

# DAVID C. KORTEN

Author of the bestselling  
WHEN CORPORATIONS RULE THE WORLD

# The Post- Corporate World

LIFE  
AFTER  
CAPITALISM

“A roadmap to a more humane future in which everyone matters.”

—Gloria Steinem

DAVID C. KORTEN

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Corporate  
World

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## What others are saying about *The Post-Corporate World*

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“First, David Korten warned us what was and would become more wrong in *When Corporations Rule the World*. In *The Post-Corporate World* he gives us a road map to a more humane future. For every reader who senses that today’s disasters of inequality, the environment, and consumerist obsessions just can’t go on but finds no hope from experts, David Korten describes a new economic culture in which everyone matters.”

—Gloria Steinem

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“*The Post-Corporate World* does for our view of corporatism what Betty Friedan did for our view of women and Rachel Carson did for our view of the environment. It is passionately and gracefully written and takes our obsession for goods and growth and turns it on itself. It will twist your mind about the world and how you are living in it. Read this book.”

—Peter Block, author of *Stewardship* and *The Empowered Manager*

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“If you secretly wonder why the hyped promise of capitalism doesn’t match the all too common and difficult struggle to make ends meet, you will be fascinated by this account of where our economy went wrong and how we can change. A stunning, illuminating, and extremely important book.”

—Vicki Robin, coauthor of *Your Money or Your Life*

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“The turmoil in the financial markets in 1998 has shown us that the globalization process needs to take much more into account the social dimension and the real interests of people. David Korten’s new book is a refreshing signpost for the future.”

—Klaus Schwab, President, World Economic Forum, Geneva

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“An earthshaking book—a product of brilliant thinking from one of history’s most groundbreaking intellectuals and activists. Korten’s clarity and uncompromising integrity come through on every page and empower the reader to take a new stand for a world that is sustainable, responsible, and steeped in the principles of relationship, community, and consciousness.”

—Lynne Twist, Co-chair, State of the World Forum

“If you want to understand what is really happening in the world, read David Korten. *The Post-Corporate World* points to what must come next if human beings and other creatures are to have a livable future.”

—**John B. Cobb, Jr.**, Professor Emeritus of Religion, Claremont Graduate School, and coauthor of *For the Common Good*

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“A breakthrough contribution to an essential rethinking of the human purpose and our institutions. One of the most important books of this century.”

—**Dr. Robert Muller**, Chancellor, University for Peace, Costa Rica, and Former Assistant Secretary General of the United Nations

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“A practical, yet ennobling vision of the future of our economy, a future that is worthy of the best of our hopes and dreams. You can have no more compassionate and humane guide to the future of a humane economy.”

—**Paul Ray**, author of *The Integral Culture Survey* and *The Cultural Creatives*

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“Chilling and inspiring! From Adam Smith to Planetary Consciousness, David Korten provides a comprehensive, intelligent analysis of the economic forces and assumptions that have shaped our past, and the necessary choices we need to alter the course of our future.”

—**Alisa Gravitz**, Executive Director, Co-op America

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“Re-establishes connects that embed us in the real world and lift our spirits with a new vision of human and natural communities.”

—**David Suzuki**, author of *The Sacred Balance*

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“Korten’s central message is loud and clear, hard-hitting, eminently readable, provocative, and important!”

—**Gar Alperovitz**, President, The National Center for Economic and Security Alternatives

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“An important and inspiring contribution to a world badly in need of a new story.”

—**Carl Frankel**, author of *In Earth’s Company*

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“Shows that business, jobs, production, and finance can serve life, community, ecological vitality, and soul-satisfying ways of life, rather than economic growth at all costs. This may be among the most important books of the late 20th century.”

—**Sarah Van Gelder**, Executive Editor, *Yes! A Journal of Positive Futures*

*“The Post-Corporate World makes me wrestle with my own preconceptions—philosophically, economically, and as a political activist—and helps me rethink my own foundations as a social critic. Not many books offer me this kind of challenge.”*

—**Charles Derber**, author of *Corporation Nation* and *The Wilding of America*

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*“David Korten, amongst a few prescient others, predicted the collapse that was set in motion in Asia and is now spreading worldwide. Here Korten once again looks ahead, envisioning the rudiments and principles of an economy that is guided by life rather than currency. An articulate and hopeful expression by one of the leading architects for a positive future.”*

—**Paul Hawken**, author of *The Ecology of Commerce*

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*“Exciting, illuminating, hopeful, and breathtaking in its scope! Goes to the roots of our global crises and show the way forward.”*

