

Stanford SOCIAL INNOVATION^{Review}

Books

The Creativity Crisis

By Roberta Ness

Review by Maryann Feldman

Stanford Social Innovation Review
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BOOKS

REVIEWS OF NEW AND NOTABLE TITLES

Past Isn't Always Prologue

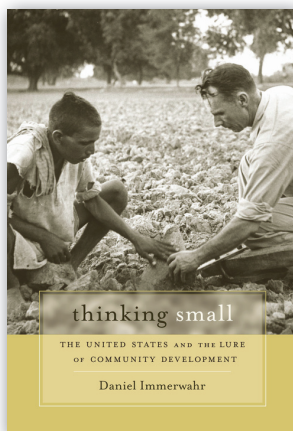
REVIEW BY MICHAEL WEINSTEIN

This is a book about poverty and the ways in which people have made sense of it," Daniel Immerwahr writes in the first sentence of the preface to *Thinking Small*. But in the book, he has almost nothing to say about actual poverty, nor does he analyze the impact of specific poverty-fighting strategies. Instead, he rummages through a mass of scholarly, popular, and political discourse—discourse that spans several continents and several decades—which, he contends, illuminates an epic debate between centralized and decentralized development policies.

If to the proverbial hammer, all objects take on the appearance of a nail, then to Immerwahr, every utterance—every work of fiction, every polemical message, every ideological musing—takes on the appearance of an argument about the proper scale of social and economic development. In one corner are the centralizers. They call for dams, irrigation systems, and other large-scale, top-down forms of modernization. Immerwahr actually doesn't write much about them; instead, they serve as a backdrop to his argument. In the other corner are the decentralizers. They call for community organizing projects, bottom-up hygiene initiatives, and other efforts to bring "power to the people." They are the focus of attention here.

Immerwahr takes the reader on a grand tour of (largely unsuccessful) community development experiments in India, the Philippines, and the United States between the 1930s and 1960s. Along the way, he conducts side trips to China, Vietnam, and elsewhere. His accounts of those experiments are often fascinating, either because they cover unfamiliar territory or because they tie familiar details together in a surprising manner. I lapped up every word of these accounts.

Indeed, the most interesting chapters in *Thinking Small* document examples of



THINKING SMALL: The United States and the Lure of Community Development

Daniel Immerwahr
253 pages, Harvard University Press

community organizing gone haywire. In India, community development, rather than empowering the local poor, resulted in oppressive alliances between government officials and local elites. In the Philippines, community development served the purpose of counter-insurgency, not economic development.

But Immerwahr never makes clear exactly where his grand tour leads. He discusses episodes and ideas without offering any analysis to help us make sense of them. If his purpose is modest—to make readers aware of the mid-20th-century origins of community development theories that are reappearing in current debates—then he succeeds. But if his purpose is to convince readers that today's policy discourse takes too little account of the failed infatuations of an earlier generation of policy makers, then he only partially succeeds. That's because he provides no test of the all-important word "too" in "too little account."

If readers expect to learn something about economic development or poverty alleviation, then this book will disappoint them. Immerwahr does not marshal evidence on behalf of one anti-poverty strategy or another. If cliometric historians err on the side of applying formal theory and quantitative methods, then he errs in the opposite direction—toward a reliance on theory-free anecdotes. He presents his anecdotes

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skillfully, and they are valuable in their own right. But anecdotes don't add up to arguments. Immerwahr never clearly states and tests a proposition. Nor does he set forth facts in a way that would allow others to test or refute his take on history.

Immerwahr's review of mid-century discourse on issues related to community development glides over a broad array of scholars, policy makers, politicians, and other luminaries. Here's a sampling, listed in no particular order: Mahatma Gandhi. Saul Alinsky (community organizer). Jimmy Carter. Gunnar Myrdal (economist). Mary Parker Follett (social worker and organizational theorist). Frederick Jackson Turner (historian). Max Shachtman (Marxist theorist). Frederick Winslow Taylor (management consultant). Norman Rockwell (painter). Sinclair Lewis (novelist). Edgar Lee Masters (poet). David Riesman (sociologist). Herbert Gans (sociologist). Y.C. James Yen (Chinese educator). Jane Jacobs (urban theorist). Huey P. Newton (cofounder of the Black Panther Party).

