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REIMAGINING PHILANTHROPY

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Confronting Philanthropy's Uncomfortable Truths

By Lucy Bernholz | AUGUST 25, 2020



Medical anthropology gives us a term — *syndemic* — to name what happens when independent threats such as a pandemic coronavirus finds a host in a system defined by endemic racism. The two dangers don't just stack on top of each other: They entwine, mutate, and grow in lethality.

This is where we are in the summer of 2020 in the United States. The nation was built on anti-Black racism and genocide against indigenous people. The rot of racism shapes

education, taxes, housing, policing, voting, environmental protection, and nearly every other system. Our laws, markets, and governments were designed to, and are succeeding at, exponentially concentrating those harms on the communities that white ruling people have treated as disposable for 400 years. This reality frames and feeds the many ways the United States is failing to control a virus when most of our peer nations are succeeding.

The philanthropic world sits in a precarious place as we figure out how best to respond to a level of crisis that is unprecedented in our lifetimes. Philanthropy is a product, after all, of the very tax and governance structures that have sustained our inequitable society. In this context, can nonprofits and foundations effectively address the health and economic damages of Covid-19, especially their disproportionate toll on Black, indigenous, and Latinx people? Do we have the political will to embrace the solutions we know can work but have been pushed aside in favor of philanthropic pet projects? Can we go outside our comfort zones and support less measurable and more inclusive approaches to giving and caring, such as the mutual-aid networks helping neighbors and small businesses, or the movements against racial injustice that are already leading to policy change?

If we sincerely want to answer these questions and address our syndemic crises, the nonprofit and philanthropic world needs to first do an honest self-assessment.

The Nonprofit-Industrial Complex

The nonprofit world today is nothing like the de Tocquevillian ideal of voluntary associational life. Instead, it is a vast set of mostly undercapitalized corporations, many of which are tightly bound to government funding. If the sobriquet of “nonprofit-industrial complex” makes you flinch, it might because of the truth it holds.

Few qualities can be applied equally to the huge and diverse cross section of organizations that fall under the nonprofit banner. But taken as a whole, the nonprofit world writ large is characterized by:

- Broken, costly, and often disabling relationships to philanthropic funding;
- Financial arrangements that bind organizations as outsourced contractors to governments.
- A corporatized priority for efficiency and “scale” that devalues the pursuit of hard-to-measure change and nurtures a dangerous slide toward sameness.

Although these organizations may use volunteers, little else about them could be described as voluntary by either the people they employ or those who turn to them for food, shelter, education, or medical care. The **staff and boards of nonprofit organizations** are also overwhelmingly white, making them racially distinct from the communities many of them serve.

Similar uncomfortable truths apply to what we typically call philanthropy. Entities such as foundations, philanthropic limited-liability companies, corporate philanthropy, impact investment, and donor-advised funds are all products of a robust industry of wealth and legal advisers, asset-management firms, and consultants. The people who create philanthropic organizations and those who work at them may be motivated by altruism, generosity, and even justice. But big philanthropy today is populated by institutions designed to optimize a combination of tax privilege, asset protection, and familial privacy according to the particular value calculation of the founders. Oddly, compared with the nonprofit world, philanthropy at this level is voluntary — no one has to set up any of these organizations.

Most philanthropic organizations are led by white people, resulting in **stark disparities** in funding provided to nonprofits run by Black, indigenous, or people of color. Black-led nonprofits face a philanthropic world that is as biased as that confronting Black-owned businesses seeking credit and banking services. While philanthropy is composed of many organizations committed to redressing syndemic harms, it is also home to donors and activists who embrace market fundamentalism, white supremacy, climate-change denial, and inequitable treatment of women, LGBTQ people, and immigrants. While many nonprofit and philanthropic organizations care about equity, many do not.

Philanthropists insist that they provide support in an apolitical way. But since the entire philanthropic world exists as an artifact of political choices — the tax and corporate code first among them — this is simply not possible. It is not a coincidence that Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s admonishment of white moderates applies perfectly to nonprofits and foundations. The white moderate, King said, is one who is “more devoted to ‘order’ than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice.” It’s shameful to admit it, but until white-led philanthropy and nonprofits see ourselves as King did, real change is not possible.

Addressing the Unknowns

As we wrestle with these uncomfortable truths, we also have crises to attend to that can’t wait for us to methodically get our shops in order. We are wrestling with two broad categories of unknowns. The first involves questions we can answer and strategies we can implement that will improve life for the millions of people who have never fully benefited from our democracy. What is unknown is whether we have the political will to get it done.