—**Jakob Von Uexkull**, Founder and Chairman, The Right Livelihood Award

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*“With incisive strokes of the pen, Korten demolishes the myths about capitalism and globalization as sources of human betterment. But the real achievement of this extraordinary book is the resurrection of the true Adam Smith. The reader will be refreshed by Korten’s deliberative optimism grounded in a thorough understanding of the human condition and the liberating possibility of mindful choice.”*

—**Elise Boulding**, Professor Emerita of Sociology, Dartmouth College

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*“A visionary blueprint for putting life in all its forms at the center of human endeavors.”*

—**Jean-Bertrand Aristide**, former president of Haiti

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*“Not everyone will agree with Korten’s answers, but everyone will be enriched by considering his questions.”*

—**Denis Hayes**, Chair and CEO, Earth Day 2000

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*Provides a powerful input for the renewal of political debates, in particular in the North. Let us hope it will generate the intense and constructive discussions it deserves.”*

—**Roberto Savio**, Secretary General, Society for International Development

“Korten offers hope, from within.”

—**Jim Hightower**, Hightower Radio

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“All those haunted to the point of despair by the prevalent TINA philosophy (There is No Alternative), will derive renewed force and optimism from this visionary work.”

—**Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan**, former UN High Commissioner for Refugees

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“Capitalism must evolve, and here is the way.”

—**Godric Bader**, President, Scott Bader Company Limited, U.K.

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“Korten reminds me of a biblical prophet; first raging against injustice with a great heart, then leading us to the newest intellectual territory and finally giving us a map to travel the future in a wiser way with renewed hope.”

—**John S. Adams**, Certified Financial Planner

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“An explosive and insightful vision of a viable future.”

—**Marc Lindenberg**, Dean, Graduate School of Public Affairs,  
University of Washington

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“A watershed book. Combining economic analysis with a view of reality that summons our deepest spirituality, it is an intellectual and moral event of the first order.”

—**Joanna Macy**, author of *Coming Back to Life*  
and *World as Lover, World as Self*

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“With globalization floundering everywhere, *The Post-Corporate World* shifts our priorities back from fictitious money to the real issues of living and dying.”

—**Vandana Shiva**, Third World Network, and author of *Biopiracy*

*To two leading-edge thinkers from the field of biology,  
Mae-Wan Ho and Elisabet Sahtouris,  
whose pioneering work on living systems inspired this book*

*To Thomas Berry,  
who drew me to the search for a new story*

*and*

*To my friends and colleagues of the Positive Futures Network,  
who are helping the new storytellers recognize themselves,  
find one another, and share what they are learning of the possibilities ahead.*



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If you wish to keep in contact with the kind of work and thinking that is moving us toward a post-corporate world, I urge you to subscribe to *YES! A Journal of Positive Futures*, published by the Positive Futures Network (PFN), P.O. Box 10818, Bainbridge Island, Washington 98110. I am a cofounder and chair the board of directors. For information call (800) 937-4451 or (206) 842-0216; fax (206) 842-5208, or visit the *YES!* Web site at

[www.futurenet.org](http://www.futurenet.org). The Positive Futures Network is dedicated to creating awareness of the forces behind the positive cultural and institutional changes described here and to helping those engaged in creating a positive future find one another and meld their efforts into an effective transformative social movement.

The views expressed in this book are mine alone and do not necessarily represent those of the PCDForum and its contributors or those of the Positive Futures Network.

David C. Korten  
Bainbridge Island  
December 1998

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# Prologue: A Story for the Third Millennium

*Because of the interconnectedness of all minds, affirming a positive vision may be about the most sophisticated action any one of us can take.*

—WILLIS HARMAN<sup>1</sup>

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IN THE 1980S capitalism triumphed over communism. In the 1990s it triumphed over democracy and the market economy. For those of us who grew up believing that capitalism is the foundation of democracy and market freedom, it has been a rude awakening to realize that under capitalism, democracy is for sale to the highest bidder and the market is centrally planned by global megacorporations larger than most states.

My previous book, *When Corporations Rule the World*, shared insights from my personal awakening to the realities of a world ruled by financial speculators and big business. Since its publication in September 1995, the troubling trends it described have steadily worsened. Mergers and acquisitions have continued to concentrate corporate power. Our political system is even more beholden to corporate money. Negotiators press ahead to complete new international trade and investment agreements that further strengthen corporate rights at the expense of human rights. Growth in the gap between the very rich and the rest of humanity

has accelerated. The global financial system is now so unstable that even the speculators who create and profit from the instability are sounding warnings. Institutional legitimacy has further declined. Unsustainable demands on the environment have increased. And the social fabric has further eroded.

