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RELATEDNESS AND EMPOWERMENT:
TOWARD A NEW POVERTY-REDUCTION AGENDA
FOR THE EMERGING CIVIL SOCIETY

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PREFACE

In this thesis, I use language which specifically addresses an audience to which I belong, which I am disposed to name as *us* – the prosperous, the satisfied, those in power, we in the United States who live above the poverty line. For reasons that I hope will be clear, it is fitting to couch my arguments in language that is so personal and situated. While it is crucial to understand, as liberation theology teaches, that the “primary victims have a wisdom about our condition that others require for their own enlightenment,”¹ and the poor must themselves be the subject of the corrective, there is also a special locatedness and distinct mission for those who live within the world of the wealthy and powerful who would reinforce the work of liberation. The most important relationship I am pointing towards is that between the global poor, living in destitution in the so-called developing countries, and the global prosperous, especially us, the flourishing North Americans. I have focused attention here because we who prosper in the United States are among those world citizens most deeply embedded in a system which gives us the option to distance ourselves from the problems of global poverty and poverty in our own country. At the same time, the very system that allows us the luxury of remoteness directly perpetuates that impoverishment from which we recoil. The two phenomena are in my judgement related, and my language is intended to highlight that relationship as a living reality.

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¹ Douglas Sturm, *Solidarity and Suffering: Toward a Politics of Relationality* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 9.

commitment to bringing the under-represented voices to the airwaves and for their involvement in both of my case studies. I would especially like to thank Laura Livoti, Phillip Babich, and Stephanie Welch for their help.

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CONTENTS

PREFACE	ii
INTRODUCTION	1
Chapter	
I UNPACKING POVERTY, EMPOWERMENT, AND RELATEDNESS	7
I-1 The wages of poverty	7
I-2 Meanings of relatedness	13
I-3 The empowerment agenda and worldly powers	18
I-4 Empowerment through civil society	22
II CASE STUDIES	28
II-1 Cross River, Nigeria	29
II-2 Indigenous Ecuador	35
II-3 Jubilee 2000	42
III TOWARD A NEW AGENDA	50
III-1 Justice and solidarity in politics and economics	50
III-2 Religious understandings	56
III-3 Conclusion	63
BIBLIOGRAPHY	65

INTRODUCTION

One perennial problem for politicians and theologians alike is poverty. Today, in our globalized world, our awareness of the depth and intransigence of global poverty has never been greater. Decades of failed policies such as large infrastructure investments in, and massive loans to, impoverished nations, have spurred a search for new approaches. The victory of the market-based ideology and attendant doubts about wealth-redistribution have deepened the political conviction that there has to be another way to pursue poverty reduction.

It is in this context that the agenda of economic development specialists has shifted to a focus on the *empowerment* of those who have the least. Poverty is seen as “a human condition [in which] people are unable to achieve essential functions in life, which in turn is due to their lack of access to and control over the commodities they require.” Empowerment, then, is “the ability to influence decisions on how commodities [broadly defined] are both generated and distributed.”¹ In other words, *powerlessness* in society is the key dimension of poverty to be tackled.

A search for the social and economic conditions that can facilitate the movement of the poor and marginalized out of their plight resonates with the call for compassion found in nearly all religions. A long line of biblical mandates, for example, call the covenantal community to love and care for the weak, the stranger and the outcast. In Christian terms, the work of poverty reduction accords with Jesus’s proclamation concerning the treatment of the outcast and downtrodden: “And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me’” (Matt. 25:40).

And yet, we know, it is never as easy as all that. When the prophetic call is reduced to an exhortation to charitable kindness, the structural realities of poverty are hardly challenged. And this is why today’s widespread rhetoric of empowerment for the poor can be deceptive: authentic empowerment of the many on the margins entails a change of relationship between them and the few at the center of power. From the perspective of the powerful, it is easy enough to give lip service to the idea that poverty reduction must be a win-win situation, in which the gains of the powerless need not rock the boat of the powerful. This proposition should indeed be true: if human power is shared in the right spirit, achieved together, it ought to be a bottomless well upon which all can draw. But, on balance, power as practiced in the world today is a decidedly zero-sum, win-lose proposition. For those in power, that power is by and large not seen as limitless resource – if one is to gain power, another must relinquish it. It is power *over*, rather than power *with* or power *to*.² For mutual power relations to flourish, for interactions to create a new, better condition of mutual benefit – in other words, of genuine empowerment for the poor – the powerful must change. That change can be felt as a loss of control. Taken to its logical end, the empowerment agenda has to be a challenge to the way that the wealthy and powerful live and think about how we live – a challenge to change, to share power and wealth; ultimately, to change the meaning of

¹ Alan Fowler, *Striking a Balance* (London: Earthscan, 1997), 3-4.