The sweep of these references—and there are many more—is truly stunning. But Immerwahr never explains the criteria that he has used to decide which voices to include.

Immerwahr, writing as a historian, warns us against embracing policies that have failed in the past. Fair enough. But do readers today need that reminder? No one comes away from the literature on economic development and thinks that experts in the field fall into neat camps—centralizers versus decentralizers, or dam builders versus community organizers. Readers who sift through the writings of economists such as Abhijit Banerjee, Jagdish Bhagwati, William Easterly, and Joseph Stiglitz will not conclude that any of them claims that there's a proven way to cure entrenched poverty.

Economists who write on this subject don't feel compelled to choose between dam building and local organizing. Some dams make sense. Others do unspeakable harm. Some local development works. And some local development doesn't. Life does not present policy makers with a simple choice between "modernization," in the form of

top-down infrastructure projects, and community development. Instead, they need to ask probing questions: Which dam? What kind of dam? Which community? What kind of development? To brush aside local initiatives comes perilously close to being glib. Consider the Millennium Villages Project, an initiative that the economist Jeffrey Sachs is overseeing in sub-Saharan Africa. Sachs's work may wind up saving millions of lives. Or his efforts may prove fruitless. Immerwahr's treatise, operating at 30,000 feet in the air, offers no insight on how to evaluate such projects.

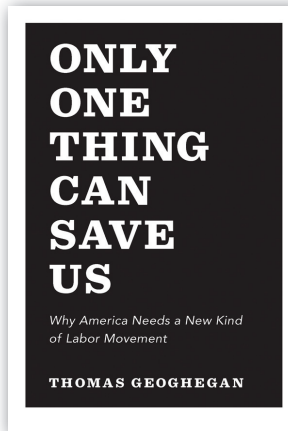
That said, although we don't need Immerwahr to remind us that policies based on localism will not pave an obvious route to progress, we can nonetheless prize his detail-rich historical overview of this topic. *Thinking Small* offers no clear argument for readers to digest. But perhaps the bounty of material that Immerwahr has gathered will become grist for someone else's intellectual mill. ■

A More Perfect Union?

REVIEWED BY THOMAS A. KOCHAN

In *Only One Thing Can Save Us*, Tom Geoghegan joins the growing chorus of voices who have called for a fundamentally new approach to empowering workers in the United States. Salvation, in his view, can come only from rebuilding the labor movement—rebuilding it from the ground up and in ways that aren't chained to the ossified doctrines of current labor law or the bureaucratic structures of existing unions.

Geoghegan presents this argument with the passion and energy that many of us have come to expect from him. He's a highly regarded labor lawyer and a loyal, principled warrior for worker's rights. His vibrant, conversational style makes you feel as if you're talking with him during a long, caffeine-fueled visit to his favorite coffeehouse. Drawing on his experience in fighting legal battles for workers, he offers thrilling



ONLY ONE THING CAN SAVE US:
Why America Needs a New Kind
of Labor Movement
Thomas Geoghegan
255 pages, New Press

tales of success and (more often) failure. Unlike many of his labor law brethren, he has come away from these battles not discouraged by defeat but open to new ideas.

Only One Thing starts with a call to make joining a union a civil right. Under that doctrine, the same penalties that apply to firing people because of their race, sex, or age would apply to firing people for organizing a union. Taking this step would have several benefits.

