

CHAPTER III: TOWARD A NEW AGENDA

I have asserted that our conscious practice of our inter-relatedness is the driver that can make empowerment and poverty reduction a reality, not just a slogan; and that civil society is the vehicle for this relatedness-empowerment strategy. Thus far I have laid out the meanings and offered case studies to make them more tangible. The attention has been on main protagonists of this strategy, the poor and marginalized. In this final chapter, I will try to strengthen my claim that *a relatedness value enhances empowerment for poverty reduction* by focusing on the role of the “we” who live a privileged life – for here the needs are particular and great.

III-1 JUSTICE AND SOLIDARITY IN POLITICS AND ECONOMICS

In his book, *Solidarity and Suffering: Toward a Politics of Relationality*, Douglas Sturm presents relatedness as a foundation for social, economic, and environmental justice. As such, it is a useful grounding for my particular concerns with empowerment and poverty reduction.

In essence, Sturm argues for a conception of justice as solidarity, “that quality of relationships through which the self might flourish.” For Sturm the central question of politics is, *how shall we live our lives together?* Rephrased from within his communitarian political ontology, the question becomes, *how might we so construct our lives together that all life flourishes?*¹ The answer, he avers, depends on how we construe our identity and our destiny. He reviews the main positions of contemporary political philosophy, scanning for values that most closely accord with justice as solidarity:

- *A politics of welfare* is centered on upholding the dignity of individuals with principles of equality. It is a remedial orientation, not a transformative one – that is, it sustains the “dominant system of corporate industrialism,” while seeking to spread its benefits more widely.
- Representing the classical liberal tradition, *a politics of liberty* privileges subjectivity, private ownership and voluntary exchange, emphasizing that responsibilities to others can only be undertaken voluntarily. It is neglectful, Sturm finds, of the more profound issue of social morality – that is, “what, within the ethos of a people, enables it to cohere, to collaborate, to sustain its basic traditions and institutions?”
- *A politics of community* is based on social virtues, especially that of empathy, which sustains our sociability and connectedness. It is maintained through a religious tradition or through communitarian republican values such as respect, tolerance,

¹ Sturm, 21, 160.

mutuality, and caring.

- *A politics of difference* emphasizes the value of diversity from a (broadly) multicultural orientation. It plays the role of critiquing the contemporary order of things – especially out of its interest in subordinating the leading role that the dominant culture gives to economic values over other cultural values.
- *A politics of ecology* maintains the broadest conception of inclusiveness, seeking a thorough rethinking of the role of the human species in the earthly biosphere.²

Sturm finds that each of these position has its limitations. Borrowing from several of them, he proposes *the politics of relationality*: at its heart “is a principle of justice as solidarity.” Its objective is the transformation of our institutions so as to enhance “the vibrancy of the whole community and each of its members.” It is a vision in which “the driving passion of law is not so much to protect the individual against trespass as it is to create a quality of social interaction conducive to the flourishing of a vibrant community of life across the world.” Justice, in his rendering, is a structure of reciprocity, “both a receiving and a giving.... [It] is expressive of a communal cosmology, which... generates visions of a new social world in which... the prospects of human flourishing might be greatly enhanced.”³

Sturm describes the character of human life and sociability as the co-existence of our many selves in the “creative passage” together. In this context, “the self as subject is to be cherished... not as a distinct monad, separate from all other subjects, [but] rather as a sensitive and creative participant in an adventure in which all creatures are engaged and are dependent on each other for sustenance and fulfillment.” The individual is both encumbered and enlivened by connectedness. Individual rights, then, are secured not as protection in a fight of all against all, but as rules for governing events in that passage together.⁴ He notes that, in the Western tradition, those rights have centered on *negative freedom* – the “freedom from” this or that interference. Negative freedom “stands at the heart of apologies for a free enterprise economy and liberal democracy.” But, in accord with the vision I have offered of empowerment as the progressive enhancement of a person’s – or a community’s – capabilities and participation, Sturm argues in favor of *affirmative freedom*, defined here by Carol C. Gould as self-development: affirmative freedom is the “freedom to develop oneself through one’s actions, or as a process of realizing one’s projects through activity in the course of which one forms one’s character and develops capacities.”⁵

The idea of human rights, therefore, is to make “claims on the community and its members to provide, to whatever degree is at all possible, conditions of life optimal to the intensification of value not just for the self alone, but, through the self, for the community, the world, and the creative ground of all life.”⁶ Rights and responsibilities

² Ibid., 4, 5.

³ Ibid., 3, 7, 11, 170.

⁴ Ibid., 25-26.

⁵ Carol C. Gould, *Rethinking Democracy: Freedom and Social Cooperation in Politics, Economy, and Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 40-41, quoted in Sturm, 41-42.

⁶ Sturm, 27.

come bundled together. Even if, at times, a particular claim may set folks against each other, the justification of any claim is its intent to contribute to the community's well-being.

