

Stanford SOCIAL INNOVATION^{Review}

Books

Smart Citizens, Smarter State: The Technologies of Expertise and the Future of Governing

By Beth Simone Noveck

Review by Stephen Goldsmith

Stanford Social Innovation Review
Spring 2016

Copyright © 2016 by Leland Stanford Jr. University
All Rights Reserved

BOOKS

REVIEWS OF NEW AND NOTABLE TITLES

STEPHEN GOLDSMITH is the Daniel Paul Professor of the Practice of Government at the Harvard Kennedy School (HKS). He is also director of the Innovations in American Government Program at HKS and former mayor of Indianapolis.

When Everyone Is an Expert

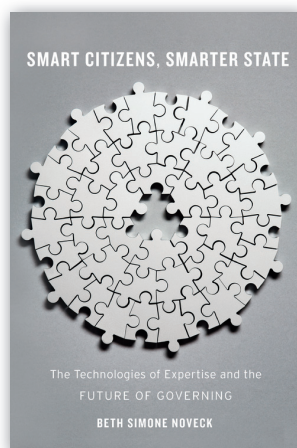
REVIEW BY STEPHEN GOLDSMITH

In a clear illustration of why “the perfect is the enemy of the good,” as the old saying goes, professional expertise often seems to interfere with more obvious, informal, and efficient solutions to public problems. At least, that’s the case that Beth Simone Noveck makes in *Smart Citizens, Smarter State*. Noveck believes that new technologies have great potential to improve governance, but only if governments can draw from the “good” wisdom of informed crowds and not rely exclusively on the “perfect” information of credentialed experts.

Currently, Noveck writes, the US government’s dependence on experts establishes a “false dichotomy between reliance on a professional elite or on an ignorant citizenry.” As a result, many government programs are insulated from broader public input. This state of affairs is particularly counterproductive because, given the rate at which today’s information technologies are improving, broader participation is crucial not only to democratic governance but also to more efficient solutions to public problems.

Noveck takes a gloomy view of government’s current barriers to the uptake of new, participatory approaches but is optimistic about the future potential for public input. She is in a good position to evaluate these prospects: Not only has she studied the crowdsourcing tools she advocates while teaching at New York University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology—she also has furthered their development as director of the Obama White House’s Open Government Initiative and advisor to David Cameron’s Open Government team. She currently directs NYU’s Governance Lab, which is attempting to put theory into practice through programs such as a networking hub among experts on open data, education, and other topics.

As I read Noveck’s book, I found myself



SMART CITIZENS, SMARTER STATE:
The Technologies of Expertise and
the Future of Governing

Beth Simone Noveck
352 pages, Harvard University Press, 2015

thinking of a time, years ago, when I served on the National Institute of Justice’s (NIJ) peer review panels on criminal justice research requests. Paragons of professionalism, these panels employed some of the best minds in criminology to evaluate government-solicited studies on criminal justice problems. The process moved slowly and relied almost exclusively on specialists.

This sort of system is important, but it ignores the broad array of other people with day-to-day experience who could offer enormous insight on the very same issues—a point that becomes alarmingly clear in Noveck’s book. One chapter, titled “Why Smarter Governance May Be Illegal,” details the many dispiriting mechanisms that restrict government’s ability to listen to crowds. The Federal Advisory Committee Act of 1972, for example, limited the number of groups qualified to advise federal agencies to a narrow field of credentialed experts. The Paperwork Reduction Act of 1980 imposed a lengthy application and approval process on agencies wishing to collect records of public input.

Noveck’s analysis on this point reminded me of the responses I received as chairman of the Corporation for National and Community Affairs to my proposal that

we conduct exit surveys with AmeriCorps members about their experiences. I assumed these surveys would guide our grantmaking and assist future volunteers in making their placement decisions. But the idea met strong resistance from the Paperwork Reduction enforcement regime, which delayed the proposal by about a year while watering it down along the way.

The professionals who evaluated grants, meanwhile, showed a discouraging lack of enthusiasm for my idea. Their roles were not designed to be receptive to new ways of operating, and the institutional culture inhibited experimentation. Noveck pays particular attention to this hurdle—one that many of us who specialize in state and local government regularly confront. “The real source of worry is less corruption and self-interest ... than the inability to apply the full range of relevant, available expertise to our most pressing challenges,” she writes. Tools that amplify crowd wisdom and open source expertise, after all, are effective only if accompanied by a fundamental shift in attitudes toward creativity and flexibility. Unfortunately, changing culture is much more difficult than implementing new technologies.

In outlining these challenges, Noveck places her arguments at the intersection of various historical and theoretical threads within government and academia. The book’s extensive bibliography will be useful to any researcher interested in the crossroads of digital technology and government. But it may leave the practically focused wishing for more concrete advice. Noveck outlines the theories behind bureaucracy and federal laws that need changing more clearly than she enumerates the tools needed to overcome them.