² My thanks to Martha Ellen Stortz for clarifying my thoughts on power relations.

possession, or to relinquish a share. The trick is to show those of us who hold the cards that the challenge to change is not a threat, but an invitation to a better way of life for all.

At the present time, any challenge to the wealthy to respond to the problem of global poverty is an uphill battle. Since the dawn of Marxism, the will to improve the lot of the poor has foundered on the rocks of political controversies over property, wealth redistribution, and “moral hazard” (the idea that “giving” to the poor only encourages the bad habits and dependencies that made them poor in the first place). But with the defeat of Soviet socialism and the subsequent surging force of free-market neoliberalism, the ease with which the wealthy and powerful can foist off responsibility is especially great now: put most succinctly, a contemporary kind of instrumental rationalism, “[c]onjoined with social Darwinism and possessive individualism... forms, for classes in positions of power and privilege, all the delineaments of a ‘viable religion,’ the kind of deep-seated faith that undergirds and sustains the lived experience of the everyday world of the elite.”³ “Empowerment” can thus be recast as the responsibility of the poor to take care of themselves, period. A cynic might concede that, as long as nobody takes this idea of empowerment too far, it, too, might have its season.

But I would like to suggest that today a qualitatively new and different element can be added to the mix to give the empowerment agenda greater authenticity. It is an idea which has already made an impact in science, spirituality, and philosophy, but has yet to register as more than a blip in the world of conventional politics and punditry. This hidden element is the newly widespread understanding that we are all in some sense profoundly interpenetrated, interconnected, and inter-related.

Call it relatedness, relationality, inter-relatedness, or interconnectedness; everyone has heard variations on this slogan – *We are all related and interconnected* – repeated in various contexts, almost as if it is a self-sufficient idea that requires no further elaboration. But many writers have elaborated the idea deeply, drawing on diverse resources such as ecological science and philosophy, cosmology, biology, and Eastern spirituality. “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,” says Sallie McFague.⁴ The Brazilian theologian Ivone Gebara says, “Interdependence means accepting the basic fact that any life situation, behavior, or even belief is always the fruit of all the interactions that make up our lives, our histories, and our wider earthly and cosmic realities.”⁵

Douglas Sturm speaks of an ontology of relationality, arguing that our “individuality can be comprehended only contextually.”⁶ We are the result of the confluence of what has come before, not to be understood independent of our community; yet each of us is also a creative agent making our own individual stamp, self-determining and self-constructing. For Carol Gould, individuals are social beings who “engage in joint or common agency” in pursuit of common goals. “[I]n pursuit of their

³ Douglas Sturm, *Solidarity and Suffering: Toward a Politics of Relationality* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 163. Sturm is paraphrasing the thoughts of Richard Rubenstein in Rubenstein, *The Age of Triage* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), 222.

⁴ Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1993), 105-108.

⁵ Ivone Gebara, *Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 52.

⁶ Sturm, 9.

individual goals, they require the respect, recognition, or forbearance of others.”⁷ For Sturm, this “thick interdependency of our lives” is the principle of relationality: human life as a continuous dialectic between participation and individuation. There is little we can accomplish apart from the communal matrix that sustains us. When Sturm says, “We are members of each other. We belong together,” he intends his statement as “both a political affirmation and a religious declaration” – for it speaks simultaneously to how we are to coexist together and to the essence of what we are.⁸