Sturm avers that such a concept of affirmative freedom is equivalent to empowerment. As such, however, it can only be delivered where there are *rich* links of community: "civil and political liberties are, by themselves, devoid of effectiveness without cultural or economic support."⁷ Only an inadequate understanding of these rights can restrict them to participation in the political realm and designate economic and social life as private matters. The affirmative freedom that is empowerment must be actively nourished, supported, paid for. This links us to the wider relationship I have drawn between communities of prosperity and communities of poverty: effective empowerment out of poverty cannot occur without fruitful economic and social conditions, and if those who have are not inclined in small ways to help those who lack, then the route of empowerment for the global poor will remain a lifelong struggle and sufferation.⁸

With this background, I would like to return once more to the idea of civil society as the vehicle for poverty reduction through empowerment. A civil society consciously organized so as to deliver the necessary cultural and economic support of which Sturm speaks offers unprecedented opportunities for bringing relatedness values to life. I will discuss two proposals which – however unrealistic they may seem! – are intended to deliver just that support. The first impacts the political sphere by offering a new form of direct global representation for citizens and civil society; and the second impacts the economic realm, by reconceiving the ends or purposes of wealth, and, in the process, offering a new role for civil society.

Writing in the January/February, 2001 *Foreign Affairs*, Richard Falk and Andrew Strauss describe today's global system as governed by interest-group pluralism without the benefit of any unifying body that represents the public interest. The process of globalization is increasing that tendency by dispersing political authority throughout the international order – that is, it is increasingly the case that the policies that shape the lives of individuals profoundly in their various roles – as workers, consumers, patients, and so on – are made with less public involvement than ever before. Much of the legal and legislative authority is seeping towards agencies and institutions beyond the reach of all democratic input, like the World Trade Organization, or business lobbyists.

At the same time, there are some few elite individuals who find that they now have the ability to flex more control than ever before: "Through expanding trade and investment, business and banking leaders [exercise] extraordinary influence on global policy⁹ elite business participation in the international system is becoming institutionalized." Falk and Strauss cite, as the best example of this institutionalized elite access, the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, an annual cavalcade of the world's most powerful people, who, with no formal authority, are able gain the ears of top global political leaders.

⁷ Ibid, 31.

⁸ Sturm, 30.

⁹ In fact, a strategy of enhanced economic growth virtually guarantees a further concentration of power by these private leaders.

But people are taking notice of the trend. “People who believe they possess a democratic entitlement to participate in decisions that affect their lives are now starting to demand their say in the international system. And global civil society has thus far been their voice as they attempt to have this say.”¹⁰ So far, the most visible face of this newly kindled interest is the ubiquitous protests at global summits, but it is clear that there is an ever-growing web of civil society associations around the globe working in a less abrupt fashion.

In response to their perception of rising “disaffection with the lack of citizen participation in the global institutions that shape people’s daily lives,” Falk and Strauss put forward the idea of a *global parliament of civil society* as a way to enhance civil society’s authority relative to nation-states as law-making bodies, and to undo the unaccountable powers of multilateral institutions and elite actors. Such a parliament would be *directly elected* by all the world’s citizens, one person-one vote. “Unlike the United Nations, this assembly would not be constituted by states. Because its authority would come directly from the global citizenry, it could refute the claim that states are bound only by laws to which they give their consent.”¹¹

The proposed parliament would also facilitate vibrant new global alignments of mutual interest within civil society, “[b]ecause elected delegates would represent individuals and society instead of states.” Therefore, “they would not have to vote along national lines. Coalitions would likely form on other bases.”¹²

One benefit of a global parliament of civil society is that it could effectively center the conversation on a *global ethic*, the *general ethical norms of related humanity*. Such an ethic must draw on a great diversity of religious traditions, but it does so on the level of ethics, not of core religious truth-claims. As such, it would render the undoubtedly interesting, but divisive, sectarian questions of religious belief or truth-claims as sideshows to the shared public space. This is as it should be; without any disrespect for the world’s religions, it is their ethical orientations that are crucial to the democratic processes and to economic and civil life – not their versions of truth. Perhaps the two cannot easily be pried apart in any given tradition, but the basic ethical conclusions of that tradition can be summarized for public consumption. A global parliament of civil society would create an unprecedented chance for dialogue and common ground between the world’s diverse traditions by offering a realm of public ethics in which the commonalities of diverse traditions can be discovered and built up.¹³

A global parliament of civil society would also restore the balance that is being lost to undemocratic means of power and control, bringing power into the hands of real people in a manner that would enhance accountability and transparency. It would contribute to the solidarity of people on opposite sides of the globe. And it would greatly enhance the empowerment of the global poor, by giving them a voice and the beginnings of the kind of cultural support that affirmative freedom requires.

¹⁰ Richard Falk and Andrew Strauss, “Toward Global Parliament,” *Foreign Affairs* (Jan./Feb., 2001), 213.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 215-216.

