
On High Moral Ground: The Incorporation of Human Rights by the Development Enterprise

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Until quite recently, the development enterprise operated in perfect isolation, if not ignorance, of the human rights community.¹ This does not mean that all development practitioners are undemocratic people or lack personal interest in human rights. Rather, it means that development practitioners did not consider human rights issues as part of their professional domain: they neither weighed the implications of their own work on human rights outcomes, nor sought explicitly to affect human rights through their work. This tendency continued until well into the 1990s, allowing the organizers of a prestigious UN-sponsored 1999 Conference on Nutrition and Human Rights to state that “the human rights approach to nutrition is not even on the radar screen”² and that “interaction between the [UN human rights machinery] and the UN development agencies has been essentially non-existent.”³

This intellectual and operational gap began to close slowly from the early 1990s onwards. There is nowadays a significant and growing literature, mainly of the ‘gray’ kind, on the relationship between development and human rights: policy declarations and exhortations of the need for further integration, mainstreaming, collaboration, and analysis are commonplace.

While much of this is to be applauded—at the very least, a major departure from the previous policy of complete blindness and acquiescence seemed overdue—there is still much to worry about in this context. Two issues stand out: 1) much of this work risks being little more than rhetorical, feel-good change, further legitimizing historically created inequalities and injustices in this world, and 2) the many faces of power reveal themselves, as they always do, when the powerful and the rich voluntarily set out to collaborate and redefine the conditions of misery and exploitation for the rest of the world, and fund the resulting solutions.

I intend to critique some of the typical ways in which human rights have made their way into the development agenda. Specifically, I will discuss three levels that are part of a continuum from the most status-quo oriented approach to the most radical. At the lowest level, I will describe the incorporation of human rights terminology into classical development discourse. As this is purely rhetorical, the traditional discourse is not

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challenged at all. On the contrary, it is validated by its occupation of yet another plane of high moral ground. At a second level, human rights objectives are added to a range of goals and criteria for development agencies, thus allowing for the establishment of new programs with specific human rights aims. A perfect example thereof is the fashionable good governance agenda. At the third and highest level, the mandate of development itself may be redefined in human rights terms, potentially bringing about a fundamental rethinking of the development paradigm itself—a so-called “human rights approach to development.” In this context, the work of Amartya Sen stands out. The following discussion investigates each of these approaches in greater detail.

The Rhetorical-Formulaic Incorporation

During the 1990s, bilateral and multilateral aid agencies published a slew of policy statements, guidelines and documents on the incorporation of human rights in their mandate. An enormous amount of this work was little more than thinly disguised repackaging of old wine in new bottles. As Frankovits rightly states:

With an increasing demand for economic and social rights to be a major factor in development assistance, donors have tended to reformulate their terminology. Beginning with the World Bank’s statement at the 1993 Conference on Human Rights in Vienna, followed by frequently heard assertions by individual donor agencies, the claim is made that all development assistance contributes to economic and social rights. Thus agricultural projects—whatever their nature—are claimed to contribute directly to the fulfillment of the right to food.⁴

A few additional quotes on the issue will get my point across nicely. There is the World Bank, claiming that its “lending over the past 50 years for education, health care, nutrition, sanitation, housing, environmental protection and agriculture have helped turn rights into reality for millions.”⁵ Or UNDP, declaring that it “already plays an important role in the protection and promotion of human rights. . . . Its program is an application of the right to development.”⁶ Essentially, these statements colonize the human rights discourse, arguing—as Moliere’s character, who discovered he had always been speaking prose—that human rights has been the focus of these development agencies all along. Case closed; high moral ground safely established.⁷

Interpreted more benignly, this wordplay constitutes the first step towards a true shift in vision. Indeed, much scholarship argues that discourse changes have real-world impacts: they slowly reshape the margins of acceptable action, create opportunities for redefining reputations and naming and shaming, change incentive structures and the way interests and preferences are defined, and influence expectations. This is, after all, a key proposition of all international law: even in the absence of enforcement mechanisms, international law does matter by affecting actors’ perceptions, calculations, reputations, and norms. The same insight is also a key tenet in so-called sociological, institutionalist, and social-

constructivist schools of thought in the academic discipline of international relations. Hence, the kind of rhetorical incorporation discussed in this section, while it may change few of the immediate actions undertaken, may make a real difference in the longer run. How much of a change this will amount to is a matter of time.