I will be drawing ethical and justice implications from this orientation of mutual belonging. A general principle of our interconnectedness drives us toward an understanding of justice as solidarity, as an imperative of right-relatedness. But any such translation of relatedness thinking into real-world action in pursuit of economic and social justice, and, especially, of effective poverty reduction, has, once again, so far been a difficult task. Consider, for example, the pervasive “antiglobalization” protests of recent years: I suspect that, for many of the (peaceful) activists, strong intimations of inter-relatedness and its moral implications stand silently behind their actions – yet media reports consistently paint the protesters as muddle-headed idealists unable to connect their ideas to economic realities. Relatedness is an orientation to our very sociability, not a simple slogan, and if it does underlie the seeming hodgepodge of justice concerns expressed at global summits, it does so quietly, and no wonder: when reduced to a slogan, the appeal to our relatedness only causes the hard-headed to roll their eyes.

The time has now come, I believe, to make this translation: to turn the value of relatedness into effective political and economic theory, and to incorporate it into our understanding of justice – in other words, to make it into a basis for transformative action. Now, I am hardly in a position to present a full theory of the connections between inter-relatedness and empowerment here; but I will present some of the groundwork that is already underlying such thinking, and use three case studies to show some of the real-world terrain for these ideas. I mean to suggest that a good place to start is in *connecting ideas of inter-relatedness to ideas of empowerment*. I will posit a relationship between these concepts as follows: *by viewing our world through an ontology of inter-relatedness, we force the relational aspect of the empowerment agenda for the poor – the balance of power between the prosperous and the deprived – into the foreground. In so doing, we sensitize and strengthen the empowerment agenda and gain effective criteria for its authenticity*. To make such a move is to ask, in any given situation, how is the *entire web of relationships* interacting with – impacting and being impacted by – a particular strategy of empowerment-out-of-poverty?

Relationality is a more fundamental concept than empowerment, for power is a *relational* quality: (em)power(ment) only makes sense within relationship. In any case, the *spirituality* of both empowerment and relatedness is a fundamental concern here, even if the terrain seems to be largely political and economic. The reason for this is nicely conveyed by Bernard Meland: “Spirit connotes a depth of thought that forms the matrix of relations in which all life is cast.... spirit is a quality of being which arises out of a particular depth of sensitivity in relations. It is, in other words, a goodness in

⁷ Carol C. Gould, “Private Rights and Public Virtues: Women, Family, and Democracy,” in Carol C. Gould, ed., *Beyond Domination: New Perspectives on Women and Philosophy* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Allanheld, 1983), 5. From Sturm, 11.

⁸ Sturm, 7, 231-232.

relationships.”⁹ To believe in that goodness, I believe, is to maintain a spirituality.

Relatedness can equally be treated in a secular vein, for example drawing on insights from physics and biology. I think that secular conceptions of both relatedness and empowerment can stand alone as foundational to justice, but that their deeper underpinnings are most richly revealed from a spiritual orientation. In religious thinking, relatedness may appear both as a complement to other foundations and as a central pillar in its own right. Relatedness complements, or intertwines with, important religious justice-visions like the Jewish Sabbath and Jubilee mandates, the Christian love command, the assertion of traditional indigenous lifeways, and new formations of eco-holism. But relatedness also stands out clearly on its own as a foundational understanding: we might think of the being-in-community of trinitarian understandings of God and of humanity, or of Martin Buber’s *I and Thou*, or of the Eastern mode of relationships encompassing the relational “no-self.” We might assert, with Harold Oliver, that reality is relatedness, that the relation is fundamental, the *relata* contingent.¹⁰

Finally, importantly, I believe that relatedness can be an inter-religious touchstone, eminently sharable by any religious tradition. All of these crossover paths are important to the intellectual, affective, and – maybe someday – political importance of relatedness.

So here we have the two elements – one, *empowerment*, is a fairly pragmatic and specific agenda for change, and the other, *relatedness*, is a way of knowing, or a way of seeing the world. Separately, each beckons us in diverse ways to transform our relationships. Together, the combined themes of empowerment and relatedness could be applied to a wide range of concerns, but the focus here is on addressing them specifically to problems of poverty and wealth. The animating idea of this thesis is that values and practices of empowerment and right relatedness, when combined, provide a much stronger grounding for effecting global poverty reduction than either does separately – or than narrowly economic or political approaches can. Civil society, with its rich links of community, is the social location within which this combination of empowerment and relatedness is most fruitfully expressed, both in value and in practice. In civil society, the synergy of a conscious interplay between these two values could generate an important new basis for action to tackle global poverty reduction.

