

# RECONSTRUCTION OF POST-CONFLICT SOCIETIES:

## SOCIAL DYNAMICS, DEMOCRACY, AND INSTITUTION-BUILDING

*Liberal democratic citizens are made, not born.*<sup>1</sup>

**I**N THE AFTERMATH OF CONFLICT, there is fragmentation. Not only are the physical remnants of social and economic order in disarray—roads and bridges destroyed, homes and buildings burned—but, more profoundly, the binding relationships of society and economy are shattered. Reconstruction, a popular buzzword of the international development community during efforts in the Balkans, Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere, was initially considered a relatively formulaic and straightforward process that focused on physical infrastructure, paper legislation, and other symbols of institutional reconstruction. Unfortunately, time and experience seem to reveal a different lesson—socio-economic institutions cannot be built from the top down. A state or society’s formal institutions are mere illusions of reconstruction unless they possess a foundation based on shared principles and concerted decision-making that includes the people they exist to serve.

Successful reconstruction efforts often include a strong element of local and community-based action. Another component of this element is the linkages between individual and group actors in decision-making. To a great extent, these linkages create communication channels, and “ties that bind”—shared principles of decision-making, a common vision of priority issues, and the realization of the practical value of joint action. Reconstruction that includes an emphasis on the process, as much as the product, has shown positive dividends in terms of fostering long-term stability and a successful re-weaving of the social fabric in new and constructive ways.

This article examines concepts of local dialogue and practical cooperation between individual and group actors, and how these processes can become the basis for sustainable and representative

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macro-level institutions that support the successful, long-term social and economic rebuilding of war-torn societies.<sup>2</sup>

### SOCIAL ORDER AND THE “SOCIOSPHERE”

*There is a plurality of virtue . . . [first] the intrinsic importance of political participation and freedom in human life; second, the instrumental importance of political incentives in keeping governments responsible and accountable; and third, the constructive role of democracy in the formation of values and in the understanding of needs, rights and duties.*<sup>3</sup>

Individuals define themselves and others by their relations to social groups and orders. In fact, humans depend on the existence of social order to define their own individuality. “Positioning,” defined through the process of communication and individual identification with certain social categories, creates generalizations and expectations of how individuals within a certain group act within a social stereotype.<sup>4</sup>

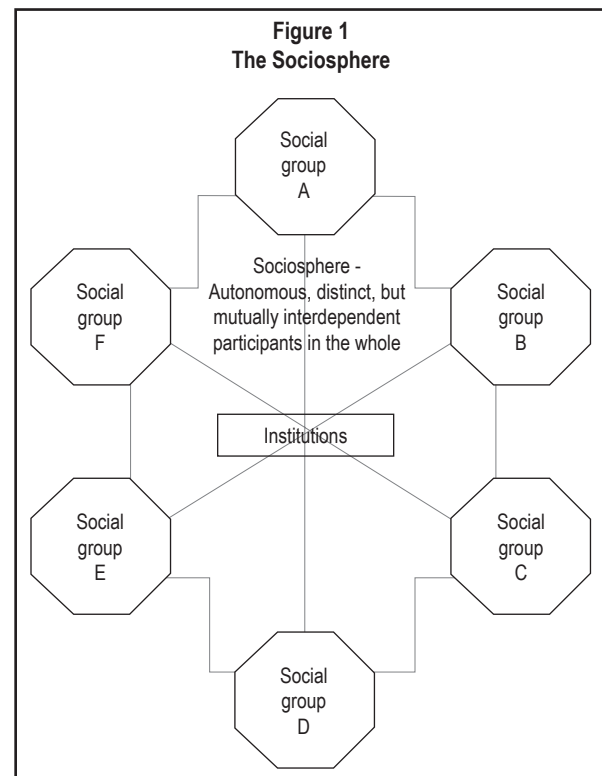
In the pursuit of dominance and control of valued social and economic resources, this positioning manifests through conflict and compromise between individuals and socio-economic groups. In a stable society, institutions and mechanisms exist to channel these conflicts through formalized deliberative systems that facilitate peaceful compromise solutions. However, in societies where these institutions are biased, authoritarian, or otherwise arbitrarily controlled by one group at the expense of another, conflict is likely to be the final product.