In 2020, the United States is a country where between a fifth and a quarter of children and families don’t have reliable access to clean water, healthy food, medical care, education, or jobs. Generations of Black men are incarcerated. Wages have barely budged in 40 years, but the rich keep getting richer. The fortunes of just **three billionaires** are worth more than the combined wealth of the poorest half of the country. To tackle these problems during the Covid-19 era, we need to address questions of immediate concern, such as:

- How do we ensure a livable wage, shelter, and food for tens of millions of our neighbors?
- Can we create a vaccine and treatments for Covid-19 and ensure equitable access to them?
- Will we spend tax dollars on community needs such as child and elder care, health services, and education — or continue to plow funds into policing, including both human and technological systems of law enforcement?
- Can we trust the election process and count on peaceful leadership transitions at a time when democratic institutions in this country are rapidly eroding?

Decades of social movements, organizing, and research have resulted in “shovel-ready” proposals for creating a more equitable society in areas such as energy, food, health, education, housing, infrastructure, justice, and transportation. Whether we choose these approaches are questions of imagination and political will.

The second category of unknowns encompasses the emotional and social toll our syndemic crises are taking on individuals and communities. We may not know the answers to these questions, but we can see them coming and contemplate what action to take:

- How, for instance, does a virus that can infect and affect everyone in the world (not equally — get over that) change how we think about being with other people? What impact will months and even years of isolation and social distancing have on the development of young children, teens, and the elderly? How can we address the slow-moving mental-health crisis, knowing that those already burdened by trauma will be hit hardest and likely served least?
- What will last from our experiments with video conferencing, digital performances, and distanced visits — and how will organizational and social structures change in response?
- Where will we get our news and how will we know what’s factual? Whom will we trust in the future?

These questions require attention and care as we go. They are opportunities to strengthen and expand places and ways of caring, coming together, and building trust.

Moving Toward Shared Responsibility

Our polarized nation appears a long way right now from that goal. Instead of a national coordinated response to contain and treat the coronavirus in the United States, we have a patchwork of regional approaches, stewing in partisan divisiveness and adding up to nothing a virus won’t exploit. But there is also another story to tell. People and communities across the country are coming together to respond to our syndemic crises with care and commitment — working in hazardous conditions, helping neighbors, expanding on and building new community-led solutions when our government systems are failing.

These are two sides of the American historical coin — we underinvest in our shared public systems while we celebrate individual generosity. This places a burden on nonprofits and philanthropy that is both too big and inappropriate to their purpose in democracies. By design, the nonprofit world is supposed to provide either an alternative to or a bolster for public programs and investments. Now it seems that we are placing the weight of collective care, justice, education, environmental action, and health care on this alternative space.

This is not a challenge philanthropy can meet. It's possible we should not even be trying, given the potential impact on our democracy. We can't let independent action — individual programs or philanthropic gifts — become a substitute for shared responsibility. The massive size of today's philanthropic funds is evidence of this phenomenon: Such ridiculous private-wealth accrual is made possible only by a tax system that ignores the needs of the many to benefit the few. The combined demands of big philanthropy and government contracting have fed the corporatization of community action. The challenges of raising funds tends to create organizations that often lack legitimacy in the communities they serve and can crowd out efforts led by local leaders and people of color.

Nonprofit and philanthropic organizations that want to address our syndemic crises need to be prepared to take on the societal systems that created them — and that have allowed their own organizations to flourish. Novelist Arundhati Roy has described the **pandemic as a portal** that allows us to decide what we bring with us as we pass through it. Do we take our inequities, divisiveness, and individualism through to the other side, or do we find ways to leave them behind and build systems that benefit the many instead of the few? This is our chance to build something better.

The Current Economic Crisis Is an Opportunity to Reset Philanthropic Priorities

By Lucy Bernholz | AUGUST 31, 2020



The U.S. economy “collapsed” in March and cratered in July, but it was broken well before. I’m not an economist, yet last October even I was able to [predict a global recession](#) in 2020. It was clear that our lived economy was fragile, discriminatory, and unreliable — although the adjectives more commonly used were automated, innovative, and entrepreneurial.

During the pandemic, a similar cognitive dissonance has taken hold in the philanthropic world where measures of charitable giving and nonprofit vitality are declining even as people

are taking to the streets, delivering aid to neighbors, creating online communities of care, and crowdfunding to keep beloved Main Street shops alive. While we search for ways to reconstruct our shattered economy into something better, we also need to reflect on how best to rebuild the nonprofit world and not simply recreate the “old normal.” To do that, we need to take an honest look at where we’re starting.