The thesis proceeds in three chapters, each made up of several sections. Most sections begin with material observations and conclude with commentary on the underlying spirituality of the given topic. The first chapter lays out the particulars of poverty, relatedness, and empowerment. Section I-1, concerning today’s poverty reduction agenda, argues that the accumulation of wealth as we know it today is an impediment to the ability of the poor to access the life-possibilities they need to overcome poverty. Fundamentally, wealth is a shared human asset and markets should serve people; with this assertion, a claim is made upon the well-to-do. Section I-2 provides a richer rendering of the theological and philosophical meanings of inter-relatedness as they pertain to poverty reduction and empowerment. Relatedness has both a natural basis and theological warrants and it can change the way we think about our

⁹ Bernard E. Meland, *The Realities of Faith* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962), 233, quoted in Sturm, 13.

¹⁰ Harold H. Oliver, *Relatedness: Essays in Metaphysics and Theology* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1984), 93-94.

property and our institutions. Section I-3 gives an account of the agenda of empowerment and explicates ways in which institutional power can be a stumbling block. Section I-4 introduces the role of *civil society*, the free groupings of persons that exist outside of the established institutions of government and business. Civil society, I argue, could become the perfect embodiment of relatedness-empowerment ideals. This argument in fact is the capstone on my prior arguments for the combination of relatedness and empowerment: civil society is the concrete ground for this new approach – the social location where I believe the action will take place.

The second chapter presents three illustrative case studies:

Section II-1: in Nigeria, a multinational concern is working in the state of Cross River to convert large sections of rainforest, home and livelihood to many people, into woodchips for export. Concerned local groups come together to try to protect their way of life, and in the process, they develop a forceful critique of economic recipes from on high which seem to overwhelm their lives while benefiting them not at all. This case offers insights into the empowerment of poor and marginalized communities through the strength of local civil society's collaborative efforts.

Section II-2: in Ecuador, Indian groups, long pushed to the margins, are asserting their unique role in the nation. In the course of a campaign for indigenous rights and power in 2000, they brought the government – briefly – to its knees. In so doing, they have asserted powerful claims against the injustice of the order which mires them at the bottom. Here I will explore the limits of empowerment strategies under conditions of exploitative inter-relationships.

Section II-3: in many nations all across the globe, a variety of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) struggles to counter the crushing burden of international debt on the world's poorest nations. A global movement for poor nations' debt cancellation coalesced last year under the name *Jubilee 2000*.¹¹ Drawing unprecedented global popular support, the group demanded action from the world's top leaders, not allowing them to insulate their power from its consequences – the permanent indebtedness and deprivation of entire generations. Here my concern is the transformative capacity of civil society to relate the actions and fate of communities of wealth and power to that of communities of poverty and exclusion.

The third chapter is a constructive effort to spell out the ways in which relatedness values bolster the empowerment agenda and so improve the opportunities of today's global poor. Section III-1 begins with the thought of David Sturm: at the heart of *the politics of relationality* is "a principle of justice as solidarity" intended to enhance the vibrancy of the whole community and each of its members. Justice as solidarity affirms the positive freedom to develop oneself through one's actions. It also insists that the effective exercise of such rights and liberties requires cultural and economic support. I conclude by considering two concrete political and economic proposals which utilize new conceptions of civil society: direct global representation, and reconceiving the final ends of wealth. Section III-2 concerns the ways in which, in theological terms, the relatedness value helps to make liberation present. The liberation of the oppressed is a call for an alternative social system, which can begin with any modest move toward the dissolution of the categories *oppressor* and *oppressed*. Relatedness delivers all the elements for the softening of the world's brutal edges: solidarity, shared feelings, mutuality, dialogic

¹¹ Of which the author is a member.

relationship, reciprocity. Section III-3 concludes the thesis by offering some ways in which the prosperous can begin to contribute to re-making relationships with our world's impoverished billions.