What differentiates a stable society from an unstable one is, by and large, the commitment of its citizens to institutions that allow for the peaceful definition, review, and resolution of conflicts between different members of a particular society. At the base of these institutions lay a shared social understanding and commitment to the validity of the role played by the institutions. This represents a recognized channel for communication and resolution between and among participants in a disagreement or conflict. Iris Marion Young, author of *Inclusion and Democracy*, states, “Social structures exist only in the action and interaction of persons; they exist not as states, but as processes.”<sup>5</sup> In other words, stable institutional structures are dependent upon dynamic and continuous interaction between and among the individuals and socio-economic groups who lend validity to the very existence and role of those same institutions.

In a functional society, there is no single socio-economic order. Rather, within virtually every society on earth, there is a complex, dynamic, overlapping, and interlinked web of social and economic groupings based on race, ethnicity, religion, political bias, economic status, trade or economic occupation, or myriad common bonding traits. These traits coalesce into various layers of socio-economic groupings, unified by shared perspectives and understanding of a specific social order and the role and identity of the individual within that order. These shared perspectives are the ties that bind a society together, and are the critical emphasis of any sustainable development effort.

The “sociosphere” model shown in Figure 1 graphically depicts the linkages of diverse socio-economic groups into a unified “society,” or shared social whole.

Any given sociosphere is greater than the sum of its parts by virtue of these dynamic linkages defined by shared participatory processes of dialogue and decision-making. Institutions are then built upon a framework of shared understandings, concepts, and “rules,” which are determined through the constructive give-and-take of conflict and compromise among the diverse social groups and individuals that comprise them. The course of this process of cooperation results in definite and tangible products, including enabling legislation, critical



infrastructure reflecting the needs and wants of key constituencies, functional markets, and responsive social and economic services. In a biological sense, the sociosphere is equivalent to a biosphere in which a complex network of seemingly distinct living organisms are tied together in a dynamic and evolutionary balance. Though conflict exists between individual elements of the biosphere, the whole remains integrally linked and capable of absorbing these conflicts constructively. However, when a critical mass of organisms becomes infected with a malevolent agent, such as cancer, the dynamic becomes dysfunctional and the integrity of the biosphere as a whole is threatened.

Similarly, if a critical mass of socio-economic groups rejects the binding authority of the shared institutions that link them to other groups, the sociosphere is shattered and society is no longer functional. Though national frameworks and “macro-social” institutions may appear to be powerful, without the conviction of a critical mass of localized actors in the sociosphere, the outcome is failure of the institutions of socio-economic governance. The end result is civil conflict and social crisis.

### REBUILDING THE DYNAMICS OF DIALOGUE

The linkages between socio-economic groups in a stable society are defined and managed through an institutional process of dialogue and participative processes. However, in a conflict situation, dialogue is sporadic at best, and the dynamic is focused on a zero-sum game, where one side is the winner and the other is the loser.

The final status agreements in Bosnia resignedly recognized this through creation of the virtually homogenous “Republika Srpska” in Northeastern Bosnia. In Bosnia, the disintegration of the previous social order became irreparable and resulted in a split national entity where before stood a unified national socio-economic structure.<sup>6</sup> However, even after one of the more brutal conflicts of the late 20th century, the pre-conflict linkages were still vital enough to serve as

the foundation for creation of a relatively stable society from the ruins of conflict in the largely Bosniak and Croat “Bosnian Federation.”

A stable society is tenuous, and depends upon a significant degree of willing participation by those individuals and groups within it. To be assured protection from those stronger or more aggressive members in society who might take valued resources from weaker members, all socio-economic groups in the sociosphere enter into a “social contract” that manifests itself in institutional structures to mediate between them. In those cases where a critical mass of

socio-economic groups do not find adequate representation—either real or perceived—in the institutional structures of the sociosphere, a reliance on violent means of expression and dominance may occur.