¹² *Ibid.*, 217.

¹³ Thanks to Bill Leshner for this insight.

Now let us turn from politics to economics. Observing the abject powerlessness of poverty and, alongside it, the prodigious accumulation of wealth; and considering the trends of the day and knowing that the time of redistributive, welfarist thinking are largely past; we can reformulate the question of how we are to live together as a question about the status of our property: *what is the purpose or goal of wealth?* Is my wealth for myself alone?

One valid approach is to look to our religious traditions: in the Judeo-Christian mode, property may be seen a shared human asset allocated by God to satisfy the needs of all. The theology of creation indicates that the world's resources are brought into existence by God to meet and satisfy the needs of all of God's (human) creatures. Shared human well-being, then, is the ultimate goal of wealth; and this is the challenge of solidarity, that the divine command to love one's neighbor places no condition as to who the neighbor is – unless it is those who are most in need.¹⁴

Alternatively, as I have done here, we can focus on our profound interconnectedness and intrinsic belonging-together. On that basis, too, we can embrace the notion that the wealth and property that confers power also endows us with responsibilities to others.

Either way, the result is a goal of de-absolutizing the entitlements of ownership in property and wealth. One endowment we carry from our Western legacy is the way we conceive of our private property – there is very little sense of “sharing” of property, wealth or capital, beyond the kinds of municipal or governmental services and properties that are owned by all and by no one. If we begin to reconceive our property and wealth as, to some degree, both communal and individual – as something that can be shared – we must also begin to look for more of that shared space.

But let us not look to government! The past decade has seen the fall of state socialism and, in the post-cold-war years, the retreat of government activism in social and economic concerns; the hegemonic supremacy of the ideology of market capitalism; and its forceful global implementation by the its central institutions. Markets and market-based incentives are here to stay, that there is no wind in the philosophical sails of governmental policies to redistribute wealth. Governments cannot and will not provide the main impetus for serious economic transformation on behalf of the poor. Government intervention, in the manner welfare-redistributive social or economic policy, is a sure ticket to controversy and resistance. It is obvious, then, why I have not pursued an ideal of radical equality in this discussion. We proceed without any expectation that humans will ever be “equal” in economic terms.

Yet, if the socialist thinkers who once challenged the moral rectitude of capitalism have all gone away, still, the capitalist worldview's claims of its moral sufficiency are not a settled matter. We live in a time in which the retreat of government as the savior of the poor exposes the coarse effects of unregulated profit-seeking capital and the failure of concentrated power to lift up those who have the least. But it is notable that the moral complaints against capitalism have arisen in recent decades from many quarters are hardly coalescing around a “dictatorship of the proletariat” or centralized, government-based solutions. Quite the opposite: much of the attention of those who question capitalism's excesses is focused on the assertion of *decentralized* local empowerment and

¹⁴ Peter Byrne and Leslie Houden, eds., *Companion Encyclopedia of Theology* (London: Routledge, 1995), 767. Citing in particular, Luke 10:25-37.

self-determination. It is in this vast patchwork of civil society and its social capital that the values which demand a higher standard of social ethics are most clearly emerging.

The growth-oriented economy is likely to reign for the foreseeable future. But where should the wealth that is newly created, from this date forward, go? Although the American nation is fixated on its own growth and economic interest, I would suggest that, all things being equal, the greatest benefits from future world economic growth ought to go to the billions of people who have the least. There are more than a few prospering Americans who would actually agree with this proposition, if they saw a path to that end that did not involve massive government intervention, taxation, and bureaucracy. They also understand that wealth transfers through governments and multilateral agencies have a well-earned reputation for stimulating corruption, waste, ecological problems and militarism.

If the reader will allow a brief utopian exercise, I should like to put forward a proposal which may seem quixotic in its appeals: it has elements that are conservative, libertarian, progressive and liberal; and, naturally, elements which disturb each. I propose that civil society itself might be the ideal destination, the most amenable communal context, for the future wealth we create. The institutions of civil society, those that most directly serve people and help them grow – schools, not-for-profit hospitals, neighborhood associations, housing associations, farm cooperatives – are the very institutions that can be held most directly accountable to their constituents. What if a substantial part of the wealth of society were directed not into private investment portfolios, but into self-sustaining endowments for these institutions?

I can speculate as to a mechanism. Today, such entities are funded through a combination of government funding and charitable giving. Government is the only power that holds the power to *compel* people to hand over their money, with the mechanism of taxation. If the taxpayers so desired, could government continue to use its power to compel money out of people's pockets, without accepting all of that money into its own general revenue and making all the decisions as to its use? In other words, suppose the government compelled individual taxpayers to contribute funds, in lieu of a portion of their taxes, to the endowment or operating budget of their own choices of qualified service organizations within civil society – particularly ones which are dedicated to the well-being and empowerment of those most in need? By these means, funds would be evacuated out of the federal budget and bureaucratic hands, social services could be strengthened for all, and power returned to local hands. At the same time, individuals would become directly involved in choices to help those in need, while their "tax" burden would remain unchanged.