There are, however, some serious problems with this habit of rhetorically incorporating human rights. Typically, until now, what this approach has produced is not only a simple sleight-of-hand; it is also wrong, for it overlooks the tensions between the logics of human rights and development.⁸ As Donnelly convincingly argues, referring to the UNDP's new work on human development:

Human rights and sustainable human development “are inextricably linked” only if development is defined to make this relationship tautological. “Sustainable human development” simply redefines human rights, along with democracy, peace, and justice, as subsets of development. Aside from the fact that neither most ordinary people nor governments use the term in this way, such a definition fails to address the relationship between economic development and human rights. Tensions between these objectives cannot be evaded by stipulative definitions.⁹

Working out the relationship between development and human rights requires more than simply stating that one automatically implies, equals, or subsumes the other. Michael Windfuhr, founder of Food First Information and Action Network, one of the world's foremost human rights organizations devoted to an economic right (the right to food), correctly adds:

Besides the general misconceptions related to ESC-Rights¹⁰—that they are costly to implement, that implementation can only be done progressively and that they are therefore not rights at all but rather political objectives—one additional basic misunderstanding often comes up in discussions on how to integrate ESC-Rights into development cooperation, the concept that development cooperation automatically implements ESC-Rights because it is oriented to improve health or food situations of groups of the population. A rights-based approach means foremost to talk about the relationship between a state and its citizens.¹¹

There is a real danger in this kind of rhetorical discourse. Far from constituting the first step towards a fundamental re-conceptualization of the practice of development cooperation, it seems merely to provide a fig leaf for the continuation of the status quo. By postulating that development projects and programs by definition constitute an implementation of human rights, the important distinction between a service-based and a rights-based approach to development is obscured.

Another pernicious tendency to manipulate words exists as well. In the previous paragraphs, the rhetorical sleight of hand consisted of arguing that the development community has always—automatically and axiomatically—furthered human rights, and

everything is thus fine and dandy. The exact opposite rhetorical trick is sometimes employed as well. It consists of suggesting that major, epochal changes are now underway in the development enterprise, and they follow directly from the blinding realization of the crucial importance of human rights in development practice. The key human rights contribution to development practice, as repeated in countless documents, is the need for the engagement and participation of the poor in the processes that affect their lives.¹² This argument is breathlessly presented as a major breakthrough that we all ought to feel truly pleased about, as if development practitioners have not been proposing exactly the same thing for decades now, with very little to show for it. When human rights specialists, most of whom are lawyers, write this kind of nonsense, one can forgive them on the grounds of their ignorance. When development practitioners write such things, however, it amounts to deliberate misrepresentation.

The prime reason why development agencies adopt such language with its deliberate obfuscations is, of course, to benefit from the moral authority and political appeal of the human rights discourse. The development community is in constant need of regaining the high moral ground in order to fend off criticism and mobilize resources. As the development community faces a deep crisis of legitimacy among both insiders and outsiders, the act of cloaking itself in the human rights mantle may make sense, especially if it does not force anyone to think or act differently.

Good Governance

At a second level we find the concept of good governance, developed by the World Bank in the early 1990s. The Bank identified “four areas of governance that are consistent with [its] mandate: public sector management, accountability, the legal framework, and information and transparency.”¹³ The good governance notion was an extension and deepening of the Bank’s economic conditionality agenda, contained in the structural adjustment programs of the 1980s. It was widely perceived that these programs had not lived up to expectations and this failure was seen as a result of political factors. Economic conditionality had not worked as expected. Governments signed structural adjustment agreements but subsequently failed to implement them correctly, if at all. If only the workings of Third World governments were more transparent and accountable, the thought went, then surely other social groups would demand the right policies and a domestic basis for a stable and liberal policy environment would be laid. As such, the good governance agenda was explicitly designed to be the complement, the political extension, of structural adjustment programs.

