

“Do Social Innovators Produce Social Change?”

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Summary

Very often social innovators do not produce social change – or they do not produce social change enough. There are other things they do produce, like efficiency improvements. If social change is the goal, what do we want from social change, why do we want it, and what do we mean by it? Conventional definitions of social change emphasize shifts in basic rights (e.g. Civil Rights Movement), institutions, and attitudes – the so-called “tectonics of society.”

Social movements often provide the mechanism for producing social change by pressing claims from outside of government and creating a groundswell of support. Their success is contingent upon opportunity structure for change, resources that can be mobilized, and timing. The trajectory of change is from outside the state with a focus on the state; changing broadly not just the way civil society operates or the way society thinks, but making fundamental changes using government as an instrument.

Cultural innovations – everyday practices and things that people take to be normal – are not considered as much by academics in policy and planning schools. Migrants and newcomers to a place bring new practices and habits that drive change. For example, German in-migration is, at least in part, responsible for shifting the mainstream American culture from one characterized by religious adherence and intolerance to leisure. The cultural innovation trajectory, which takes hold from adoption at the individual or household level via popular culture, is quite different from social movement-induced change – particularly in regards to the role of the state. Cultural change is also particularly difficult to control.

Much of social innovation and the focus of social innovators is creative coping rather than social change. Coping is not a bad thing; it plays an important role in both society and personal lives. But it is not enough and we can do better.

What is labeled social innovation or what counts as social innovation? It is often conceived as a particular kind of entrepreneurship (e.g. nonprofit start-ups, double or triple bottom line /social impact businesses). This narrowness can engender blind spots.

Howard Stevenson offers a useful definition of entrepreneurship: “entrepreneurship is the pursuit of opportunity beyond resources currently controlled.” Entrepreneurship plays an important function because it is about calculated risk-taking that leads to growth, but entrepreneurship is not intrinsically aligned with innovation or social change. Despite veneration by American politicians, entrepreneurship often begins and stays small. A discussion of how you get to growth – often gets left out.

Conceptions of innovation and entrepreneurship are highly linked in both business and social sector. As a result, the social innovation discourse gets hijacked by the public imaginary around technology start-ups. If we want real social change but our phrasing has been so captured or circumscribed by the entrepreneurship conversation, then it is not obvious what the boundaries of social innovation ought to be.

In practice, we have often looked to creators of new products/services that have had social impact when we describe social innovation or innovators. For example, there was a fascination in late-1990s with

social capital, a global phenomenon thought about as a cure-all for social ills (e.g. micro-lending and peer-group support model of Grameen Bank). There is a heavy concentration of product/service-based innovation in education (e.g. Teach for America), networked-based violence prevention (Operation Ceasefire), child and youth programs, and to a lesser extent in financial services and public safety.

In fields linked to community development—neighborhood revitalization, creating opportunity, equitable urban change—there has been a heavy concentration in education, child and youth programming and to a lesser extent in financial services and public safety. As useful as this is, it is limited; a modest part of how we should be thinking and promoting social innovation.

We are very often describing social innovators as people who are crafting and incubating excellent public services. Some are indeed excellent, while many are not. In theory, ones that are not should fall by wayside. Some scale, while many do not, particularly without overwhelming force or powerful political backers. These products or programs commonly are ones whose impact can be measured in standard ways – financial performance, violence reduction.

We have relied upon business school models of social innovation – which emphasize the association between innovation, entrepreneurship, growth, and measurement of impact – to refine, improve, scale, and ensure greater impact. The virtue of this is that the model’s relentless emphasis about one’s value proposition, impact strategy, performance, as well as, concern about details and logistics.

There are two problems with this perspective. First, business school hegemony obscures other mechanisms and strategies for change and leads to certain amount of diversion of intellectual energy, public attention, dollars and talent into a narrow model of social innovation and reference points. When people identify social innovator as a career goal, they do not seriously consider careers in government, lack a theory of politics, and subscribe to a naive belief they can accomplish goals without politics. Social innovators commonly subscribe to a “demonstration theory of social change” akin to “if you build it, they will come.” This is detached from the realities of public policy and management in this country.

Secondly, the business school approach generates hefty incentives for overselling the true scope of transformative impact and promotes a culture of marketing. In advancing transformative social impact, it is critical to consider the difference between a local maximum and global maximum. Are you on the highest hill in the neighborhood or Mt. Whitney? We need to know when we are investing at lot of time and talent in things that are at the 13’ level rather than shifting the tectonics of society.