In the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina, a society that was for centuries one of the most ethnically integrated and cosmopolitan in Europe disintegrated into one of the bloodiest civil wars the Eu-

ropean continent had known for decades. What occurred at the outset of the war, however, was a combination of external pressure from a violently reactive socio-economic group that was not a part of the Bosnian sociosphere proper (the Serbian nationalists in Belgrade, under the leadership of Slobodan Milosevic), but which activated a “rogue” socio-economic group formerly integrated in the Bosnian sociosphere (the Bosnian Serbs under their local warlords). This interaction, and the effect on the previously functional and integrated macro-sociosphere of Bosnian society, is graphically outlined in Figure 2. Though simplified, the net effect was the mobilization of Serbian local communities to break their linkages with Bosnian and Croatian local communities to a degree that achieved critical mass in creating national-level strife and warfare.

Though to outside observers the effect of the resultant breakdown was a national event, in reality it played itself out in a myriad of localized conflicts. This reflects the concept of local dialogue and action in reverse—old personal quarrels and real or perceived slights find an outlet in destructive interaction between individuals and local socio-economic

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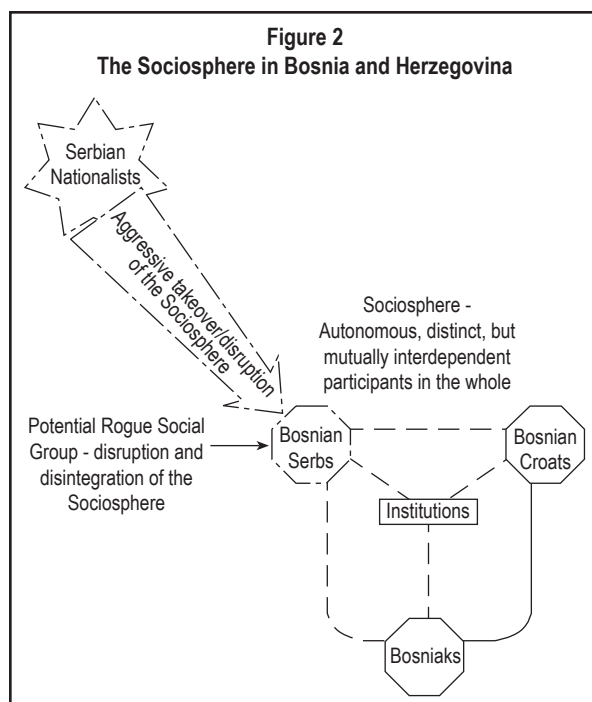
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groupings. This expands outward, resulting in a downward spiral of continually self-reinforcing and exponentially expanding conflict.

For this very reason, “peace-building” requires a concerted, long-term effort focused on a “bottom-up” approach.<sup>7</sup> When former combatants are forced through the attrition of conflict and pressure of external forces to lay down their weapons and turn to the process of reconstruction, there is little to build on by way of trust. In southern Iraq, where an ostensibly homogenous group such as the Shi’ite Muslims exists, local sociospheres are challenged by the existence of foreign Iranians, Baathists, conflicting religious factions, and tribal/political groupings of potentially fractious socio-economic groups within the macro-level Shia sociosphere. To effectively address these divisions, a highly localized and incentive-based approach is the surest way to identify common objectives and to re-establish ties of dialogue and communication.

In their analysis of reconstruction of key institutional structures within civil society, Monica Llamazares and David Crosier observe that “[c]onstruction of civil society can be said to rely upon shared values, social networks, and supportive environments.”<sup>8</sup> This is particularly true when looking at local, rather than national, sociospheres. Building from the basic principles of civil society reconstruction outlined in this statement, the core dynamics of dialogue are as follows:



**a. Value Frameworks.** In the cases of both Bosnia and Iraq, a framework of values existed and continued, even in conflict and post-conflict stages. This was due largely to a shared history, language, and geographic and socio-economic tradition (which paradoxically, sometimes contributes to conflict as well). Following conflict, change must begin at the local level, where relationships are manageable, processes are pragmatic, and outcomes are tangible. Existence of a common frame of reference for socio-economic groups within the sociosphere to work through recent conflict and to reaffirm shared needs and objectives are key to the social reconstruction process.

**b. Platform for Dialogue.** In a post-conflict environment, socio-economic networks are often tenuous at best. Networks that reach across the divide of formerly conflicting socio-economic groups usually do not exist. Thus, one of the first priorities in reconstructing dialogue is creating a platform that provides all members of the sociosphere with a “seat at the table.” Ideally, the vehicle for this process is one that is grounded in some common tradition or model recognizable as valid to all participants. Whether these are formal or informal, based upon local associations or tribal councils, the important element is a common familiarity with the vehicle as an instrument for participatory dialogue and decision-making.