First, it would impose real economic costs on employers who violate the law. (The remedies available to fired organizers under current labor law are practically meaningless.) Second, it would strike fear into managers because they would be subject to the court-ordered “discovery” of information about their hiring and firing decisions. Third, it would give workers control over whether to bring legal action against an employer. (Today, they can do so only with the support of a union or the National Labor Relations Board.) This idea isn't new. Back in 1994, when I was a member of the Dunlop Commission on the Future of Worker Management Relations, my colleagues and I discussed it. But the fierce opposition that the idea generated then—and still generates today—suggests that it has enormous merit.

The second idea that Geoghegan offers is more radical: Let the “right to work” doctrine take hold in every state. That way, labor advocates would neutralize the argument that unions force people who don't want union representation to pay union dues. He acknowledges the problem of “free

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riders”—workers who get the benefits of representation without paying for them. But he has a solution. State and federal authorities, he writes, should drop the requirement of exclusive representation, which dictates that a union can bargain for a group of workers only if a majority of those workers support it. When a union gains that status, it suffers the winner's curse of having to represent all the workers, regardless of whether they join the union. Many labor law scholars have argued that current law permits members-only representation. Indeed, the United Auto Workers is now pursuing that approach at the Volkswagen plant in Chattanooga, Tenn.

Another idea is to focus not on labor law but on corporate law. Geoghegan argues for testing European-style works councils, which give workers a voice in advising management, and for revising company charters to allow worker representation on corporate boards of directors. At the least, he suggests, workers should be able to sue corporate directors for breach of fiduciary responsibility.

Geoghegan also urges state and federal agencies to use their purchasing power to press companies to comply with labor standards both at home and abroad. In the 1960s, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed an executive order that requires government contractors to take affirmative steps to eradicate racial discrimination in their employment practices. Why not apply the same principle to companies that discriminate against people who want to join a union?

What's missing from this survey of tactics? Unable to cast off his lawyer's cloak, Geoghegan fails to see that young organizers and social entrepreneurs are using social media and other new technologies to transform the process of mobilizing people. As he notes, the traditional strike is dead. Instead, labor activism has increasingly become a matter of building public support through media—social and otherwise. But efforts to harness the power of social media for labor organizing have only just begun, and the best ideas for doing so will come not from aging lawyers (or from college professors!) but from the next generation of activists.

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Those activists are not shackled by the constraints of labor law or union bureaucracy. Consider the young organizers of the Restaurant Opportunities Centers United (ROC), a group that seeks to mobilize low-wage workers in the food service industry. The organizers insist that ROC is not a union—even as industry lawyers are urging authorities to designate it as one so that they can use current labor law to straitjacket the group.

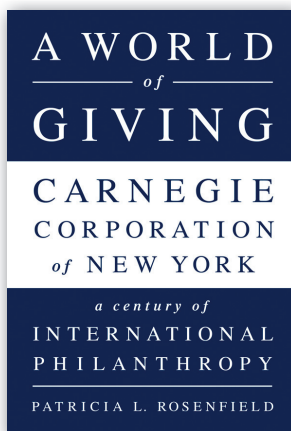
None of the ideas put forth by Geoghegan is completely original. But it's great to see a longtime defender and ally of the labor movement take them seriously. Nothing, it seems, is off-limits anymore. ■

Uncertain Legacy

REVIEWED BY PETER FRUMKIN

A *World of Giving*, by Patricia L. Rosenfield, is a very long book that tells a straightforward story of experimentation and evolution in philanthropy. Thoroughly researched and abundantly footnoted, the book chronicles the development of the Carnegie Corporation—Andrew Carnegie's most important institutional legacy—from its early years to the present. The corporation began with a broad mission to “promote the advancement and diffusion of knowledge and understanding,” and Rosenfield imposes a strong sense of order on the vast range of activities that have defined its work to fulfill that mission.

