

Individual giving, collective action

By Karen Weisblatt,
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Michael Edwards, both in his **openDemocracy** essay "[Philanthrocapitalism: after the goldrush \[0\]](#)" (19 March 2008) and in the book on which it draws, *[Just Another Emperor: the Myths and Realities of Philanthrocapitalism](#)* [1], is right: the new movement towards "philanthrocapitalism" may offer important opportunities – but not in its present formulation. One of its major underlying weaknesses as a paradigm for social change is that it ignores the critical contribution of mass movements to historical transformations.

Internationally, significant [post-war social movements](#) [2] have often resulted from small acts - by literally millions of people who created contexts which enabled structural political change at the highest level. This is the model of the civil-rights movement in the United States, where recent celebrations of Martin Luther King remind us of his role as heroic leader who worked in [in tandem](#) [3] with countless unknown actors; it is also the model of the [transformation of the former Soviet bloc](#) [3], where externally supported dissidents made common cause with the broader populations, enabling a shift in the balance of power; and this was also true for the [anti-apartheid movement](#). [4]

Everywhere leaders emerged; everywhere resources were leveraged to bring momentum to the cause; nowhere could these shifts have been made by drawing primarily on business models. The success of these movements relied in large part on voluntary actions by individuals.

Few would deny that these are some of the most important social changes of our time. "Old" philanthropy did not of course initiate these actions, yet often it supported them and now continue to assist their contemporary equivalents. Yet try as we might, it is hard to imagine the new players spotting these trends. For one of the unifying factors of this otherwise disparate group is their lack of personal experience in collective action. It is not "just" that they have not been involved in [social movements](#) [6]. Many of those operating in Europe with whom I've spoken confidentially left the business world, decided to "change their lives" and embarked on a trip abroad. More often than not this meant time in the developing world. Once home, they get to work as agents of change. Often there is little in their life experience which "brings" them to a deep understanding about collective action undertaken by free citizens or those striving to become free.

Karen Weisblatt is a Paris-based advisor to philanthropists and charitable foundations

Also in **openDemocracy's** debate on philanthrocapitalism:

Michael Edwards, "[Philanthrocapitalism: after the goldrush](#) [4]" (19 March 2008)

Gara LaMarche, "[Philanthropy for social change](#) [4]" (9 April 2008)

Geoff Mulgan, "[The new philanthropy: power, inequality, democracy](#) [4]" (10 April 2008)

Simon Zadek, "[Civil society and capitalism: a new landscape](#) [4]" (14 April 2008)

The business experience of “collective action” - for example, when a company like Google utterly transforms the lives of millions by improving access to knowledge - is in crucial respects unlike social movements. Each individual user of Google’s services finds a benefit in using the service more or less independently of others’ behaviour. But collective action makes sense and has power only in so far as everyone together is engaged in it. And it is probably as hard to “teach” the new philanthropists about this as it is to train a social entrepreneur, for similarly, this might just be a talent which can be “detected” but not taught.

Yet there should be some way to harness the creative energy of the new philanthropists, whose team spirit in their high-tech or other ventures was clearly evident, so that they engage in a more sustained conversation about collective action. “Philanthrocapitalism” is in its nascent [7] stage. There is still time to adapt to core challenges. But the new actors need to cut the hubris and self-congratulatory tone and get to work on proving to the world that their hypothetical models can indeed bring results over time. For if - and only if - they can manage to think creatively about the bigger social-change agenda, then we might indeed be looking at a genuinely revolutionary model, poised to bring new vigour to the sector.

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[1] <http://www.justanotheremperor.org/>

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[4] <http://www.bodley.ox.ac.uk/dept/rhodes/aam/aam.html>

[5] <http://www.justanotheremperor.org/>

[6] <http://www.oup.com/ca/isbn/0-19-542309-7>

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