**c. Stabilized Conflict Environment.** This is one of the most difficult requirements for re-creating the dynamic of dialogue, as all too often in post-conflict societies, external forces must be relied upon to stabilize the environment. In Bosnia, this included a reliance on the United Nations Protection Force (UNPROFOR), followed later by the NATO Implementation Force (IFOR), to ensure that former combatants did not resort to violence when the dialogue reached difficult stages of give and take.

The final core dynamic is the most difficult of the three for restoring dynamic dialogue between and among formerly adversarial socio-economic groups. Former Clinton advisor William Galston states in *Liberal Pluralism: The Implications of Value Pluralism for Political Theory and Practice*, “While

pluralists cannot regard social peace and stability as dominant goods in all circumstances, they recognize that these goods typically help create the framework within which the attainment of other goods becomes possible. ... [A]narchy is the enemy of pluralism."<sup>9</sup> Though in certain cases—Iraq and Afghanistan, for example—reconstruction efforts continue during conflict and civil war, it is as yet unclear if these efforts will ultimately succeed.

Once the three elements of dialogue are in place and the foundations laid for constructive interaction between socio-economic groups within the sociosphere, the second step of the socio-economic reconstruction process can begin. This emphasizes the challenge of moving from small, highly localized pockets of cooperation to larger units, creating a "critical mass" for socio-economic reconstruction.

### CRITICAL MASS IN THE SOCIOSPHERE

*Where plural polities are weak or did not exist, they have to be created; confidence between antagonistic groups established . . . market economies kick-started; and civic culture encouraged to take root.<sup>10</sup>*

Concerted action by socio-economic groups engaged in dialogue at the local level can have substantive repercussions in terms of galvanizing reconstruction at other levels of society. In particular, the process of localized reconstruction serves to create a foundation for successful institution building at the regional and national levels. Local action is grounded in shared socio-economic contextual realities that more easily transcend perceived differences and past conflicts. In Bosnia, for example, businesspeople and community members of differing ethnic backgrounds were able to transcend their previous conflicts in pursuit of a common goal of local economic stability and effective municipal government. In Iraq, rather than focus immediately on larger political objectives, different tribes were able to build cooperation through collaborative tribal councils that focused on prioritizing basic needs for community infrastructure to the benefit of all.

Reaching a critical mass for influencing the larger reconstruction agenda has a great deal to do with making change processes relevant to the individual participants in the new sociosphere. It is through the practice of addressing localized concerns—inherently individual, but expressed through the group dynamic—that a sense of "practical democracy" and ownership begins to imbue the reconstruction

of larger socio-economic institutions with real value drawn from active community participation.

Indeed, without the empowerment of local communities to determine their futures, attempts at civil society reconstruction in a post-conflict society are likely to fail.<sup>11</sup> A top-down approach risks entrenching elite interests at the national level, with little accountability to a more diverse and broadly representative constituency.

Once different socio-economic groups begin to take command of their own problem-solving processes through inclusive dialogue and concerted action, critical mass begins to build. Formal institutional structures—such as those of local government—are particularly important in expanding the civil society efforts begun at the local level. However, apolitical associative networks and coordinating consultative bodies may also play a key role, particularly where political processes are still charged with conflict or the need for decisive change is particularly time-sensitive.

This movement from localized socio-economic groups to regional and "national" groups requires a paradigm shift in how the sociosphere model is viewed. Rather than a two-dimensional model, the sociosphere becomes a multi-dimensional intersection of local, regional, and national sociospheres, all bound by crosscutting connections between and among the socio-economic groups from which each level is drawn. For example, a village in central Bosnia may represent a sociosphere, and be composed of both Bosniaks and Croats. However, that village is a component of the larger cantonal and republican sociosphere, as are the Bosniaks and Croats who interact throughout all levels of society. This reflects the fact that, "Everyone relates to a plurality of social groups; every social group has other social groups cutting across it."<sup>12</sup> Thus, a sociosphere can be local, regional, or national, and every level is dependent on and influenced by both preceding and succeeding layers in a continuous, interdependent, and mutually reinforcing dynamic.