The core challenge Noveck raises, however, is relevant to a broad range of public interest professionals. As government agencies review how to solicit and shape public knowledge, they must also rethink what, exactly, sets the credentialed experts apart. Noveck identifies substantial potential for change in this area and encourages public thinkers and officials to be more nimble,

BOOKS

efficient, and inclusive in their views of what constitutes knowledge. She also advocates conducting the business of government in closer alignment with the cutting edge of technology. If we are serious about building a genuinely democratic community of knowledge-makers, we ought to take her recommendations to heart. ■

On the Rise

REVIEW BY JANE WALES

In debates and campaign events, some presidential candidates describe the United States as a country that has failed to lead. To hear them tell it, success has eluded US policymakers, and the nation is buffeted by events in a world shaped by actors who neither embrace US values nor share US goals. But as Georgetown University development economist Steven Radelet argues in his book *The Great Surge*, this “pervasive pessimism” is unwarranted. After all, growing numbers of countries have adopted the US model of democracy and market economy—not only in Europe, but in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. And although its benefits have not always been equitably shared, the model has lifted millions out of poverty.

Radelet documents in head-spinning detail the impact of these gains in 109 developing countries. “Never before have so many people, in so many developing countries, made so much progress in so short a time in reducing poverty, increasing incomes, improving health, reducing conflict and war, and spreading democracy,” he writes.

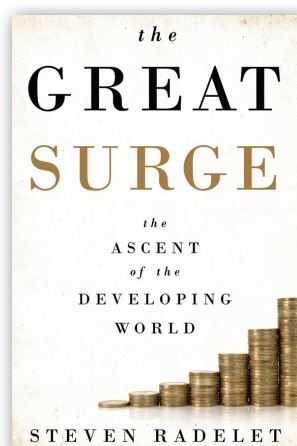
Although Radelet does not dwell on the United States’ role in the rise of the developing world, US leadership was pivotal in helping launch the transformations he describes. At Bretton Woods in 1944, US policymakers put forth a vision that laid the groundwork for international economic integration and aid distribution and established the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. In 1948, the Marshall Plan, an American initiative that rebuilt war-ravaged Western Europe, began

to integrate friends and former foes into a larger economic and political order.

The World Bank was joined in subsequent years by regional development banks—the Inter-American Development Bank in 1959, the African Development Bank in 1964, and the Asian Development Bank in 1966. Negotiations that included the majority of developing countries created the World Trade Organization in 1994. As Radelet outlines, this process of economic integration has recently accelerated, thanks to investments in information technology by the US government and private actors as well as regional agreements to liberalize trade, promote foreign investment, and reward good governance.

Two other developments, Radelet notes, greatly contributed to this progress: the fall of Soviet communism and the emergence of accountable local leaders as the influence of communism and colonialism waned. During prior periods of globalization, many countries were “caught up in the power struggles, ideological battles, and physical conflicts of the Cold War.” To counter Soviet influence, the United States often acted against its democratic values by supporting right-wing dictatorships. After the Cold War’s end, by contrast, “dictators supported by the superpowers began to fall. Civil wars and state violence began to decline. ... A consensus began to emerge around more market-based economic systems and more accountable, transparent, and democratic governance.”

In the years that followed, leaders in the United States, Europe, and Japan pursued



THE GREAT SURGE: The Ascent of the Developing World

Steven Radelet
354 pages, Simon & Schuster, 2015

JANE WALES is vice president of the Aspen Institute and CEO of the Global Philanthropy Forum and the World Affairs Council. She served in the Clinton Administration as special assistant to the President and senior director of the National Security Council.

purposeful, albeit imperfect, policies aimed at engaging and lifting up developing economies. Leaders in Africa, Asia, and Latin America lowered barriers to trade and investment and connected local enterprises to global markets. At the same time, as Radelet details, charitable foundations and NGOs joined forces with governments and businesses to bring technological benefits to the world’s poor, from mobile health and banking services to online education to more transparent governance. Radelet makes special mention of partnerships like the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization and the Global Fund to Fight AIDs, Tuberculosis and Malaria, which have successfully leveraged public funding, private-sector R&D capacity, and a needed nudge from the charitable sector.

Radelet believes that knowledge gained from such programs can contribute greatly to states’ capacity to improve their citizens’ welfare in the future. But he warns that failure to address the interplay among political, economic, environmental, and demographic “headwinds” can reverse these gains. Corruption, violent conflict, and climate change threaten to derail progress. And, absent smart policy, the very forces that have enabled the great surge—technological innovation and economic integration—could undermine the ability of states to govern, societies to prosper, and nature to provide.