First, the hopeful news. The nonprofit world was buoyed (emotionally, at least) when five of the nation’s big foundations announced a commitment to an **additional \$1.2 billion in grant making**. This joint action, which involves a variety of measures including issuing bonds and increasing payout rates, demonstrates that even the largest foundations can act quickly and creatively when they want to. Similarly, the **#HalfMyDAF campaign**, which encourages people to give at least half the money in their donor-advised funds to nonprofits hit hard by the pandemic, shows a willingness to break the mold. These acts reflect awareness by a handful of organizations and donors that our democracy is, as Crystal Hayling, head of the Libra Foundation put it, **“on the precipice” of collapse**.

While commendable, such moves are, in reality, short-term fixes largely aimed at saving nonprofit organizations.

Neither effort involves a reconsideration of philanthropic structures, the privileges granted to them by law, or their role in perpetuating the societal systems that birthed them in the first place. Instead, they are positive steps within the confines of the old normal. They also undeniably involve a degree of self-protection for both the foundations and DAF holders fearful of expanded regulatory demands on how they use their money. Ultimately, both approaches are about giving more but not differently or necessarily better.

Nonprofits certainly need help, but before philanthropy rushes to save them, let’s consider what they’re saving. We should remind ourselves that many nonprofit jobs are poorly paid and lack benefits and that the nonprofit world fares little better than corporate America on measures of inclusion or equity. I say this not to kick nonprofits when they’re down but to ask us to think about what we’re collectively invested in repairing.

Wealthy Nonprofits Face Other Challenges

The megafauna of nonprofits — colleges, museums, libraries, performance centers, and hospitals — pose a separate set of challenges.

Many are struggling during a pandemic that has made physical gathering dangerous, forcing them to move quickly to incorporate digital opportunities without making their brick-and-mortar institutions obsolete. How, for example, will higher education justify the expenses associated with residential life when most teaching is occurring online? The universities that figure out how to do it right and survive the pandemic will be models for a new normal in higher education.

Navigating this transition will require wholesale reconsideration of both individual organizations and their collective approach to digital rules and practices regarding issues of privacy and intellectual property.

While the biggest of the big nonprofits are struggling, smaller, community-based networks of care that rarely attracted outside funding are raising what might become unprecedented amounts of money. Bail funds and mutual-aid groups have used the internet and social media, as well as months of media attention, to attract money from new donors in faraway locales who previously knew little or nothing about these groups. Almost every solidarity statement received in email inboxes over the past few months, whether from employers, major retail brands, banks, elected officials, or even local bookstores, has called out a set of Black-led organizations to support. And people are opening up their wallets in response.

Anecdotally, we are also giving to local restaurants, newspapers, artists, musicians, and unions. But unless data-reporting rules change, we have no way to quantify this generosity since much of it takes place on private platforms through services such as GoFundMe, Patreon, Venmo, and PayPal. The same holds for the time, energy, money, and physical safety that people spend putting their bodies on the streets for racial justice. These collective actions remain uncounted, even as they lead to policy change in cities and corporations. As I've written about in the *Blueprint* series, this giving also demonstrates how little donors care about tax incentives when it comes to working for social justice, keeping small businesses alive, and so many other important causes.

Will Americans Give More or Less?

Here's what I predict for several years to come: We will see declines in measured charitable giving, declines in the number of nonprofits and the size of their budgets, and a reduction in the size of philanthropic foundations.

Here's what none of that will tell us: Are Americans doing less to care for their neighbors and neighborhoods, to advocate for justice, to make change in their communities? In the summer of 2020 as people take to the streets, participate in local support networks, and volunteer for political campaigns, it certainly doesn't seem that way. We give in innumerable ways, but because we don't count them, they don't count in terms of understanding how much people give or how much time they spend advocating for different policies.

This presents opportunities for rethinking how philanthropy operates. To get started, we should:

- Re-write the rules about what kind of giving counts and develop meaningful measures of those activities.
- Create new types of institutions, modeled on mutual-aid networks, that encourage participation from community members while also ensuring their personal safety, including protecting their digital data and their right to participate in collective action.

- Design new ways of managing data that build off the emergence of entities such as **open collectives** and **data collaboratives**, which enable groups of people to safely and effectively use digital data to advocate for change. Nonprofits were designed for the analog age. It's times for a digital upgrade.
- Encourage philanthropic investment in community-led efforts to help nonprofits incorporate safe and effective digital practices. Inspirational models include Detroit's **Equitable Internet Initiative** and a few Indigenous-led efforts to bring **high-speed broadband to Tribal Nations**.

Each of these ideas provides an opening for foundations to help community groups and mutual-aid networks flourish without falling back on the old inequitable and unproductive rules of giving. Community foundations such as the **Chicago Community Trust** are already taking steps in that direction.

Local nonprofits should also look for ways they can support and learn from the care and aid networks in their communities, including strengthening rather than diminishing grassroots leadership. This is a chance to not just save nonprofits; it is an opportunity to turn them into more effective vehicles for change.