The good governance agenda also fulfilled a rhetorical-political function. It allowed the World Bank to discuss the reforms that it proposed as economic and not political matters. In short, it constituted an attempt to de-politicize the concepts of democracy (and a

fortiori human rights) in order to avoid allegations of undermining state sovereignty, as well as to benefit from the widespread acceptance that economic thinking enjoys in the development community. As the Human Rights Council of Australia puts it: “The use of ‘good governance’ arises from a perception that governments in developing countries will prove less resistant to such euphemisms than to talk of ‘corruption’ or ‘human rights.’”¹⁴ This apolitical nature is crucial for the survival of international organizations in a world of *de jure*, if not *de facto*, sovereignty.

In some ways the good governance agenda, being defined in a more restrictive fashion, is less politically interventionist than that of democracy and human rights. In other ways, it extends the reach of the international community, for it has almost no backing in international law. Unlike human rights (and some would even argue democracy), not a single international treaty or legal instrument commits governments to transparency, accountability of civil servants, or ‘good’ public sector management, however defined. State practice, for that matter, differs dramatically even among the rich countries.

The access to public information that U.S. citizens enjoy under the Freedom of Information Act is absolutely unthinkable in most of Europe. Then again, the degree of financial clout exerted by Wall Street on the U.S. Department of Treasury, or by large corporations on the U.S. Department of Commerce, if not on the entire political system in the United States, would be unacceptable to most European citizens. Yet the extent to which French foreign policy, especially towards Africa, is a private presidential matter beyond democratic scrutiny is unimaginable in most other countries. Moreover, the broad-based coalition governments underpinned by corporatist institutions reaching deep into society, characteristic of a number of European countries, are inconceivable in the United States. Indeed, profound differences in the way public institutions are accountable or transparent to citizens, or the way the public sector is managed, exist between rich countries. None of these matters are governed by international legal standards. Although good governance is defined as a technical matter, essentially another term for liberal public sector management, it is a strong extension and imposition of the liberal ideology of its promoters and is also totally unsupported by international legal standards.

More recently, the World Bank has officially converted to ‘real’ human rights, and its discourse on governance has subsequently become much less technical, at least in documents meant for human rights activists. This produces interesting results. According to the Bank itself, “By helping to fight corruption, improve transparency, and accountability in governance, strengthen judicial systems, and modernize financial sectors, the Bank contributes to building environments in which people are better able to pursue a broader range of human rights.”¹⁵ As this quote suggests, and as I have already discussed, much of the human rights conversation still amounts to little more than rhetorical repackaging. Policies that were once justified by their promise to improve investor

confidence are now justified for their human rights potential.

Nothing else has changed. It takes more than a few ideological leaps to see how strengthening financial systems is a human rights activity. Certainly the framers of the Universal Declaration and the two Covenants were not thinking of shoring up banking reserve requirements, improving accounting standards, or liberalizing current accounts when they constructed the original human rights edifice.

In such statements, the many faces of power and their associated discourses come together. Human rights, free trade, or the willingness to let multinational corporations (MNCs) buy national assets become conflated, amounting to restatements of the 'good world' as the powerful see it. They are decreed from above, morally self-satisfying and compatible with the status quo in the centers of power. Rich countries remain immune to criticism. Over-consumption in the north, a history of colonialism, environmental degradation, protectionism, the dumping of arms in the Third World, the history of shoring up past dictators, the wisdom of structural adjustment, and globalization are not on the table for discussion. No wonder so many people resent the human rights agenda.

Sen and Freedom as Development

At a third level, a new paradigm of rights-based development is emerging in which development and rights become different aspects of the same dynamic. The boundaries between human rights and development disappear, and both become conceptually and operationally inseparable parts of the same processes of social change. Development comes to be redefined in terms that include human rights as a constitutive part: all worthwhile processes of social change are simultaneously rights-based and economically grounded, and should be conceived in such terms. This makes intuitive sense, because at the level of human experience these dimensions *are* indeed inseparable.¹⁶

Amartya Sen has produced significant and often-quoted reflections on this new paradigm. His latest book, *Development as Freedom*, synthesizes many of his earlier insights. He defines development as the expansion of capabilities or substantive human freedoms for each person, "the capacity to lead the kind of life he or she has reason to value."¹⁷ He rightly adds, "despite unprecedented increases in overall opulence, the contemporary world denies elementary freedoms to vast numbers—perhaps even the majority—of people." He argues for the removal of major factors that limit freedom, defining them as "poverty as well as tyranny, poor economic opportunities as well as systematic social deprivation, neglect of public facilities as well as intolerance or over-activity of repressive states."¹⁸