The model I have offered pertains to the domestic situation of wealthy nations – not immediately to the global poor. The point is, just imagining ways to bring the wealthy and prosperous to acceptance of a new dispensation that is in *everybody's* interest is a first step towards other modest claims on future wealth creation. Without expropriating what wealth has already been amassed, perhaps future pools of wealth can be coaxed out of private interests with less resistance than is caused by taxes for government spending. I have sought to establish that civil society can embody relatedness and empowerment values as a driver for poverty reduction. It may also be the most pragmatic way forward for a more general economic transformation: if empowerment is the flourishing of today's poor through enhanced participation in the world's opportunities, and if the

wealthy and powerful are called upon to be involved in this transformation, and if the ways in which the prosperous could respond are without limit, it is also true that the responses by the wealthy that are most likely are sharply proscribed by the political, economic, and social realities of their advantages. Enhancing empowerment by making civil society into the same kind of pillar of strength as the business community and governments could be more politically palatable to the prosperous than schemes involving economic redistribution explicitly. Today's wealthy and powerful could go some distance toward fulfilling their duty of empowerment, relatively painlessly, by actively supporting a future in which the power and place of civil society is recognized alongside government and business in the "natural" order. If self-serving motives help to fulfill a transformative vision that stands on its own merits, so be it. Civil society is a "third way," if you will. It carries its own dangers, to be sure – we need only think of the current controversy over "charitable choice" in the United States. But, with the right intentions, which I have specified as values of right-relatedness, it could offer a better way forward, even for those who back their way into it.

Proposals such as a global parliament and a new orientation to the purposes of wealth are, for the time being, pipe dreams. But after we have dreamt a little, perhaps we can find other, smaller ways in which the values of relatedness, the empowerment agenda, and our solidarity *can* be advanced, so that all life may flourish.

III-2 RELIGIOUS UNDERSTANDINGS

I have just put forward some constructive, material proposals intended to advance an empowerment-relatedness agenda against poverty; now I would like to conclude by suggesting further spiritual orientations to the same problem. This is an important linkage because the vision of justice as solidarity, as Sturm puts it, or, I might say, relatedness-mandated empowerment, rests ultimately on an affirmation of *spirit as reality*. We resist the utilitarian urge to put economic efficiency above all our relationships, Sturm says, "because of those moments when we are visited with an intimation of the reality of spirit, when... we become aware of the uncalculated goodness inherent in the depth of sensitivity on which each of us is so dependent for our ultimate sanity..."¹⁵ The religious impulse motivates the thirst for justice. Aloysius Pieris, a Jesuit priest and director of the Tulana Research Center in Sri Lanka, tells how spirituality pushes justice forward: "I submit that the religious instinct be defined as a revolutionary urge, a psycho-social impulse, to generate a new humanity. It is none other than the piercing thrust of evolution in its self-conscious state, the human version of nature's thirst for higher forms of life..."¹⁶

¹⁵ Sturm, 13-14.

¹⁶ Aloysius Pieris, "The Place of Non-Christian Religions and Cultures in the Evolution of Third World Theology," in V. Fabella and S. Torres, *Irruption of the Third World: Challenge to Theology*, Maryknoll: Orbis, 1983, 134, quoted in Sturm, 159.

The teachings of Jesus are, of course, greatly concerned with the incoming of the Reign of God. The Reign has been interpreted a thousand ways, but one thing that it is, Walter Wink argues, is a way of praxis for Jesus. He showed this by his own example, with his deep and active involvement in the work of redemption: healing miracles motivated by compassion; risky denunciations of the powers responsible for the “anti-Reign” – identified as the wealthy, scribes, priests, and rulers. The Reign of God is also to be understood in terms of whom Jesus’ addressees are: the poor, primarily – as in the Beatitudes. Implicitly, Jesus denounces the configuration of the society that the anti-Reign creates, a society that can produce so many victims.¹⁷

The gospel, therefore, “is not a message of personal salvation *from* the world” – not a relationship between the savior and the spiritual life of the individual absent a reckoning for the encompassing system. Rather, “redemption means actually being liberated from the oppression of the Powers, being forgiven for one’s own sin and for complicity with the Powers, and being engaged in liberating the Powers themselves from their bondage to idolatry.” Worldly structures are related to, subject to, spirituality. Social entities “can only be fundamentally changed by strategies that address the social-spiritual nature of institutions.”¹⁸ This insight does not solve the puzzle of “which spirituality?” – it does not have to. Once an assemblage of spiritual perspectives is acknowledged as important to the public discourse, it is the task of multiple communities to explore the implications of them together in their diversity.

