
Observing Edwards and Philanthropy

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"In the matter of social enterprise, I was inoculated with scepticism early. Visiting a large US human services nonprofit in 2002, I was told that its funding was derived from the "social entrepreneurial model." Pen poised for copious note taking, I asked what this was. Turned out they meant thrift stores. These can work: they helped pay my salary for 16 years. But they weren't new, and they didn't need a new label.

Edwards too has been frustrated by the deluded rhetoric that has sometimes characterized the social enterprise "movement." He is, however, behind the curve on social ventures. The bullshit still flows but the failures that he describes have tempered the language and refined practice more generally than he credits. In any case, in human service nonprofits social enterprises remain a minority activity. Restrictive government and foundation funding pose more of a threat to mission. But I sense that this is not Edwards' real interest. Indeed, some of his facts are shaky here: Housing Works bookstore/café is only one of several businesses that make up \$15 million of its \$38 million budget, not \$2 million.

The kind of world we want and a necessary debate about social change are his main concern. Three observations. The lack of open-mindedness about the mechanisms of social change in the "social entrepreneurship" movement is indeed troubling. I once suggested to a presenter from Ashoka, who had described how it would measure the impact of its social entrepreneurs, that some kind of comparison with other approaches to social change might be illuminating. I could have more successfully suggested membership of the Darwin Society to a creationist. Edwards' picture of civil society is rose tinted. Fraternities in the US can be secretive and exclusive as well as offering support and identity; I know a minority HIV/AIDS organization in an English city that has often had to play the role of "a UN peacekeeper" to fractious and competing grassroots HIV/AIDS groups. Elective democracy, that fundamentally important component of Democracy that is creating some excitement at the moment, is singularly absent from Edwards' discussion.

So, bring on the Debate and some radical solutions, but let's set the boundaries for these accurately: if Philanthrocapitalism (a truly ugly coinage, worthy of Marx on a bad day) "is a symptom of a disordered and profoundly unequal world," then isn't Philanthropy of any formal kind the same?

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