

The Problem of Philanthropy for Civic Renewal

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When the capacity to define the problem becomes a professional prerogative, citizens no longer exist. The prerogative removes the citizen as problem-definer, much less problem-solver. It translates political functions into technical and technological problems.

—John McKnight, “Professionalized Service and Disabling Help”

It might seem particularly churlish of me to suggest – in the very midst of its inaugural festivities – that the launching of a new philanthropic affinity group devoted to citizenship might be anything other than an unmixed blessing for the Republic. But it has to be said: the record of philanthropy has not been good with respect to the cultivation of citizenship. Indeed, there is a deep theoretical and historical tension between 20th century American philanthropy and citizenship, reflecting what Ivan Illich describes as “the disabling of the citizen through professional dominance.” Whether Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement is a blessing for the Republic depends critically on the self-consciousness it brings to this irony: the Framers of the Republic would have expected the cultivation of active citizenship to be the first object of civil society’s philanthropy. Yet whenever modern “scientific philanthropy” has systematically deployed its resources over the past one hundred years, the retreat of citizenship has often been not just a side-effect, *but in fact an intended result.*

As foundations now turn their serious attention to a crisis in citizenship that they in part precipitated, will they be genuinely helpful, or will they simply resort to the same civically toxic professional technologies upon which they’ve always relied, disabling citizenship further even as it purports to resuscitate it?

PHILANTHROPY & AMERICAN DEMOCRACY

The American Founders would have been appalled to find philanthropy at odds with citizenship, because they considered such institutions of civil society to be essential to the success of American self-governance. For our constitutional framers left their work, in a decisive sense, incomplete. They erected the constitutional framework for a large, commercial republic, not only to generate prosperity, but also to cultivate certain civic habits and practices within the new democracy. A people engaged in commerce, the Founders understood, would be too sensible and moderate – too busy – to succumb to the political passions that had torn apart all previous democracies. But as the Founders knew, and as Alexis de Tocqueville reminded us, commerce, while salutary against zealotry, also brings with it the danger of individualist isolation – an absorption in narrow, materialistic interests to the exclusion of citizenly, moral, and spiritual concerns. Radically self-absorbed individuals all too readily turn their affairs over to governing elites, who happily meet the material needs of the population, so long as their managerial prerogatives are not challenged. Democracy’s proud self-governance might yield to what Tocqueville described as a soft, narcotized tyranny.

Yet the Founders and Tocqueville were sanguine about America's ability to avoid this. For beyond and beneath our constitutional superstructure lay a vast multiplicity of local communities, townships, religious institutions, neighborhoods, fraternal and sororal orders, and voluntary associations. These small, local associations molded individuals into citizens, calling them out of their private, commercial interests into larger, public concerns, and immersing them in moral and spiritual communities that lifted their vision beyond mere material gain. Citizens thus taught to be vigilant, vigorous, and personally responsible were unlikely to succumb to egoistic isolation and materialism – to become merely passive, self-indulgent clients of elites. The Founders were so confident of the durability of this undergirding of local civic and moral agencies (and so averse to nationalized “soulcraft”) that they left that part of the constitutional design unspoken, unwritten, incomplete.

Completing this important part of the Founders' project is today largely in the hands of America's foundations and nonprofits – the modern descendants of Tocqueville's voluntary associations. But foundations, especially the larger and more sophisticated, often turn up their noses at the suggestion that one of their primary responsibilities is to fund local civic associations. This is a residue of philanthropy's romance with early 20th century progressivism. Our first large foundations – Carnegie, Rockefeller, and Russell Sage – arose at the same time as and were heavily influenced by that immensely influential reform movement. Progressivism's intellectuals dismissed America's small, local civic associations as petty, parochial, superstitious, and outdated relics of the past. At any rate, civic associations were considered doomed by vast, community-shattering social forces like urbanization and industrialization. Happily, new social sciences like economics, sociology, psychology, and political science had emerged, capable of analyzing and understanding distant, overweening social forces. Political salvation lay in transferring authority away from the chaotic jumble of local communities, and centralizing it in the hands of rationalist, professional elites credentialed in the new sciences of society.

The 20th century's new, “scientific” philanthropy understood itself to be very much in progressivism's *avant garde*. Millions of dollars were devoted to upgrading the professionalism and technological sophistication of law, medicine, social work, and higher education, displacing bumbling amateurs with skilled experts. Likewise within politics, the major new foundations aimed to displace amateur with expert, underwriting the development and public policy application of the social sciences through support for research universities, policy research institutions, and the development of scholarly associations. Now philanthropy famously promised to get at the *root causes* of problems by scientifically tracing them back to the hidden but potent forces producing them. By contrast, Tocqueville's paltry local associations had only been able to cope with the *effects* of such causes through feeble “charity.”