Ada María Isasi-Díaz mirrors Wink’s perspective, noting that, “Salvation is gratuitously given by God; it flows from the very essence of God, [which is] love....The love relationship is the goal of all life.” Therefore, acts and expressions of love among humans “sustain... the ongoing act of God’s salvation.”¹⁹ Specifically, “[o]ur participation in the act of salvation is what we refer to as liberation. It consists of our work to transform the world.”²⁰ Such an understanding of salvation as a this-worldly organic principle of growth through love points to the value of, and in, the living Creation *per se*. The concretization of worldly “oppression” is a call for transformation of the actual relationships signified as “oppressive” – a transformation of *this* social world. It results in the replacement of otherworldly hopes for salvation with real works of love, by real people.

We cannot avoid, therefore, a confrontation with the sometimes political, sometimes theological language of “oppression.” The word “oppression” necessarily implies the existence of these two opposing populations side by side, *oppressors* and *oppressed* – but this is hard language indeed when we locate it in the actual situation of six billion human beings sharing one planet in the dawning twenty-first century. We shall have to wrestle with this dividing of the world into antagonistic camps.

The boundaries, “oppressor/oppressed,” are fluid – individual identities are subject to varied contexts and changing circumstances. So the global web of oppressive tendencies is hardly exhausted with the treatment of the poor and the poorest: Rosemary Radford Ruether notes that the dynamic of oppression/oppressed/oppressor “is a

¹⁷ Wink, 82-83.

¹⁸ Wink, 82-84.

¹⁹ Isasi-Díaz, 90.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 90.

structural relation of exploitation which also deeply shapes people's socialization.”²¹ Isasi-Díaz argues that “[s]pecific oppressions...are not self-contained realities but are interconnected parts of a worldwide system of domination.” Many individuals exist in overlapping communities under oppression. Different individuals experience greatly different degrees of oppression, and those who experience the “lesser” degrees of oppression – the glass ceiling, the absence of affirmative action – will to a greater or lesser extent know, by affinity, the experience of those defined, by poverty, as truly, deeply oppressed.²²

Ignacio Ellacuría described the need to remember our inescapable relatedness and avoid dividing the world too sharply:

...we must get beyond simplistic formulas with regard to both the causes of oppression and to its forms, so as not to fall into a Manichean division of the world, which would situate all good in the world on one side and all evil on the other. It is precisely a structural way of looking at the problem that enables us to avoid the error of seeing as good all the individuals on one side and as evil those on the other side, thus leaving aside the problem of personal transformation.²³

Individuals, on *both* sides of the oppressed/oppressor divide, are a mix of good and evil. We *all* need transformation.

It is obvious then, that in today's context of globalization a vision of civil society driven by values of relatedness and empowerment, and trying to affect extreme inequalities of wealth and poverty, must confront substantial obstacles. Globally the dominant powers of business and government are themselves dominated by a nexus of economic, political, and philosophical ideologies: neoliberal free-trade economics, money and power, and scientism and economism. Whatever the intention of these ideologies, in their effect they may be seen in a spiritual-ethical sense as constituting a *violation of relatedness*. In liberation theology terms the structural aspects of oppression – which can be found in the organization of economies, for example, or the cultural norms of leadership – are aspects of our alienation, both from God and from our fellow creatures. That alienation is the missing of the mark that we commonly know as sin. In this world, in this time, so the liberationists tell us, the Reign of God is held in abeyance by the social phenomena of oppression, the broken web of relationships that extends outward, inward, and through each of us and is bigger than any of us. Injustice and exploitation are the outward faces of sin and alienation.

The challenge is that once we have opened the Pandora's box of the language of oppression, we have also, in the end, the task of putting that same language to rest. Still, the murky overlapping of these categories, “oppressed” and “oppressor,” should be taken as a sign of hope in the possibility of achieving meaningful sympathy – of seeing the other in one's self. The goal is to arrive at a situation in which these categories, or labels – *oppressor* and *oppressed* – should disappear. If “the oppression of a class –

²¹ From a note to the author.

²² Isasi-Díaz, 91.

²³ Ignacio Ellacuría, “The crucified people,” in *Systematic Theology: Perspectives from Liberation Theology*, Jon Sobrino and Ignacio Ellacuría, eds. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), 267.

socioeconomic poverty – is...the infrastructural expression of the process of oppression,” then great wealth and great poverty define two opposed groups which can only unite *to the extent that they also dissolve themselves*. What would remain afterwards, in this visionary exercise, is just human beings, living together, without so great a gulf of having and having-not.

What kind of actual transformation would the overturning of oppression require? Any involuntary reform or restriction of oppressors’ way of life, in the name of the rights of the community, would appear to the oppressors as a profound violation of their individual rights. Oppressorhood comes with material benefits, and many of those who hold the benefits tend to actively seek to maintain or increase them. The perpetuation of oppression through many generations creates a strongly possessive consciousness that translates things into money and profit. In this manner, to be is to have.²⁴ Jesus paid the price for overturning the money-changers’ tables. Twentieth-century history shows that the revolutionary urge to take back for “the people” what has been hoarded by the few cannot be done without nasty lingering consequences. For these reasons – because of the sheer unlikelihood that an enduring change in the possessive consciousness can be forced from the outside, and to avoid a conversation full of blame, recrimination and vain hopes – I have looked for the soft solutions oriented to the future, gradually building new institutions that create change without forcing anyone to change or taking anything out of anyone’s hands.