An interesting part of Sen's work is his treatment of freedom as simultaneously instrumental, constitutive, and constructive for development. This goes beyond arguing that both development and freedom are nice (so why don't we call them something else altogether). Rather, it sets out the deep and mutually constitutive links that exist between these two concepts and domains in ways that make their inseparability clear for all. As he states:

There is the often asked rhetoric: What should come first—removing poverty and misery, or guaranteeing political liberty and civil rights, for which poor people have little use anyway? Is this a sensible way of approaching the problem of economic needs and political freedoms—in terms of a basic dichotomy that appears to undermine the relevance of political freedoms because the economic needs are so urgent? I would argue, no, this is altogether the wrong way to see the force of economic needs, or to understand the salience of political freedoms. The real issues that have to be addressed lie elsewhere, and they involve taking note of extensive interconnections between political freedoms and the understanding and fulfillment of economic needs. The connections are not only instrumental (political freedoms can have a major role in providing incentives and information in the solution of acute economic needs), but also constructive. . . I shall argue that the intensity of economic needs *adds* to—rather than subtracts from—the urgency of political freedoms. There are three different considerations that take us in the direction of a general preeminence of basic political and liberal rights:

1. Their *direct* importance in human living associated with basic capabilities (including that of social and political participation);
2. Their *instrumental* role in enhancing the hearing that people get in expressing and supporting their claims to political attention (including the claims of economic needs);
3. Their *constructive* role in the conceptualization of “needs” (including the understanding of “economic needs” in a social context).¹⁹

Such ideas have made great inroads in international development discourse. Take this statement, for example, from the UN Secretary-General's *Agenda for Development*, which clearly discusses the first two types of relations between development and human rights:

Democracy and development are linked in fundamental ways. They are linked because democracy provides the only long-term basis for managing competing ethnic, religious, and cultural interests in a way that minimizes the risk of violent internal conflict. They are linked because democracy is inherently attached to the question of governance, which has an impact on all aspects of development efforts. They are linked because democracy is a fundamental human right, the advancement of which is itself an important measure of development. They are linked because people's participation in the decision-making processes which affect their lives is a basic tenet of development.²⁰

This was written five years before Amartya Sen's book, by an institution that is not exactly the hotbed of philosophical innovation. And we can go back further in time as well: cannot Wilson's four freedoms be seen as direct precursors of exactly the same ideas? Hence, we

have to acknowledge that these concepts have been around a long time in the development field. Rather than congratulating ourselves on how smart and insightful we have become since we all read and talk about Sen's work, we ought to ask why we have not acted on these ideas before. And this is where we encounter the limits of Sen's major contribution to development. There is no politically grounded analysis of what stands in the way of his approach. In addition, Sen does not even try to move beyond the level of broad paradigmatic insight. This is hardly a cause for discarding Sen's major contribution: no man is obliged to do everything. What it does mean, though, is that agencies, by signing up to Sen's vision, remain committed to little more than improved discourse.

Why then the barrage of praise for Sen's seminal contributions to development? The reason is deeply linked to the constant search for high moral ground that preoccupies so many in a field where competition for scarce resources is intense. In the development enterprise money is never made, only spent. The voices of those who receive the services supplied are hardly heard, actions are rarely evaluated, and product quality measures are almost totally unknown. In that world, the creation of attractive visions is a prime mechanism to ensure survival and growth. Such visions combine the appeal of science with the high moral ground of 'doing good.' Indeed, their essential function is just that—providing visions of oneself, markers of identity, trademarks of progressiveness. Many of the ideological changes that the development community goes through are traceable to this imperative, and the glorification of Sen's fine work is no exception. With insightful and stimulating conceptual formulations, but zero practical guidelines or obligations, there is little to disagree with in Sen's thinking: adopting it costs nothing. Aid agencies are left with a pure win-win situation.