These developments have brought us to today's moment of peril for American democracy. Our culture today is full of the disabling message that the expert knows better than the citizen. Just as it would no longer occur to most Americans to rely on wise elders or our own reasoned judgments in medical or legal matters, so many of us have come to believe that public life as well is best left to experts. The chief exception to this is voting, of course, but that's only to bestow legitimacy on one or another set of professionally designed, technical solutions to policy problems. The notion that Americans might still govern themselves within small, decentralized associations is dismissed as a wistful, “neo-Tocquevillian” anachronism, long since consigned to the dustbin of history by rationalist, bureaucratic, expert-driven centralism. Meanwhile, of course, popular culture, amplified by the marketplace, beckons Americans toward materialistic self-indulgence and privatized pleasures, insuring further that our professional elites have the public sphere to themselves. For all his quaint, archaic irrelevance, Tocqueville's fear of a gentle slide into soft despotism seems remarkably prescient.

THE PROBLEM OF PHILANTHROPY FOR CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Philanthropy did nothing to prevent this, and much to promote it. So before we can employ philanthropy to tackle the problem of civic engagement, we need to tackle the problem of philanthropy *for* civic engagement. What is needed, in Illich's words, is a "skeptical and nondeferential posture of the citizen toward the professional expert" within the work of philanthropy itself. But that would mean a dramatic change in the most deep-seated habits of American foundations.

Consider how thoroughly philanthropic work is bound up with the technologies of professional expertise. When a foundation wishes to take on a new problem, its first step is to collect all the latest social science data describing it. It then scans the scholarly literature and consults with other foundation experts in search of the latest experimental models for attacking the problem (*avant garde* foundations don't "do" established or proven – only innovative and cutting edge.) Next, a request for proposals is issued, which elicits pledges from various nonprofits – typically the largest, most sophisticated, and most professionally managed – that they will faithfully execute the program as described in the foundation's specs. Given current foundation fads, the winning nonprofits will probably be deluged by expert assistance with internal management improvements, or "capacity building." Even before the formal program evaluations are completed by yet another crew of professionals, the foundation's public relations experts will have included in the glossy annual report a paean to its innovative initiative, pointedly suggesting that public officials will no doubt soon be eager to redesign public policy accordingly. Other than the initiative's "community in-put" phase – in which a thin crowd of likely "clients" drowse through a power-point briefing on the program that will soon be "put in" to their community – there's not a citizen in sight.

Sadly, even when the focus is on civic engagement itself, professionals have subtle ways of insuring that *their* understanding of engagement crowds out that of an everyday citizen. Citizens coming together sporadically to clean up the neighborhood is all very nice, according to philanthropists, and it might have satisfied Tocqueville. It doesn't, however, reflect a thorough understanding of the social forces that made the neighborhood unclean and unsafe in the first place, and so it doesn't lead to sustained civic mobilization challenging those forces. In other words, everyday citizens just interested in clean-ups don't understand civic problems as deeply as the root-causes professionals at foundation headquarters do. But the foundation will fund only the sort of activism that reflects its own level of political enlightenment. If it does take a chance on a less sophisticated amateur citizen group, it's only on condition that the group agrees to submit to various consciousness-raising exercises, including visits from or seminars with more knowledgeable consultants.

Foundations bring other biases to the funding of community associations that have little to do with their effectiveness as civic mobilizers. For all the new foundation interest in religious groups as civic activists, for instance, those groups limited to a single religious persuasion – especially if that persuasion is heavy on the Holy Spirit and light on existential theological pondering – typically need not apply. They are urged to put aside their sectarian zeal (even though that may be precisely what motivates civic engagement in the first place) and join together in an interfaith alliance, where parochial religious ardor is soon submerged in the professional staff's calm, dispassionate analysis of the true, secular, scientific causes of suffering. Indeed, foundations often understand civic engagement in essence to mean lassoing groups reflecting a diverse range of classes, ethnicities, and faiths into a Collaborative Community Consortium. Therein, all the rough, particularist edges are smoothed out through a painstaking process of facilitated deliberation more at home in a university faculty meeting than a corner barbershop. Difficult, indeed, is it to escape progressivism's preference for professionalism over petty, parochial community.