In that same spirit, I shall stop talking about those individuals who wind up in the oppressors’ camp because of their active exercise of personal power at the expense of others. There is a more interesting group to focus on: the many people who benefit from the systems of oppression and yet are of good intention and seek change. In this crowd, we find a subtler, more quiescent sense of what oppression means. The mere accident of birth, after all, produces many “oppressors,” long before they are able to take responsibility as adults. Oppression then has a passive face as well as an active one. Whereas it is not difficult for a well-to-do person in a wealthy nation to react against abuses by corporate or governmental powers or by rogue individuals pursuing nakedly oppressive agendas, it is a greater personal challenge to accept that *being in a position that benefits* from the work of other actively oppressing agents is also a mark of the oppressor.

For example, all Americans deposit a greatly disproportionate amount of their accumulated waste in the earth’s atmosphere at the expense of present and future generations in all nations. Furthermore, we have a government which fights for our “right” to do so. Even if we rail against this fact, we cannot avoid *participating* in it – and *benefiting* from it. Owning up to one’s status as “oppressor” requires an awakening, whereas self-justification is automatic in the culture.

We can thus distinguish between active performance of oppression and the “passive” acts of benefiting from a pervasive system of oppression. Isasi-Díaz gives a name to those individuals in the camp of oppressors, whose “passive action” benefits from structures and acts of oppression, yet who seek to act in genuine solidarity with the poor and oppressed: she calls them the “friends” of the oppressed. Her quotations marks indicate a kind of tentative status, because the action of “friends” on the side of justice for the oppressed must be renewed every hour of every day, whereas their participation in

²⁴ Isasi-Díaz, 41.

oppression grinds on inexorably and inescapably. In the “friends,” those who “passively benefit” from oppression, solidarity can take effective root. And with the awakening of solidarity between the oppressed and the “friends,” there is, finally, the possibility of transformative action towards the overturning of oppression. But that is no simple matter. What potential does this class of “friends” have as a force for transformation?

The “friends” of the oppressed, enjoying the fruits of oppression, are nonetheless awakened by the injustices they have perceived, and they have set as their goal *to be with* the oppressed. This is no simple thing to achieve: Isasi-Díaz illustrates the barrier to a genuine “walking with,” or “being with,” by recounting a conversation from her stint as a missionary in a rural village in Peru: her unemployed and impoverished neighbor told her, “Remember, you can always leave this place; we can’t.” The danger she sees “for the majority of people who are committed to justice,” is that “solidarity means merely *agreement with and sympathy for* the poor and the oppressed” (emphasis mine). “Agreement with” is an ephemeral commitment, a “disposition” that can be maintained or discarded depending on circumstances. Mere feelings of sympathy have “little or nothing to do with liberative praxis.”²⁵

It is important, Isasi-Díaz says, to bear foremost in mind what love actually requires: “the *active involvement* of those who are in relationship” (italics mine). Love, then, is an active principle; it falls on human beings, as God’s image, to love as God loves, not merely to receive love. Isasi-Díaz seeks to replace *charity*, as “the appropriate Christian...ethical behavior...in our world today,” with authentic *solidarity*. That is, if the gospel mandate is that we love our neighbor, acts of authentic solidarity are the appropriate expression of that love, whereas charity is typically a “one-sided giving...of what we have in abundance” – only a salve for the conscience! “If the true meaning of solidarity were understood and intended,” she says, “visible radical change would be happening in the lives of those of us who endorse it with our applause.”²⁶

For Isasi-Díaz “[s]olidarity has to do with understanding the interconnections that exist between oppression and privilege, between the rich and the poor, the oppressed and the oppressors.” Through solidarity we identify “common responsibilities and interests.” One measure of solidarity is the “cohesiveness...among communities of struggle.” This emphasis is notably different from notions of altruism which posit a disinterested agreement – for example, a Rawlsian system of ethics in which, if one did not know what one’s position would be within the system, one would support a guaranteed minimum level of justice and opportunity for all. Isasi-Díaz imbues solidarity with a far deeper connection: an orientation to others which depends on “shared feelings,” which “lead to joint action.” We can sense here, then, that solidarity is indissoluble from the concrete experience of the individual in his or her particular community of shared responsibilities and affections.²⁷

This is a calling to discern the way through the web of relationships and find the connections that must be woven and the structures that must be built which can allow love to flow into the shared, public realm. An “appreciative consciousness” – an attitude of the heart that opens one to the Other, allowing a person to relate successfully in

²⁵ Ibid., 86-87.

