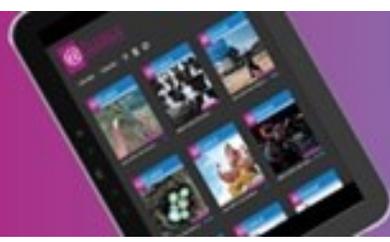


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# Foundations' overreliance on management may obscure social justice goals



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**The conversation that defines civil society is unique to each country, to the role of the state, to the role of the family and community, and to the role of the market. In North America we tend to mute this conversation and focus instead on our managerial style of inputs, outputs and outcomes. We manage social issues, and we wonder why social issues manage to continue. We discuss the strategies, the organizations, and the rules.**

In examining the social contract, we see the interplay between the protection of civil society and the fair management of its institutions to allow for the social cohesion and economic sustainability of communities. The complicated work of social change can fit tidily neither into a box nor a sector. However, by devising a non-profit sector to carry the bulk of this work, North America has created a scapegoat – a sector that can be blamed when social justice attempts fail.

Stanford Social Innovation Review recently ran an article asking ‘[are non-profits getting in the way of social change?](#)’ Through quotes from private foundations, Paul Klein asserted that these funders crave more innovative solutions and more rigorous approaches. The foundations, he said, also would like to see proof of impact, leading to a conclusion that non-profits are losing their monopoly on social change. To read an article where foundations were wagging their fingers to say ‘not good enough’ shows us how little we consider the type of civil society that we have built. Dare we ask about their complicity in building a non-profit sector that now they do not seem to enjoy?

Is our narrative today simply a rehashing of the core tension of American social change: private initiative versus public good? For Benjamin Franklin, the role of public associations created an opportunity to bridge the world of private and public. Increasingly, as public associations took shape, the question arose as to whether private interests, as supported by the Federalists, could serve the public good in the same way supporters of the third U.S. president, Thomas Jefferson, believed that democratically elected government could. Eighteenth century French historian Alexis de Tocqueville insightfully captured the essence of this tension in American civil society, asking the question: “But up to what extent can the two principles of individual well-being and the general good in fact be merged? ...This is something with only the future will show.”

What if we decided, as the SSIR article asks, that non-profits **are** getting in the way of social change? How might foundations approach the inextricable social problems they cite? In the Arab world 50 per cent of the population is less than 25 years old and 29 per cent of 16 – 29 year olds are unemployed. There is a lack of skills for private sector employment in the region, leading to 60 per cent of the population being foreign workers. These unemployed youth are threatened with losing out on economic opportunities and lifetime earnings. They also may prove conduits of political instability. While foundations might have considered their roles as catalysts of job creation and entrepreneurship in Arab countries, they face the absence of a non-profit sector in which to work, a reverse of the North American context. To whom do foundations turn to in these situations? How do we seek to effect social change? Do we import pay-for-performance, exit strategies, and commercialization for social good?

Simply asking those questions, with an ingrained sense of their possibility, speaks to our immense power and privilege as institutions. Importing North American innovations or best practices into these situations inadvertently applies a North American assumption of civil society into these contexts. Rather than finger pointing about ineptitudes, we might spend more time in dialogue on the ‘private initiative and public good’ nature of North American social change. For foundations, we should aspire to invigorate the discourse of civil society, to challenge our assumptions, rather than attempting to over-manage social change; deluding ourselves in thinking we have control. As John McKnight aptly shares in *The Careless Society*,

‘There are incredible possibilities if we are willing to fail to be gods.’ We are privileged to have a choice.

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