Comprehensive community initiatives risk being local foothills that do not go beyond local reference points. And despite their rigor, the results are modest. We continue to face astounding economic inequality and profound citizen distrust and disengagement from government and politics, even as we got better at incubating excellent programs, products and services.

There is another chasm or schism in the field as it concerns the public sector. The innovation-in-government side of story, fueled in part by the Ford Foundation efforts in 1990s to create a competitive program to document and celebrate innovators in government, operates as a conversation separate and apart from the nonprofit start-up world of social entrepreneurship. It need not be so. Recent efforts by President Obama – including the establishment of the White House Office of Social Innovation and Civic Participation – focus on grassroots activity, non-profit startups, and service innovators. Service in our country is not yet a truly transformative force on a large scale, though it could be.

Social innovation can have a more significant and sustained impact by embracing policy entrepreneurship, considering the incentives of public officials, and understanding how policy design and policy implementation can promote efforts at scaling.

We could adopt a broader and much more strategic paradigm for thinking about social innovation. Reverse engineering – working backward from desired changes to identify multiple mechanisms– is a promising approach. University-based centers can be intellectual hubs for creative thought, which can broaden the lens, pursue more than one model for impact, and advance a broader, more strategic paradigm or framework for thinking about social innovation.

A four-part framework. One type of innovation is institutional innovation, innovations that change rules and roles. Examples include: 1) community benefits agreements, which change norms of how development on large scale happens; 2) competitive government grant making (e.g. Department of Education's Race to the Top), which induces public agencies and programs to enact a set of tough, contentious reforms in order to compete for substantial money to finance transformative change—even the losers benefit from the reforms; and 3) value capture (e.g. Columbian cities), in which the public sector invests in public space that produces private benefits and captures some of the upside through codified finance arrangements. Other areas of emphasis for intellectual centers should be: programmatic innovation – new practices in form of service or product (e.g. TFA, First Accounts model for small checking accounts); and physical/technological innovation – engineering and strategically pursuing opportunities for those at the bottom of the pyramid (e.g. smart energy meters, green roofs, solar cookers).

Cultural innovation, which involves establishing a new norm in society in a manner distinct from the traditional regulatory approach, is a particularly important avenue to pursue – especially in Los Angeles. Examples include Oprah's reinvention of daytime talk show. One powerful example is the adoption of the designated driver practice, which emerged from a collaboration between a public health school and Hollywood screenwriters. We need many things that are not the province of other types of innovation. Other areas ripe for cultural innovation are making STEM fields really compelling for kids from disadvantaged backgrounds and universalizing the idea of parents as first educators—not blaming people for not having certain practices but making everyone invested in learning even before pre-school.

Under what conditions would social innovators more broadly defined actually produce useful social change? We need to be open to a trajectory or pathway of change (e.g. community policing emerged from conversations amongst practitioners in policing, criminologists, and thoughtful observers). It is also necessary to spot openings for broader institutional shifts (multipliers, mimicry, broader testing of possibly transformative ideas, e.g. Race to the Top). It is important to combine intellectual curiosity with a practicability about the kinds of fields and moments that allow for transformative institutional innovation. Finally, it is where we build out systems and career paths for systems of innovation in the public sector. We need to engage the public, philanthropy, public support, and intellectual energy about the looming civil service shortage. How to retain young talent—that is intrigued and compelled by social innovation—but does not see a connection to the public sector, is another critical step. It is necessary to reinvent what we have been calling “managing for public trust” from a compliance to a creativity orientation. Bureaucrats are so fixated on minimizing “waste, fraud and abuse” and avoiding Congressional criticism that government has been paralyzed from a diminished propensity for risk-taking. We need to create a 21st-century risk management. If there is no risk, there is no reward.

Teaching the breadth of avenues for achieving social change, not just the business model, is no small contribution for universities. There are few courses that exist that take this broader view. But university-based centers can play other important roles. These centers can be effective intermediaries that go beyond instructional or applied research role; they can broker public problem-solving, civic capacity, and governance at local levels. The importance of neutral conveners, importance of people who work with data and know how to enrich a conversation, of personal relationships—faculty and staff who run initiatives who are trusted by players on the local scene and their ability to broker conversations and get something novel rolling, should not be overlooked. Centers can also be intentional in rolling against tide – placing bets and asking broader questions, like the university-convened process leading to the notion of community policing.