Largely unexamined in Radelet’s otherwise exhaustive account is the most dire of the global threats: the contagion of state failure and the unraveling of a state system. Americans and others have worked hard to build. This is a serious omission, as accountable states are the primary guarantors of human security, and their failure could undo the gains that Radelet applauds. In the face of these threats, the United States has a central role to play in maintaining the system of democracy and open markets that it helped create. So as the next US president prepares for the choices ahead, he or she ought to take time to gain a fuller understanding of the values that inform and interests that drive global development policy. *The Great Surge* is a great place to start. ■

A First-Class Solution

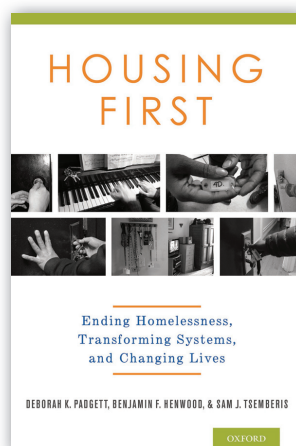
REVIEW BY DENNIS P. CULHANE

Few social problems have appeared to be as intractable as contemporary homelessness. Seattle and Los Angeles each recently declared a “state of emergency” after a noticeable escalation of homelessness in the past year. In New York City, a sudden resurgence of street homelessness has prompted almost daily local headlines. Polls show the issue is back atop the public’s agenda. At the same time, news accounts across the United States have heralded certain cities’ and states’ successes in battling homelessness. Houston, New Orleans, Philadelphia, Phoenix, Salt Lake City, and the state of Virginia, for example, each have declared that they have effectively ended homelessness among veterans.

How can we make sense of these competing narratives? Homelessness researchers Deborah Padgett, Benjamin Henwood, and Sam Tsemberis offer an answer. Their new book, *Housing First*, examines the reasons that the eponymous Housing First movement has succeeded dramatically in battling homelessness when traditional, top-down efforts have failed. In doing so, the book offers broader lessons about the risk that institutions built around addressing social problems may lose sight of their core missions behind the ideologies and vested interests of the professionals involved.

The social services sector has long been plagued by bad service, low professional morale, and a lack of impact. Aware of these complaints, governments tend to give meager funding to social programs, and, tragically, professionals in the sector accept that the down-and-out citizens they serve deserve the second-class services they receive. Service systems are often uninformed by research, tone-deaf to their clients, and utterly lacking in innovation.

Housing First has upended this state of affairs. The movement began in the



HOUSING FIRST: Ending Homelessness, Transforming Systems, and Changing Lives

Deborah K. Padgett, Benjamin F. Henwood,
& Sam J. Tsemberis
228 pages, Oxford University Press, 2016

early 1990s, when staff members at a New York homelessness program led by Sam Tsemberis decided to step back from their work and listen to the people whom they were unsuccessful in getting off the streets. They learned that these people preferred the dignity and autonomy of living on the streets to the subjugation of living in shelters. They preferred the freedom to avoid medication, doctors, and sobriety to the mandated services prescribed by the homeless services system. Most of all, they wanted places to live like everyone else—not in facilities set aside for people like them, with rules and overseers, but in regular apartments, places of their own where they could lock their doors and experience privacy.

This was a radical revelation in the top-down social services sector, where treatment professionals usually assume they know best. Traditionally, the sector’s paternalistic prerequisites for housing have deterred many homeless people: “The climb was too steep, the journey too long, or the difficulty level too high,” the authors write. “Repeatedly trying and failing discouraged many, and they eventually stopped trying, remained homeless, and withdrew into hopelessness.”

Tsemberis and his team, on the other hand, gave their homeless clients exactly what they asked for: regular lodgings in standard apartment buildings, without preconditions for substance-abuse treatment or sobriety, and rental subsidies to make the units affordable. The only condition was that

DENNIS P. CULHANE is the Dana and Andrew Stone Professor of Social Policy at the University of Pennsylvania. He is also director of research for the National Center for Homelessness Among Veterans at the US Department of Veterans Affairs.

tenants let a team led by a peer mentor check on them once a week. Housing First enlisted newly housed tenants to serve as mentors and as members of the committee overseeing the program.

To people outside the homelessness services sector, the idea that housing is the solution to homelessness may appear obvious. Employing randomized controlled trials to prove it may seem like testing whether food would be an appropriate treatment for starvation. Nevertheless, the performance of the Housing First model in several randomized controlled trials has shocked skeptics: 85 percent to 90 percent of people placed in housing remained housed two years later. Research showed high levels of effectiveness in city after city across North America, Europe, and Australia. Several studies, moreover, found that the intervention’s costs were offset by reduced use of emergency rooms, jails, hospitals, detox centers, and shelters. The US government has now established Housing First as official policy. At the US Department of Veterans Affairs, it has led to a remarkable decline in homeless veterans.

These victories have forced the established “homelessness industry” to re-examine its own approaches. I have made *Housing First* required reading in a graduate-level class this semester in the hope that it will encourage students to consider how well-meaning professionals (as they are training to become) must collaborate with the people they serve to create responsive and inclusive social programs.

In its critique of entrenched practices, *Housing First* perhaps offers less a program model than an anti-model. Its guiding principles are essentially exhortations that providers should treat people who are homeless as they themselves would want to be treated. In this way, *Housing First* points the way for a new, ground-up approach to alleviating poverty and other forms of disadvantage, with insights that appeal to disruptors, progressives, idealists, pragmatists, and even compassionate conservatives. As communities struggle with a resurgence in homelessness, they can look to this book for guidance. ■