In addition, Sen has been able to restate well-known concepts intelligently in *economic-sounding language*. He is an economist by profession, and a good one. Over the years, he has constructed a body of work that is deeply erudite, methodologically and theoretically sound, and empirically rich, as well as—a rarity in his profession—multidisciplinary and informed by a strong ethical vision.²¹ Because he is an economist employed by prestigious universities such as Harvard and Cambridge and is therefore certifiably authoritative, the fact that he speaks the language of the dominant ideology of "economism" simply adds to his appeal—an appeal that has come to border on beatification since he received the Nobel Prize. We, the do-gooders working in the margins, need every economist who comes our way! Nevertheless, there are a few limitations in his work that should be discussed.

Specifically, if we believe Amartya Sen is right, what do we do differently when we redefine development along his path? It is interesting here to look at the institution whose discourse has most taken over Sen's ideas: UNDP. Their excellent 2001 *Human Development Report* deals with human rights, human development, and the relations between the two. This report is chocked-full of interesting insights, and has a distinctly

different intellectual feeling to it than, for example, a typical World Bank report or even UNDP work a decade ago. Yet the most remarkable finding comes from the section that describes the practical implications of “promoting rights in development.”²² According to the Report, there are five concrete things to be done in the new approach:

1. Launch independent national assessments of human rights;
2. Align national laws with international human rights standards and commitments;
3. Promote human rights norms;
4. Strengthen a network of human rights organizations; and
5. Promote a rights-enabling economic environment.

Four out of the five implications—ensure that governments make references to human rights in their constitutions and remove contrary laws; educate, sensitize, or mobilize people in human rights; create national human rights commissions or ombudsmen—are largely legalistic and technical and will not challenge anyone. These are all potentially useful activities, but they do not reflect any mainstreaming of human rights into development practice. They are simply small, technical add-ons. Only the fifth seems to offer the potential of going further. Allow me to quote from it at more length from the same report:

How to create an enabling environment in which public policy can most effectively provide resources for advancing human rights? First, the public sector must focus on what it can do and leave for others what it should not do . . . Second, with this division of labor, the state can focus on the direct provision of many economic, social, and civil rights. . . Third, the major economic ministries, such as finance and planning, need to integrate rights into the economic policy-making process. . . Fourth, the private sector also has responsibilities in creating an enabling economic environment. Chambers of commerce and other business organizations should contribute to efforts to further improve human rights . . .

This is all the new approach amounts to: a standard repetition of the late 1990s liberal dogma of the sanctity of economic growth combined with a measure of human resource development and pious statements that ministries and corporations ought to think about human rights. Vagueness dominates. Are UNDP’s suggestions different from what the World Bank’s *World Development Report* would allow? If so, how would they be operationalized? What would the role of external aid agencies be? Not a word on any of these questions. In addition, none of the human rights objectives relate to UNDP, the aid enterprise, or the international community itself. All of them are to be implemented out there, in this separate place called the Third World, but do not require any critique of the global system and our place in it.

Conclusion

As could be expected, there is less to the emerging human rights approach in the development regime than meets the eye. Much of it is about the quest for moral high ground: draping oneself in the mantle of human rights to cover the fat belly of the development community while avoiding challenging the status quo too much, cross-examining oneself, or questioning the international system. One can see power at work here, which is to be expected. Most of this rethinking constitutes a voluntary act by people in New York, Washington, London, or Geneva (not to forget Medford, Massachusetts). Smart and well intended, most of them, but not exactly people in great need to overthrow the established order or second-guess themselves. The people in whose name the innovations are adopted did not fight for this change. It is not part of a fundamental reshuffling of the cards of power or a redistribution of resources worldwide: no such dynamic has occurred. As a result, one could expect little more than fluff, self-congratulation, and more or less hidden transcripts of power.

I am aware that I am painting a particularly negative picture in these pages. As someone who has strongly argued that the old development paradigm and associated practice was in need of profound repair,²³ I am certainly not making the case that we should simply leave things alone, or that any alteration of the development mandate in the direction of a greater attention to human rights is by definition a bad idea. I also appreciate how major change always starts small, and how even rhetorical gains sometimes turn out to be the snowballs that set in motion fresh avalanches. I even realize that there are organizations and people, in both rich and poor countries, who are courageously rethinking long-held ideologies and practices in human rights terms. That said, for this paper, I have chosen the uppercut approach to argumentation: pricking through a few balloons in the hope that when they burst, the noise will be enough to rouse academics, policymakers, and practitioners from the comfortable sleep of the just.

