and property through profits, and democratic government upholds freedoms and protects property, civil society is a third voice which allows *people* to speak. It provides social and economic groups with a *place at the table*, alongside more traditional instruments like electoral and legislative influence and the privilege of corporate ownership.

In an unbalanced society one realm can subjugate the others. For example, in what Perlas terms today's "elite globalization," the economic sphere dominates over the political and cultural. As entities which are accustomed to exercising powerful techniques of control, the dominant powers of business and government are limited by an economic, scientific worldview, and this diminishes their character. But even if the dominant values of business and government were to change, the particular emphases which are perennially appropriate to them – for example, the generation and protection of wealth – are not in themselves sufficient for the healthy state of society.<sup>58</sup> As Perlas says, "Many development approaches today basically ignore cultural, social, ecological, human and spiritual considerations in their actual policies, programs and projects....they have [a] fixation on purely economic and political considerations." The entrance of civil society changes this: "Culture emerges as an autonomous realm of society worthy of serious consideration, because cultural concerns and actions are embedded in the advocacy and initiatives of civil society."<sup>59</sup>

Civil society is said to be driven by moral and spiritual values, seeking to enact those values in transformative ways. The realm of values concerns consequential judgements about what is important in people's lives. The aims and work of civil society range from the human to the ecological and from the personal and particular to the social and, increasingly, the global. Civil society is said to make a unique contribution to the society as a whole, because it represents a people's culture directly and brings its perspectives and concerns into the public sphere in a way that governments and businesses cannot:

Culture deals with the realm of ideas, which includes worldviews, knowledge, meanings, symbols, identity, ethics, art, and spirituality. The 'cultural sphere' is that subsystem of society concerned with the

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 4-5.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 7.

development of full human capacities; we owe to the cultural sphere art, ethics, knowledge and wisdom, our sense of the sacred, and much else that makes life worth living. Culture is, in fact, that social space where identity and meaning are generated. The two are inseparable. Identity and meaning give human beings their cognitive, affective, and ethical orientation. In short, culture is the wellspring that determines and sustains human behavior.<sup>60</sup>

Civil society's greatest strength is described by David Korten when he says that civil society is the realm of "life values": it is "built on the foundation of spiritual values that permeate its culture. Personal and institutional relationships are defined by the self-organizing flow of the spiritually grounded life energies of its members."<sup>61</sup> Korten offers an attractive vision of a global shift that he sees coming into being, drawing on this resource – civil society as *sustainable society*. In this self-conscious civic realm, "The processes of cultural regeneration are grounded in the rich and dynamic community life and authentic inner spiritual experience of each of the society's members. The result is a... culture grounded in life affirming values." Further, "[a]n active citizenry... will insist that institutions of polity be radically democratic in terms of openness, equality, active citizen participation and consensus-oriented decision making. Similarly, they will demand that the institutions of economy function... with the primary goal of providing productive and satisfying livelihoods for all while maintaining a balanced human relationship with the non-human environment."<sup>62</sup>

Perlas hopes that this sort of civil society can achieve what he calls *comprehensive sustainable development*. Comprehensive sustainable development is not a socialistic rejection of the market economy, although it is a strong critique of its foundational assumptions. Nor is it an anarchistic rejection of government, although it is a strong critique of government's failure to stay within its own realm. Comprehensive sustainable development is a vision of the three institutional powers, through their balanced interaction, sustaining "the wholeness of social life": "Business will bring economic concerns. Government will bring political concerns. Civil society will bring cultural, social, ecological, human, and spiritual concerns. Comprehensive sustainable development therefore considers seven dimensions of development: economic, political, cultural, social, ecological, human, and spiritual." Such a balance is meant to be a deadly challenge to dogmatic neoliberal economics: it will replace neoliberalism, Perlas asserts, with "associative economics, where the chief motive for economic activity is not profits and competition but servicing human needs and cooperation."<sup>63</sup>

The progressive visions of consensus, compassion and justice that I have been discussing are hardly self-fulfilling. No one would assume that everyone's actual inner life is necessarily so cooperatively unselfish, nor even that, with the emergence of conscious civil society, such visions and values will win out as a social consensus. The institutional realities which I discussed in the previous section may be making inroads

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>61</sup> David C. Korten, "Civil-izing Societies." Unpublished paper, July 13, 2000, quoted in Perlas, 21.

<sup>62</sup> Perlas, 21-22.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 6-9.

into that inherent spirituality which is supposed to flow out of us. Edward Farley speaks of a massive cultural transformation in our time, a global sea change which has transformed the fabric of life, characterized by phenomena like multicultural awareness, pop culture, and the “rise of the postmodern era”: “[t]his complex of economically driven changes has displaced religion as the primary location of values and institutional loyalty and as the primary community of human relations.” Thus,

The typical postmodern lives in and is influenced by a variety of institutions – each one promoting its own world of meaning and value – which compete with each other for the loyalty, time and energy of the population. Moreover, the social shift...has isolated certain powerful institutions (corporate, military, governmental, media, entertainment) from the influence of the so-called normative institutions such as education, religion and the arts. Indeed, the great cultural transformation of our time has changed the character of these normative institutions, drawing them into the marketplace and the world of image-making, of salesmanship and of managerial orientations. This massive shift has had a devastating effect on the once-deep cultural values that exerted their force upon most of society’s institutions...<sup>64</sup>