Rosenfield doesn't try to be original in how she organizes the book. She does not, for example, deploy clever crosscutting themes or recurring ideas that might illuminate the philanthropic territory that the corporation has traversed. Instead, she adopts a crisp and easy-to-follow structure that breaks the Carnegie storyline into eight periods that extend from 1911 to the present. She begins by discussing some of the confusion and struggle that characterized the corporation in its early days: Carnegie



A WORLD OF GIVING: Carnegie Corporation of New York—A Century of International Philanthropy

Patricia L. Rosenfield
738 pages, Public Affairs

had three presidents in its first four years of operation. Then, after moving through periods of by increasing engagement with pressing global challenges, she shifts to the story of several leaders who left their distinctive mark on the foundation.

One strength of the book is that it captures how Carnegie's 12 presidents have shaped the foundation's gentle evolution. Consider Frederick Keppel (1923-1941), who pushed the corporation boldly in a more international direction, or Alan Pifer (1967-1982), who helped professionalize the foundation and open it up to a variety of stakeholders. Later, David A. Hamburg (1982-1997) and Vartan Gregorian (1997-the present) continued their predecessors' commitment to building a global community of changemakers. Rosenfield ably conveys the importance of leadership in foundations—even though Carnegie, like most of its peers, generally operates in the world at a distance and through its grantees.

Readers who are looking for a tough, analytical approach to the history of a prominent American foundation will find the book somewhat frustrating. It reads at times like a century-long annual report produced by a longtime insider. Rosenfeld starts and ends with the claim that effective foundation giving involves four elements: “significance of mission”; “openness to risk-taking”; “willingness to make long-term investments”; and “openness to collaboration and partnership.” For a book that devotes 738 pages to the history of one institution, that set of ideas can

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only be described as a rather modest collection of takeaways.

There's nothing wrong with Rosenfield's narrative approach. At times, though, the book comes across as over-supportive of the Carnegie Corporation—not in a cheerleading way, but in the sense that Rosenfield never really asks tough questions about accountability. She identifies a few obvious missteps, but on the whole her account focuses on recounting the lofty intentions, grand plans, and complex agendas that Carnegie leaders have pursued. The book contains surprisingly little discussion of the actual outcomes that resulted from corporation giving.

Dispassionately and in great detail, Rosenfield describes the support provided by the Carnegie Corporation to a wide range of ideas, organizations, and movements: Russian studies programs, the National Bureau for Economic Research, development in Africa, international conflict resolution, the Institute for International Education, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Caribbean women's empowerment, and on and on and on. In the few cases when Carnegie engaged in active institution creation, its impact seems real enough. But in most other cases, its giving is only a drop in the river of global foundation funding.

Overall, Rosenfield treads lightly when it comes to giving the corporation credit for what its grantees have accomplished. Another reason for doing so is that Carnegie has frequently acted in partnership with other institutions. As Rosenfield shows, the corporation has collaborated extensively with the Rockefeller and Ford foundations, along with many other funders.

The scholarship on private foundations takes various forms. There are biographies of the great donors, like Ron Chernow's *Titan: The Life of John D. Rockefeller Sr.* There are critical assessments of the field and its assumptions, like Mark Dowie's *American Foundations*. There are sweeping histories of the entire field, like Judith Sealander's *Private Wealth and Public Life*. The history of a single institution is ultimately a more constraining form because it provides little scope for the

intimate details of a biography, the bite of a generalized critique, or the thematic integration of a broad historical narrative.

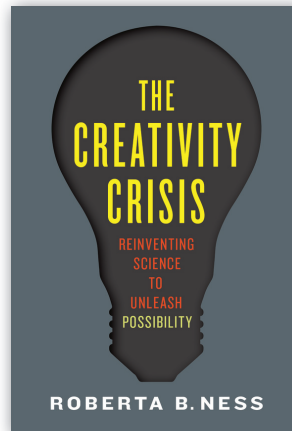
Within the confines of its approach, however, *A World of Giving* presents a solid and comprehensive account of the Carnegie Corporation's institutional development. Even if it never approaches being a page-turner, the book delivers a masterfully organized array of details regarding the ideas, grants, and initiatives that constitute the foundation's pursuit of Andrew Carnegie's open-ended mandate. ■