Much of the concern about the decline of civic engagement today, I suspect, is really disappointment that so many citizen groups in America are unable to meet professionalism's rather exacting standards of ideological maturity, analytical insight, diversity, and magnanimity – that they seem to generate so much more bonding than bridging social capital, in Robert Putnam's terms. But that concern is more accurately directed toward the very character of the American regime. For just as the Founders and Tocqueville hoped that civic engagement would gently tug citizens upward against the gravitational force of privatized commercialism, so they counted on individualism and commerce to ballast citizens against being carried away by the abstract, complex, Jacobin political enthusiasms that had historically been the undoing of popular government. Engagement with local issues of obvious immediate interest – we need to fix this street, close down that drug house, protect this park – such was to be the norm for politics in a commercial republic. But as a way of securing a moderate, sober public life that did not tear itself to pieces in ideological civil war – such was good, indeed.

Foundations are, of course, free to fund whatever sort of civic engagement they find most congenial to their own refined sensibilities. But when their funding is so overwhelmingly of the sophisticated collaborative sort, it tends to send the message that theirs is the only legitimate form of engagement. Mainstream philanthropy thus winds up telling everyday citizens – once more – that they aren't able to “do” citizenship properly, that is, according to the standards of the professional civic engagement engineers. As neighborhood advocate Bob Woodson puts it, “the helping hand strikes again.”

TOWARD A PHILANTHROPY OF CIVIC RENEWAL

Given what I've said, it would ill-behoove me now to pose as an expert and lay out a detailed, multi-year initiative for stimulating civic engagement, complete with deliverables, benchmarks, and measurable outcomes. These technologies serve only to recreate projects in professionalism's own image. What is needed above all is a dramatic change in attitude on the part of philanthropy itself. It must shake itself free of the cult of professionalism, and abandon its pretensions to know better than citizens themselves what their problems are and how they should be resolved. It must reexamine its belief that solutions have to be *created*, and open itself to the radical possibility that solutions rather are to be *found* – that they're already out there in the neighborhoods, waiting to be discovered by the inquisitive, humble seeker no longer blinded by the hubris of expertise.

With eyes to see, foundations would find civic engagement all about them – in that clean-up project, in this parent's committee, in that anti-drug drive. Remarkably, countless citizen initiatives continue to spring from the grassroots to tackle their own problems, in spite of the steady barrage of messages from their professional betters that such matters really should be left to the credentialed. And if some substantial foundations were to make it widely known that they are now willing to fund these kinds of undertakings – just as they are, crudely cobbled together, with water stains on the ceiling tiles, duct tape on the industrial carpeting, and the treasury in a shoe box – then there would no doubt be even more of them. So many that it's hard to decide which to fund? What a pleasant dilemma for supporters of civic engagement.

To be sure, grassroots civic renewal philanthropy can seem almost counter-intuitive. One of my favorite bubbling springs of civic engagement is the Friendship Club in Milwaukee, a social club for recovering addicts located on a desolate inner city street, around the corner from a hulking, abandoned Sears building. Even as its members struggle individually to govern their own lives, so the club struggles to govern itself as a community, trying to preserve a precious civic space proudly carved out by low-income African-Americans who had been made to feel unwelcome at other

recovery clubs. *The History of Friendship, Inc.*, a commemorative monograph written by member James Miller, presents a raw, honest cultural and political history of the club: struggles among various factions and charismatic leaders; secession of dissident groups to form their own clubs; committees springing up like weeds but failing to do their work, or even to meet; membership dues not being paid; board directors suddenly resigning or being recalled en masse.

Through it all, though, the club has not only survived, but flourished. Clearly, this is no gleaming, smoothly humming, nonprofit addiction-services-delivery vehicle. It is, rather, a messy, gritty, struggling community association, painfully relearning and passing on to each new member the mundane details of everyday self-governance, both personal and civic. It is the smudged face of democracy itself. Foundations gravitate immediately to the neatly ordered service provider, or create one if none exists. It takes a different kind of foundation to honor the efforts of and to fund the Friendship Club. But that's the sort of counter-intuitive grant-making that civic engagement philanthropy needs to explore.

Lest we dismiss the small community association as a last-ditch makeshift suitable only for society's marginalized and forgotten – or as a romantic atavism, with no appeal to hyper-mobile, sophisticated Americans – consider the reports beginning to trickle in from mainstream journalists who have summoned the courage to venture into the Heart of Dark-Redness. Searching for the stimulus behind the remarkable level of civic engagement evidenced recently by Christian evangelicals in the burgeoning exurbs, they have stumbled upon the disturbing but fascinating phenomenon of the post-denominational megachurch.