Positive critical mass occurs through the coordination of a number of localized sociospheres in the pursuit of common aims and concerns. Concrete examples of this dynamic include regional networks of local business associations and municipal governments formally united to lobby national government for regulatory changes, as occurred in the Central Valley region of the Bosnian Federation, or regional community councils pooling their resources to rebuild a water distribution plant that served multiple communities, as occurred in al-Hillah, in the Upper South of Iraq. The important

dynamics in building the foundation for this critical mass include the following:

- a. **Shared objectives.** The objectives of a concerted action must be of relevance to all those socio-economic groups participating across the local sociospheres. Concrete, short-term outcomes (a loan fund, market road, emergency clinic) must be linked to broader, long-term objectives (improved regional competitiveness, enabling environments, financial services provision) that directly and positively affect the members of all socio-economic groups involved. This ensures that concerted action does not become a “one-off” deal.
- b. **Concrete, visible outcomes.** Rather than emphasize theoretical, macro-level objectives or ideals, concerted action must result in concrete, visible outcomes that can serve as a viable symbol and reminder to all those involved in the mobilizing process of its power.
- c. **Inclusive decision-making.** Though catalyzing, risk-taking local leaders are a critical factor, the overall process cannot be dominated by individual needs and desires, or outside actors. Decision-making must enable the active participation and input of as many affected socio-economic groups and individual actors as possible. Without this, the action loses validity and its strength as a catalyst for change in the critical mass.

Building from the dynamics of local socio-economic group dialogue, local forces can transform into agents of change at a “macro” level. Though established regional and national authorities initially see local socio-economic action as a threat,<sup>13</sup> successful local action, based upon the principles outlined above, has a greater chance of being grounded in a legitimate consensus of key constituencies and more difficult to ignore in the political arena.

## EXTERNAL INFLUENCE AND MORAL HAZARD

*Although it may be relatively easy to create institutional structures, the transformation of these structures into legitimate institutions is extremely difficult, and only marginally affected by external actors.<sup>14</sup>*

A root dilemma of internationally driven reconstruction efforts in post-conflict societies is that external forces can hope to serve only in a catalytic and facilitative role. Anything beyond this risks the creation of an idol to external perceptions, rather than a functional society built upon the ownership and participation of the various socio-economic groups within the affected sociosphere. All too often, external actors take on a prescriptive role that dis-empowers and ultimately alienates the society being addressed.

That said, the catalytic role is key in socio-economic orders that have been ravaged by conflict. Because “anarchy is the enemy of pluralism,”<sup>15</sup> often the role of external actors is enforcing stability so that reconstructive socio-economic processes can begin to occur. In addition, a practical influence in terms of access to resources can provide immediate incentives for reconstitution of the linkages of dialogue and cooperation in a manner that focuses on achieving pragmatic localized objectives, such as building a school or accessing micro-enterprise loan funds through a participative process.

Yet perhaps the most vital role played by external actors, and the most fraught with risk, is that of the neutral arbiter. Conflict creates deep socio-economic rifts, and from these rifts come mistrust and suspicion that is difficult to overcome. Often, socio-economic groups cannot initiate new dialogue and cooperation on their own. The negative conditions caused by years of conflict and mistrust make it impossible for local leaders to bring together different socio-economic groups without an initial “push” in the right direction. Facilitation of the initial steps is the primary role for external influence. Included in this role is an ability to act as mediator of disputes—old and new—that inevitably arise in the process of re-forming socio-economic ties, and an essential commitment to treating all parties fairly, justly, and equitably.

The moral hazard of external intervention comes when the utility of the neutral arbiter role ends. External actors are driven by human considerations too, and if these are not kept in check, the status quo of intervention can create dependencies and neo-colonialist attitudes among external actors and those being served by their presence. The decision as to what shape post-conflict society and socio-sphere will take lies solely on those who comprise it. Prolonged external intervention, however well-intended, re-creates the “invasive” paradigm of the sociosphere model and ultimately undermines the process of successful reconstruction and formation of a civil society structure that is responsive to inter-