Misdiagnosing Science

REVIEW BY MARYANN FELDMAN

The *Creativity Crisis* takes its title from a 2010 *Newsweek* article that noted a decline in creativity among American school-children. Roberta B. Ness extends that concept to argue that American society as a whole is unable to address grand challenges because academic science has become too cautious. The scientific community, for example, has done little to crack the problems of water scarcity, cancer, and obesity. Scientists, Ness contends, could also do more to change the food landscape by helping to improve manufacturing and supply-chain practices. "What if today's system of science," she asks, could enable a new generation of innovators "to overcome failures, to avoid the pressures of short-term profits, and to strive for something really audacious?"

Ness, a former dean of the University of Texas School of Public Health and vice president for innovation at the University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston, has previously written two other books on scientific creativity. The first one, *Innovation Generation* (2012), is a how-to guide for "thinking outside the box." The second, *Genius Unmasked* (2013), recounts historical episodes of scientific discovery. Like those works, *The Creativity Crisis* is aimed at a



THE CREATIVITY CRISIS: Reinventing Science to Unleash Possibility

Roberta B. Ness
287 pages, Oxford University Press

general audience. Most of the literature that Ness cites to make her argument is popular rather than scholarly. There is a growing body of knowledge about how to use scientific resources effectively, and references to that research are largely missing from the book.

Ness frames *The Creativity Crisis* as an inquiry into the organizational, economic, and social factors that inhibit creativity at universities. She organizes the book around three sources of caution that, she argues, limit scientific innovation: the influence of money, social pressure, and an aversion to risk. Each of the book's three sections includes a chapter that describes one source of caution, two chapters that present further analysis of that impediment, and a fourth chapter that provides recommendations for overcoming it.

In the book, Ness promises to offer new thinking on the topic of scientific innovation, but I did not find much creativity either in her analysis or in her proposed solutions. Is there really a "creativity crisis" in universities? From where I sit, as a professor who teaches entrepreneurship and innovation, the answer is no. Today, in university labs throughout the United States, there are new ideas in abundance. The word "crisis" strikes too dire a note. And the notion of "reinventing science" (to use a phrase from Ness's subtitle) suggests a kind of hubris that seems inappropriate.

Solving grand social challenges requires input from all segments of society. More specifically, it requires orchestrated action

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by leaders in government, industry, and civil society to support scientific work. Consider the scourge of HIV/AIDS. In the 1980s, to be diagnosed with that virus was a death sentence. Today, thanks to a series of remarkable scientific advances, HIV/AIDS is a manageable condition. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, observed in 2003 that those advances "represent a model of what can be accomplished when the world's scientific community is galvanized in a common goal." But a clear social mandate of that kind is rare. Despite significant research findings on the causes of obesity, for example, there is little social resolve to confront that problem on a large scale.

Ness focuses on the supply side of the scientific enterprise and does not consider the entire system in which scientists must operate. Attributing all of the problems associated with lagging innovation to academic science, she fails to hold stakeholders in industry or government to account. Although her stated intent is to promote creativity, Ness does little more than document the well-known limitations of academia. Given that the process of innovation has become more complex and more dependent on multiple actors, dwelling on those limitations may be counterproductive.

Many of the examples in *The Creativity Crisis* come from the world of commercial innovation. Ness, for instance, suggests that academic scientists should be more like the automaker Henry Ford. She emphasizes his dedication to long-term technological change and his willingness to tolerate short-term losses. But Ness ignores the fact that Ford was the leader of a for-profit enterprise, not an academic. Certainly, to any academic who is trying to run a lab—and constantly writing grants to do so—the Ford approach will sound great. But scientists respond to incentives, just like anyone else, and the current system incentivizes a preference for caution rather than bold risk-taking. To revise that incentive structure, we as a society need to provide more favorable conditions for the pursuit of careers in science. ■