While they notice first the sprawling, mall-like structure filled by thousands of worshippers on Sunday, the deeper meaning of the megachurch, they note, is to be found in the week-day meetings of countless small, intimate groups, organized to meet the full variety of human needs: child care, job search, education, recovery from addiction, just filling the lonely hours. As a recent article by an intrepid *Mother Jones* explorer noted, “By taking on roles as various as those of the neighborhood welcome committee, the Rotary, the corner diner, the country club mixer, the support group – and, of course, family and school – megachurches have become the tightly knit villages that many Americans think they grew up in.”

Similar religious associations have sprung up among urban Hispanics and African-Americans, likewise inspired by evangelical and Pentecostal teachings and built around small self-help groups. This sort of concrete community-mindedness has provided a ready platform for broader forms of civic engagement, in spite of the fact, or rather precisely because, engagement as such is not the central purpose of this sort of organizing – meeting immediate human needs is. In the final analysis, Tocqueville would have found himself quite at home with the most dynamic contemporary form of community-building, while today's most sophisticated scholars and writers find it inexplicable, alien, and threatening.

The left, of course, provides its own examples of community revitalization and civic engagement in its community organizing tradition. But as Harry Boyte, Mark Warren, Mike Gecan, and other students of the tradition have observed, even the once distinctly secular Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) increasingly roots its organizing efforts in churches and other faith-based institutions, incorporating religious symbols, parables, and doctrines into its teaching, and even helping congregations expand and organize their own worship community. In a recent critical but appreciative account of the rise of the evangelicals, IAF's Gecan noted that the new exurban churches thrive because they appreciate the power of relationships – “relationships that start with an enthusiastic recognition of the capacity of others to grow and develop, of the innate preference that most people feel to be

viewed not as clients of agencies or bundles of needs desperate to be ‘served,’ but as good and full beings who are agents of their own destinies.”

As far-fetched as this may seem, the left’s community organizing tradition has far more in common with the right’s evangelical communities than many realize, because both have suffered from, and both are cultural and political insurgencies against, what Gecan describes as the “contempt of the progressive elite for ordinary people – for their faiths, their speech patterns, their clothes, their hobbies, their aspirations.” Insofar as both of these insurgencies aim to cultivate citizens who are “agents of their own destinies,” they could be critical allies in the struggle to establish a new kind of philanthropy for civic engagement.

None of this will be even remotely persuasive to the larger, established foundations, with long-standing investments in professional technologies. After all, isn’t this *too* humble a task for philanthropy? Isn’t it an abject retreat from social science’s promise to get at the root causes of social problems once and for all? Aren’t we reverting to mere charity?

Consider, though, that after almost a century of spending billions in root-cause philanthropy, it’s difficult to name a single social problem to the roots of which we’ve gotten and solved once and for all. Meanwhile, everyday citizens have continued to form countless community associations to tackle their own problems their own way. One could look at this and see “mere” charity. Or one could see vigorous civic engagement in self-governance. The Founders and Tocqueville clearly saw the latter. Upon this modest, practical, local civic activity they placed their highest hopes for the survival of their experiment in democracy. Foundations supporting such activity need hardly be ashamed, when it’s nothing less than helping to rebuild popular self-governance at the grassroots.

The good news is that some of the foundations and funds now coming on line – with more modest endowments, deep commitments to specific locales, and strong faith perspectives – may be open precisely to this approach. These new donors will want to make grants in their own backyards, and to see – literally and up-close – what their relatively modest grants are supporting. This sounds like grassroots philanthropy.

The Bradley Foundation can (and did) visit the \$18,000 air-conditioning system it helped the Friendship Club install. But first, the new approach must snatch fledgling donors from the teeth of mainstream philanthropy’s imposing recruiting machinery. This finely tuned apparatus aims to convince small foundations that to avoid wasteful “scatteration,” they should pool their quaint, insignificant sums to meet the match for that potential major grant from a prestigious national foundation, currently shopping for a site in which to replicate one of its cutting-edge experiments.

To counter this appeal, it will be necessary for civic engagement philanthropy to develop not just an alternative *practice* of giving, but a persuasive, coherent alternative *theory* of giving as well. As it turns out, that theory (like the grassroots activism embodying it) has been there all along – in the expectations of the Founders and Tocqueville that small, local associations are essential to stimulate the degree and kind of civic engagement required for the preservation of our free and democratic institutions. That understanding has long been buried beneath 20th century progressive philanthropy’s very different view – that public policy is too important to be left to a bumbling, irrational public, because it’s really a series of complex technical problems, to be solved efficiently and rationally by professionals. I hope this is the moment that philanthropy decides to switch its allegiance back again, from expert to citizen.

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I welcome your comments and questions about this essay.

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