nal participants. As Young points out, “Structured social action and interaction often have collective results that no one intends, and which may even be counter to the best intentions of the actors.”<sup>16</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Democracy in its purest form is rooted in the basic human need to have one’s views, perspectives, and needs respected in a fair and equitable fashion. When societies fail and reconstruction efforts begin, too often there is a failure to recognize the importance of practical democratic principles in achieving a sense of local ownership and buy-in for enduring reconstruction objectives. There is no quick fix for reconstructing post-conflict societies. While the physical structures of roads, bridges, courts, banks, municipal buildings, schools, and clinics are easily patched back together, these are merely symbols of institutions, not institutions themselves. The fundamental processes of socio-economic interaction, decision-making, and dialogue require a much more thoughtful engagement. Attention to the basic building blocks of society, and the fundamental human desire for voice, can yield powerful results. Unfortunately, the time, resources, and commitment required is often too much for the frequently politically motivated institutions of the international community to handle.

Though the model for post-conflict reconstruction outlined above is not a panacea, it represents a key paradigm shift, taking development theory out of strategic policy boxes and allowing for more flexible, localized responsiveness. Authentic reconstruction responds to crosscutting community needs and priorities, not theoretical definitions or donor bureaucracy. Rather than externally determining the appropriate solutions to reconstruction problems in advance, a more flexible “demand-driven” approach encourages the development of dynamic dialogue and critical mass driven change from the very roots of a society. Once dialogue between and among participants in a local sociosphere is established, it can then be extended to connect with other localized sociospheres, so that the cumulative effect results in an impact at the “macro level” of society. Through this process, new institutions can be built that rest upon a stable foundation of diversity, accountability, and—perhaps most important—a crosscutting commitment and adherence to the role of those very institutions in society as a whole, even when they support decisions that one or more socio-economic groups may not agree with. When

conflict is relegated to the give-and-take of institutional dialogue, debate, and compromise, a truly stable civil society develops.

In this paper, I have outlined a model for understanding the dynamic connections between socio-economic groups and the institutions that serve them at various levels. I examined the ways internal and external influences can affect these connections in both constructive and destructive ways. The sociosphere concept demonstrates that no socio-economic group can be taken in isolation from others in a society, and any effort at reconstruction must explicitly recognize and address the ties that bind: the linkages of dialogue, incentive, and decision-making between and among the most basic building-blocks of society—the local communities that inform the greater whole.

**LBJ**

## NOTES

1. William A. Galston, *Liberal Pluralism: The Implications of Value Pluralism for Political Theory and Practice* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 15.
2. Particularly, this paper draws from the author’s personal experience and observations on the social dynamics inherent to the Romanian “Integrated NGO and Economic Development Project,” financed by USAID and implemented by CHF International from 1999 to 2003; the Bosnian “Municipal Economic Development Initiative,” financed by USAID, SIDA, and the Royal Netherlands Embassy to Sarajevo and also implemented by CHF International between 2001 and 2004; as well as the USAID “Community Revitalization through Democratic Action” model of socio-economic development, currently being implemented in Serbia, Montenegro, Georgia, Central Asia, and Iraq. Please see Works Cited for additional resources on these projects and their outcomes.
3. Amartya Kumar Sen, “Democracy as a Universal Value,” *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 10, no. 3 (1999), p. 11.
4. Iris Marion Young, *Inclusion and Democracy* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2000 & 2002), p. 100.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 95.
6. Robert J. Donia and John V.A., *Bosnia & Herzegovina: A Tradition Betrayed* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).
7. Monica Llamazares and David Crosier, “The Myth of Civil Society: Approaches to Societal Reconstruction in Southeastern Europe,” *Higher Education in Europe*, vol. XXIV, no. 4 (1999), p. 558.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 554.

9. Galston, p. 65.
10. Mark Duffield, "Social Reconstruction and the Radicalization of Development: Aid as a Relation of Global Liberal Governance," *Development and Change*, vol. 33, no. 5 (2002), p. 1050.
11. Llamazares and Crosier, p. 555.
12. Young, p. 88.
13. Llamazares and Crosier, p. 555.
14. Jennifer Milliken and Keith Krause, "State Failure, State Collapse, and State Reconstruction: Concepts, Lessons and Strategies," *Development and Change*, vol. 33, no. 5 (2002) p. 770.
15. Galston, p. 65.
16. Young, p. 97.

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