²⁶ Ibid., 88-89.

²⁷ Isasi-Díaz, 89.

interdependence – requires an openness and vulnerability, a fluidity of boundaries.²⁸ Thus the personal becomes outwardly transformational: “To struggle against oppression, against alienation, is a matter of ongoing personal conversion that involves effective attempts to change alienating societal structures.”²⁹

Isasi-Díaz poses solidarity as a theory that “opposes the theory of oppression by reconceptualizing every aspect of society.” As one’s awareness of one’s own location in one region of the web of oppression grows, one begins to find its connections everywhere, and, if one is to be true to that intuition, one must follow these links and try to conceive of the totality of these relationships. Then one may see what, in one’s own small place, is to be done. It is through this awareness that “a commonality of feelings and interests [can] flourish and become...the cornerstone of society, the way it is organized and operates.” Recognizing that in our globalizing world no society is isolated, we can begin to locate ourselves in a worldwide web of commonality. Again, it is only in the grounding of our understanding of oppression in our particular experience that the wider connections of feelings and interests that are the essence of solidarity can be felt. The recognition of a commonality is the basis for mutuality.³⁰ Commitment to mutuality “is possible only if there is a ‘sense of being bound to whoever or whatever is the object of [this] commitment’....Commitment gives other persons or a worthy cause claim over oneself,” resulting in “a relation of binding and being-bound, giving and being-claimed.”³¹ Without this conversion, the tendency is to “overcome” divisions by one side destroying the other.

The hardest part about this dynamic of mutuality is the entailment that the oppressed must also accept a claim of relationship and of mutual aid from the “friends of the oppressed,” even as these “friends” cannot entirely lose the mantle of some kind of oppressorhood. “Friends” can, for example, help the oppressed to understand that what they need to do is not to participate more deeply in the structures of oppression, but to change them. This is a tricky dynamic, easily open to charges of presumptuousness and condescension. But such charges in the end risk defending the status quo. Somehow real mutuality must emerge, and that process is inevitably rife with tension. The key point is that “If we do not recognize the need for the oppressed to learn from the ‘friends,’ then we cannot claim that mutuality is at the heart of solidarity.” Solidarity “requires a true dialogic relationship.”³² In this way of relating, a mutual seeking of the empowerment of the poor might take root.

One final time, I wish to turn the conversation towards community and civil society. Throughout this work, I have tried to define what significance the value of right-relatedness has for the peaceful pursuit of an empowerment agenda. My answer has centered on the emergence of this new kind of civil society: communities of individuals who understand themselves as *both* strong in individual agency *and* originally and indissolubly intertwined and shared with their other permeable and interdependent selves;

²⁸ Sturm, 11.

²⁹ Isasi-Díaz, 90.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 92.

³¹ Margaret Farley, *Personal Commitments* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), 159. From Isasi-Díaz, 99.

³² Isasi-Díaz, 97.

and, likewise communities of communities that understand their relationships in that vein. Such individuals and communities could be expected to go farther in developing the social institutions of ethical, associative transformation. They can provide the forum in which the transformations-to-mutuality of which Isasi-Díaz speaks can occur.

To explicate this relationship between individual and community further, I shall return to the thought of Douglas Sturm. Sturm notes that if the mandate of individuality is “Preserve autonomy!”, the mandate of solidarity is “Enhance community!” The ultimate flaw of a single-minded focus on individuality is ontological: with its determined preservation of autonomy and faith in the market as efficient problem-solver, it “ignores our essential connectedness with the community of life,” and “the interactive character of culture.” For Sturm, we can address our crises “only if we can come to understand ourselves as denizens of a vast and variegated community of life – denizens whose well-being as selves is intimately intertwined with the well-being of all.”³³

For Sturm the time is ripe for this understanding, because “[the contemporary] language of dialogue, communication, solidarity, community is indicative of a move beyond the classical principle of objectivity and the modern turn to subjectivity to a new possibility: a principle of intersubjectivity.” In this way, multiple perspectives can work together, for divergence is respected as long as it “sustains and enriches the dialectic.”³⁴ The reason we can and should pursue this intersubjectivity is simply that “we belong together”; we are connected with each other.

What kind of community does this entail? Sturm describes the “relational association” defined by reciprocal engagement in a system of dynamic interaction in which one’s act is both dependent and contributory. It is a structure of interdependency and of empowering mutuality. Examples include the solidarity of true friendships and of covenantal communities, in which energies are directed to the welfare of all its members. Participants are motivated to enrich such associations because they are “integral to their own self development as social beings.”³⁵

Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki places this community more explicitly in the context of ultimacy: “The togetherness of all things in the infinite satisfaction of God is the ultimacy of love, pervading and transforming each participant through the power of God’s own subjectivity. The aims for the world that spring from this divine love are themselves aims toward a richness of community, which is as much named by love in the finite world as in the divine reality.”³⁶ Sturm avers that “What Suchocki designates as the intention of love – the richness of community – is indicated by mutuality as the overriding quality of relationships.”³⁷ Finally, Isasi-Díaz tells us that this mutuality “begins to make liberation present.” This, I submit, is the task of empowerment.

