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## Ownership and Social Justice

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In his critique of “philanthrocapitalism” Michael Edwards rightly stresses that any serious approach must involve (and integrate): a particular kind of new ownership strategy; building social change movements; and what he calls changing the economic system.

So far, however, these issues have rarely been dealt with seriously and in an integrated fashion. Yes, social movements are critical, but very few see new ownership forms as explicitly strategic—rather than as a tactical (often mainly local) approach. Again, the movements we know most about in this country (Civil Rights, Feminism, Environmentalism) changed many things, but none seriously defined the goal as systemic change. Given the emphasis he appropriately places on these matters, I would have liked Edwards to explore much more clearly how he sees the relationship between movement building, new ownership strategies, and ‘changing the system.’

Over the last thirty years there has been an explosion of “common-wealth” and “commons” economic efforts—approaches which as a matter of principle turn the ownership of wealth (capital) into a socially-owned or public or quasi-public asset. Included are nearly 10,000 employee-owned firms; co-ops with more than 120 million members; roughly 4,600 neighborhood corporations; a range of new social enterprises; numerous quasi-public land trusts and new municipal enterprises (including 2,000 public electric utilities), etc. At the state level, there is growing experience with public pension fund investing aimed at achieving broader social and environmental goals. Abroad, there are related models, like Mondragon in Spain.

Having said as much—and even though most of my time goes into trying to help further the “pluralist common-wealth” strategic vision they suggest—it is important to acknowledge how flawed many are, and how much needs to be learned. And we have seen few public and explicit movement-building attempts to systematically debate how the new forms might become part and parcel of a coherent longer term system change model.

In my experience many individuals concerned with these matters—including even some of the most ardent of Edward’s “philanthrocapitalists”(!)—are often much more open to expansive models of change than the usual designations suggest. Especially (but not exclusively) at the local level I have even found people who self-identify as ‘conservatives’ supportive of what are inherently highly “collective” forms of economic activity. Importantly, the test is usually whether what is proposed is serious and practical, and whether it can be shown to actually help the community.

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