*The Post-Corporate World* takes the growing threat of social and environmental collapse driven by the excesses of an economic system that is blind to human need as its point of departure. In contrast with *When Corporations Rule the World*, however, it focuses less on the dysfunctions of the new global capitalism and more on the nature and form of democratic, market-based alternatives. It is written to challenge the story that has become the daily mantra of public discourse, a story that goes something like this:

Like it or not—with the death of socialism—the forces of economic globalization and the new global capitalism are immutable and irreversible. There is no alternative. We must deepen our commitment to consumerism, free trade, and economic growth even as we endure the current trials of capitalism’s creative destruction. In the end we will be rewarded with universal peace and prosperity. In the meantime, those who would survive and prosper must learn to win in the global economy’s relentless and unforgiving competition.

For those of us who believe there is more to life than making money and shopping in megamalls for products we didn’t know we needed until we saw them advertised on television, this story is a demeaning and dehumanizing counsel of despair and resignation that stirs resistance deep in the core of our being. Yet given the power and seeming support enjoyed by the institutions involved, capitalism’s message of inevitability—if not its promise of universal freedom and prosperity—seems all too credible. Too often, those of us who long for alternatives feel powerless and alone. In fact, however, we are not alone. There are hundreds of millions of us—possibly billions—a part of the evidence I see that our species is in the midst of a profound awakening to a new appreciation of what it means to be truly human.

Indeed, millions of people, unsung heroes of a new era, are already hard at work constructing the building blocks of a post-corporate–post-capitalist civilization. They are demonstrating alternatives far more

attractive and viable than socialism or the failed economic models of the former Soviet Union. The most promising alternatives center on applying the familiar principles of democratic governance and market economics to create societies that function in service to life and treat money as a facilitator, not the purpose, of our economic lives.

These determined pioneers are creating new political parties and movements, strengthening their communities, deepening their spiritual practice, discovering the joyous liberation of voluntary simplicity, building networks of locally rooted businesses, certifying socially and environmentally responsible products, restoring forests and watersheds, promoting public transportation and defining urban growth boundaries, serving as peacemakers between hostile groups, advancing organic agriculture, practicing holistic health, directing their investments to socially responsible businesses, organizing recycling campaigns, and demanding that trade agreements protect the rights of people and the environment.

They are present in every country. They come from every race, class, religion, and ethnic group. They include landless and illiterate peasants but also corporate executives; they include union members, shareholders, ranchers, teachers, housewives, small-business owners, farmers, local government officials, inner-city kids, loggers, wealthy intellectuals, and reformed gang leaders. The majority are women. Fed up with the failures of elitist leadership and distant bureaucracies, they are demonstrating the powerful potential of truly democratic forms of leadership in which people take direct responsibility for the health and well-being of themselves, their families, their communities, and the planet.

They are demonstrating through action that the mantra's message of inevitability is as false as its promise of universal freedom and prosperity. They—we—are creating a new story of the human and planetary future.

## Stories

When I was a graduate student, I came across a remarkable book called *The Imager*, by Kenneth Boulding. Boulding's thesis was simple but profound. We each organize our knowledge into a personal image of the world, which serves as a kind of map in guiding our behavior. To understand behavior, understand the image. *To change behavior, change the image.* It is an idea that deeply influenced my subsequent thinking about the processes of institutional change.



Most of the information we receive leaves our image of reality unaffected, which means the information conveys no new meaning. Or the information may alter the image in some way that does not change its basic structure. There are, however, times when new information reconstitutes our image of the world—and consequently our behavior. Changing the image shared by a culture can change its collective behavior and thereby create a new cultural reality.

Our deepest images are often best expressed as the stories on which we rely to give context and meaning to our lives. My own experience is a testimony to the fundamental change a new story can bring to the direction of an individual life. In 1959, I was completing my senior year of college. My political values were conservative and I was preparing to return to the town of my birth to succeed my father, as he had succeeded his father, as the head of our family business selling musical instruments and kitchen appliances. Aside from a journey of a few days in Canada and a border crossing of a few hours into Mexico with my parents as a child, I had never ventured outside the United States. Nor did I see much point to foreign travel, since within my limited worldview most everything of value or interest was to be found right here, in the good old United States of America.

Then for reasons I do not even recall—perhaps related to my concern that communism posed a threat to the American way of life—I chanced to take a course on modern revolutions from history professor Robert North. I became immersed in a simple, widely shared story that changed my life in a most dramatic way. The story, which you might call the classic American development story of the cold war era, went like this:

Our world is divided into a small group of highly developed Western industrial countries and a much larger group of countries whose people are deprived of the benefits of development due to a lack of capital and technical and managerial skills. Their resulting poverty makes them easy targets for the false promises of communist revolutionaries. For reasons of self-interest, as well as humanitarianism, we must reach out to bring the benefits of American society to the poor countries of the world by providing them with the capital and expertise needed to spur their economic growth.

One fateful night I called my family in Longview, Washington, and informed them that I would not be returning to take my place in the family