Values, whether culturally transmitted or self-generated, are diverse and can be divisive. In pluralistic societies in a pluralistic world, whose values are we talking about? Even if civil society is held together by certain commonly held baseline covenants, it is also a marketplace of competing values. Within the locatedness of the many diverse communities of voices that make up civil society, competing groups run the gamut of relationships from neighborliness to diametrical opposition. Many groups within civil society are not concerned much beyond their own community. Some exist to defend and enlarge their own interest, even at the expense of others. Others dedicate themselves to good works, yet, lacking a vision of a wider relatedness to social structures, actually function to curb transformative change and justify existing oppressions. Cautioning against any simple formulation of civil society as the unmitigated good balancing the dehumanizing tendencies of other powers, R. Fatton notes that:

Civil society is not the all-encompassing movement of popular empowerment and economic change portrayed in the...exaggerated elaborations of its advocates. It is simply not a democratic *deus ex machina* equalising life chances and opportunities.... [C]ivil society is traversed by class interests, ethnic particularisms, individual egotism, and all types of religious and secular ‘fundamentalisms.’

Nonetheless, Fatton posits that if intentionally inclusive, empowering communities are to arise, it will be out of this very background of fractious civil society: “It is clear... that the seeds of the civic community [which is more egalitarian, socially

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<sup>64</sup> Edward Farley, “Transforming a Lukewarm Church,” review of *Reclaiming the Church: Where the Mainline Church Went Wrong and What to Do about It*, by John B. Cobb, Jr., *Christian Century*, August 27-September 3, 1997, 756-767.

cohesive, and more oriented to the public good] cannot be planted, let alone flourish, without a dense civil society regrouping as a vast network of associational life.”<sup>65</sup>

For the purposes of poverty reduction, I would call this civil association “the civil society of relatedness-empowerment.” Some criteria for the authenticity of such a grouping, and for its worthiness to take on authority equal with the powers of government and business, might include:

- That in its organized, institutionalized form, it be highly subject to influence from its grassroots members, drawing its energy from its mass base.
- That it embody both diversity and plurality of perspectives *and* a single-minded embrace of the unified overarching value of relatedness-for-empowerment.
- That it be a countercurrent to domination, existing explicitly in a transformational relationship to the domination system, working to alter the relations between the governing powers.
- That it have the power to motivate changes of heart.

Alan Fowler gives us a good reason to believe that civil society can meet these criteria. Civil society is not the only realm among the institutional powers in which world-defining values are advanced; governmental and corporate cultures also carry distinct values. So why, Fowler asks, might civil society be better able to embody the truest values of a society’s people? He points to one very special quality in the way that civil society actors embody their values, by drawing an analogy to organizational management theory. “How,” he asks, “do you get people to behave well in their organizational roles?” People behave the way they need to in organizations either because they *have to* – because they are coerced; or because *incentives* exist which induce them to behave in certain ways; or because they are driven to comply by the force of “their own *internal* beliefs and values.” Fowler argues that, corresponding to these three types of motivation, *governments* rely on the first – hierarchy, command and enforcement; *businesses* on the second – monetary rewards and incentives; and the *voluntary organizations of civil society* rely on personal values, commitment and self-motivation. The difference is crucial, because these strongly held and deeply motivating values, whether self-generated or tradition-bound, alone give people the “empowerment to behave like co-owners.”<sup>66</sup>

If communities of wealth and communities of poverty are related to each other in ways that we rarely acknowledge – the actions of the one intertwine with and affect the destiny of the other – the public space in which this interaction can become most visible is civil society. I propose that global civil society – those groups struggling for the

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<sup>65</sup> R. Fatton, Jr., “Africa in the Age of Democratization: The Civic Limitations of Civil Society,” *Africa Studies Review* (38:2, 1995), 72, quoted in, and with re-phrasing by, Eghosa E. Osaghae, in *Structural Adjustment, Civil Society and National Cohesion in Africa* (Harare, Zimbabwe: African Association of Political Science, 1998), 4.

<sup>66</sup> Fowler, 23.

empowerment agenda – itself *embodies* the values of ethical relatedness. Relatedness ethics, that is, are taking form in global civil society, with a unique synergy between identity and action. It is in this realm that we find growing the understanding that all entities in the web of life, including our selves and our institutions, are fundamentally open, relational and interconnected – again, as likely as not a spiritual commitment. And it is just this understanding that can lead the people and institutions who make up civil society to both pursue more vigorously the goals of social and economic justice and seek to strengthen the power of civil society in relation to the powers of business and government. Ultimately, if one finds this vision attractive, one might even hope that these values can seep into the character of the powers of business and government as well.

The civil society of relatedness can help us to make heretofore unrealized inroads into poverty reduction and empowerment by bringing communities of wealth (the United States, the so-called G-7 – the group of seven wealthiest and most powerful nations – and other local elites) closer to communities of poverty (America’s poor, “the global south” or “the third world”) in tangible ways that make a difference. Ultimately, this redemptive practice will prepare us for other great looming collective challenges of humanity, like global warming and ecological sustainability. Realizing our relatedness to the global other as a matter of justice and of facts-with-consequences is the practice of the opening of the heart, without which our enhanced participation in global sustainability, collectively as Americans – is as unlikely in the future as it is today.

In the chapter that follows, I present case studies which are intended to illustrate the themes spelled out in this chapter – poverty, right-relatedness, empowerment, and the role of civil society. The case studies are intended to keep this discussion “close to the ground” by showing in very concrete and current ways how the empowerment agenda is enacted by civil society to transform communities of poverty and their relationships to the powerful; and to show how central are the values of right-relatedness – often informed by spiritual sources – to the success of this effort.