³³ Ibid, 4, 10.

³⁴ Sturm, 178.

³⁵ Ibid., 43-44.

³⁶ Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, *The End of Evil: Process Eschatology in Historical Context* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 123, quoted in Sturm, 39.

³⁷ Sturm, 43.

III-3 CONCLUSION

Understanding the links in our global relationships and the choices that we the prosperous have – to take responsibility for our side of the relationships, to take on the challenge of transforming ourselves and our institutions – begins with the question, what can we do to participate in change? To conclude, I shall list a number of ways in which the privileged can begin to engage in the empowerment agenda.

As participants in market life we can recognize that the purpose of markets is to serve people. We know this from the benefits that our market economy delivers to us. We can pursue a market that does the same for everybody.

As investors – as *owners* of the system – we can exercise some control over the trajectory of American money. The tradition of corporate philanthropy shows us that those managers who pursue the profit motive already know that that profit comes with an obligation to enhance human culture and the opportunities for those who have the least. We can influence the corporate behavior and objectives of multinational firms that do business in impoverished nations, directing them to balance their profit motives with the goal of building long-term, sustainable businesses that participate in local communities in life-enhancing, empowering ways.

As citizens we can influence American political leaders – and the multilateral financial institutions over which they exercise extensive control – to go much further in pursuing development strategies of empowerment and poverty reduction, leavening neoliberal economic growth recipes with more forceful strategies to invest in people to enhance their capabilities and power.

As neighbors we can put more of our own time and money into building direct human relationships with the individuals and communities of the global poor, for example, through cultural exchange. This will help us to see them not as a distant and anonymous mass, but as themselves – and as ourselves.

As participants in civic life we can build a rich and global civil society as a locus of people-power and a counterweight to governmental and corporate power. We can assert the privilege of a rich cultural life as a leading purpose of our living and working. We can build new structures that enforce this vision, for example, a global parliament directly representing people and their interests as represented by civil society organizations, bypassing the filters of governing institutions and private commercial interests. In so doing we can re-form the very concept of the democratic *polis*.

As prospering people we can lead by example in questioning the extremes of income inequality that exist in the United States. We can participate more deeply in the goals of poverty reduction and empowerment within our own communities. Of course, much of this kind of change ultimately requires legislative action in areas such as taxation and social investment, but we can work to build consensus to those ends.

As the owners of great worldly resources we can meditate more deeply on the ways that the resources of the bountiful earth can be shared. What would it mean to have access to something, without owning it?

As charitable people we can look more deeply at the ways our charitable activities either perpetuate or transform the domination system. Does our money and work enhance the capabilities of the poor to function and emerge from poverty, or does it merely sustain them through their lifelong journey of impoverishment?

As believers we can harness our religions to these ends. We can search our own theological and spiritual resources for support for empowerment-in-inter-relatedness. We can insist that these objectives become a more central part of our faith practice. From a Christian perspective we can discover that the meaning of Christian charity is fulfilled in love-of-neighbor as an entering into relationships of mutual obligation, walking-with, being-with, an enhanced effort to understand the other before us. We can renew Jesus's commitment to "the least" as a dedication to empowerment as on the one hand the work of enhancing people's capabilities, and on the other the accountability of the powerful.

As intersubjective persons-in-community we can try to get past the philosophies, behaviors and policies that treat others on the margins as objects. We can encourage ourselves and our friends to recognize the poor and powerless as *subjects*, as leaders of change. We can come face-to-face with them and let them influence us. We can come to respect their aims and desires on their terms, not ours. We can learn to grasp and relish the *feeling* of our relatedness more deeply. We can try to become less walled-off and separate. We can *show up*.

As people in power we can recognize and accept that a commitment to empowerment-in-relatedness is a call upon us to be less unilateral, aloof, and autocratic in our choices. We can discover that we can accept that an ostensible loss of power might actually be a transformation of the very meaning of power.

* * * *

I have argued that the values of right-relatedness and empowerment combine to generate a new form of cultural organization, global civil society, composed of free people and acting as a counterweight to the powers of business and government. I have argued that such a civil society of relatedness and empowerment can change the terms of the poverty reduction agenda. In order to make this thesis clear and real, I have tried to avoid an over-reliance on philosophical and theological theorizing, offering instead a close-up, ground-level look at the work of this new civil society. This work, we have seen, crosses both communities of poverty and communities of wealth, and is itself an expression of both a deep religious and cultural background and a contemporary vision of justice as solidarity. My intent has been to animate this transformative process for those of us on the prosperous side of the global divide, to invite our further commitment and engagement in the struggle for life – the struggle to end wrenching, deadly poverty.

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