Notes

¹ Katarina Tomasevski, *Development Aid and Human Rights Revisited* (New York: Pinter, 1993) and Hans-Otto Sano, "Development and Human Rights: The Necessary, but Partial Integration of Human Rights and Development," *Human Rights Quarterly* 22, no. 3 (2000), 742.

² Lawrence Haddad, "Symposium Synthesis and Overview," *SCN News*, no. 18 (July 1999), 14.

³ Urban Jonsson, "Historical Summary on the SCN Working Group on Nutrition, Ethics, and Human Rights," *SCN News*, no. 18 (July 1999), 49; David P. Forsythe, "The United Nations, Human Rights, and Development," *Human Rights Quarterly* 19, no. 2 (1997), 334. Note that the right to food is probably the most well developed of all economic, social, and cultural rights; hence, the situation is even worse in all other fields of development!

⁴ André Frankovits, "Rejoinder: The Rights Way to Development," *Food Policy* 21, no. 1 (1996), 126; see also Human Rights Council of Australia, "Inquiry into the Link between Aid and Human Rights,"

Submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defense and Trade, February 2001, sections 2 and 3.

⁵ James C. Lovelace, "Will Rights Cure Malnutrition? Reflections on Human Rights, Nutrition, and Developments," *SCN News*, no. 18 (July 1999), 27; World Bank, *Development and Human Rights: The Role of the World Bank*, (Washington DC: World Bank, 1999), 3-4.

⁶ "Integrating Human Rights with Sustainable Development," *UNDP Policy Document 2* (1998), 6.

⁷ See also Katarina Tomasevski, "International Development Finance Agencies," *Economic, Social and Cultural Rights: A Textbook*, eds. Asbjorn Eide, Catarina Krause, and Allan Rosas (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1995), 409.

⁸ Sano, "Development and Human Rights," 744.

⁹ Jack Donnelly, "Human Rights, Democracy and Development," *Human Rights Quarterly* 21, no. 2 (August 1999), 611.

¹⁰ Economic, social and cultural rights.

¹¹ Michael Windfuhr, "Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and Development Cooperation," in *Working Together: The Human Rights Based Approach to Development Cooperation - Report of the NGO Workshop*, eds. Andre Frankovits and Patrick Earle (Stockholm: October 16-19, 2000), 25.

¹² DFDID, *Realizing Human Rights for Poor People* (London: DFID Strategy Paper, 2000), 5; Stella Mukasa and Florence Butegwa, *An Overview of Approaches to Economic and Social Rights in Development in Uganda - Draft report for DANIDA* (Kampala: Nordic Consulting Group, June 2001), 40; Arjun Sengupta, *Study on the Current State of Progress in the Implementation of the Rights to Development*, Commission on Human Rights, 56th sess., July 1999; Arjun Sengupta, "Realizing the Right to Development," *Development and Change*, 31 (2000a), 553-578; Note by the Secretary-General for the 55th session. A/55/306. Aug. 2000b. E/CN.4/1999/WG.18/2.

¹³ World Bank, *Governance and Development* (Washington DC: World Bank, 1992), passim.

¹⁴ HRCA 2001.

¹⁵ World Bank, *Development and Human Rights*, 3.

¹⁶ Craig Scott, "Reaching Beyond (Without Abandoning) the Category of 'Economic, Social and Cultural Rights,'" *Human Rights Quarterly* 21, no. 3 (1999), 635-6.

¹⁷ Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999), 87.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 1; see also UNDP, *Human Development Report 2001* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 19.

¹⁹ Sen, *Development as Freedom*, 147-8.

²⁰ United Nations, *An Agenda for Development: Report of the Secretary-General* (New York: UN, A/48/935, 6 May 1994), par. 120.

²¹ Please note that, in the community of his economist peers, the latter qualifiers—all the ones that follow the words "methodologically and theoretically," in fact—are much less appreciated. As a colleague recently remarked: "Sen couldn't get tenure in any good American economics department on the basis of his famous work."

²² UNDP, *Human Development Report 2001*, 112.

²³ Peter Uvin, *Aiding Violence: The Development Enterprise in Rwanda* (West Hartford: Kumarian Press, 1998).