Let's Dismantle Toxic Tax Policies That Feed Big Philanthropy

By Lucy Bernholz | SEPTEMBER 8, 2020



In her new book, *Civic Gifts*, sociologist Elisabeth Clemens analyzes the relationship between nonprofit organizations and American government and, in the process, forces us to set aside a powerful myth about the philanthropic world: the myth of independence. Focusing on nonprofits and philanthropy without talking about the public systems that surround them and the public-policy choices that shape them is the equivalent of a young farmer polishing the apples she submits to judges at a county fair while ignoring the health of the soil in which those apples were grown.

In the United States today, a toxic tax code permeates our soil and prevents us from growing into a more equitable society. Our current tax laws starve our schools, hospitals, transit, and elder-care systems. They allow individuals to become trillionaires and corporations to pay nothing. They enable the amassing of philanthropic fortunes so large that people turn to them when government efforts fail.

For decades, these policies have concentrated financial benefits on the white ruling class while extracting wealth from low-income Black and brown people. The pandemic is the “big reveal” of the truly shared nature of these systemic inequities.

The political agendas of nonprofit and philanthropic advocacy organizations have focused for too long on the wrong end of tax policy. This includes deduction rates for charitable giving, payout rates for endowments, exemption rates for nonprofits, prevention of municipalities from taxing endowed or nonprofit property, and postage rates for certain charitable materials. Proposals of this type are fine, but they circumvent the most important issue: how our existing tax structure enables unjust accumulation by the already wealthy.

All but ignored in trade-association agendas for the philanthropic world are the **larger issues** of estate taxes, carried interest rates, corporate tax shelters, and personal exemptions that have contributed to the highest rates of wealth inequality in the world’s history. Why? Because those same rules produce, theoretically, more big philanthropy.

A Feature or a Bug?

The question we must ask is whether a system that enables such massive concentration of wealth at the expense of an equitable society and functioning government programs should be sustained. Are the massive philanthropic legacies produced as a byproduct of this system a feature or a bug? Celebrity culture, the cult of the big, and tech boosterism have argued for the former. But perhaps, in the face of systemic failures so deep they can’t be ignored, we will see it as the bug it really is.

Philanthropic fortunes, created at the expense of shared investment in government programs, will not and cannot address issues such as structural racism, inequitable public support for health care, housing, insufficient efforts to halt climate change, and so much more. Those failures are ours collectively. Only together can we solve them. It isn’t simply that the funding doesn’t add up — it’s that relying on philanthropy and nonprofits to do the public’s work is a form of lower cost outsourcing with less accountability. It’s not democratic. And it’s not working.

Abrogating Our Responsibilities

Moving in a new direction will require philanthropy and nonprofits to actively support public policies that dig deep into soil-level issues, including advocating for a just and fair

tax code. That means, for example, challenging laws that minimize taxes on carried interest rates. Such laws benefit hedge funds, private-equity firms, and their owners. And these investment companies, in turn, contribute to the **devastation of main streets**, the decimation of **local journalism**, and the decline in the quality of services for the elderly.

By failing to organize and support advocacy for equitable tax policies, philanthropy reveals that its devotion to fueling its own growth is greater than its allegiance to its stated missions.

Most foundations and their advocacy associations would never admit this, of course. Instead, they simply focus their limited advocacy elsewhere. But failing to fix our tax policies destroys the soil in which public policies, such as our social safety net, grow. To ask philanthropy to step up and provide an alternative source of funding is to abrogate our responsibility to govern ourselves.

Philanthropic leaders themselves are quick to remind us that they don't have the money to fix massive public systems like education or health care. In other words, we need to stop underfunding government programs and start recognizing that philanthropy cannot fill in the gaps. We need to stop ignoring the reality of tax and wealth inequality and acknowledge that the status quo, no matter how much it benefits philanthropy, isn't working.

Digital Dependence Has Obliterated the Notion of Nonprofit Independence

By Lucy Bernholz | SEPTEMBER 15, 2020



Nonprofits, foundations, political organizers, street protestors, and each of us as individuals are dependent on the digital world. We rely on hardware, software, and digital networks to work, shop, entertain, connect, pay bills, and organize. And that was before the pandemic forced many people to figure out how to manage nearly every aspect of their lives remotely.

Our dependence on digital systems — almost all of which are commercially owned and government surveilled — reduces the notion of an independent space for civic action to a farce.

This digital dependence, like the **tax system discussed previously** in this series, is another toxic element of the soil that feeds today's nonprofit and philanthropic organizations. Digital copies of your organization's documents, financial information, community and donor information, coalition plans, and video-conference board meetings live on big tech's servers and are controlled by their rules.

This data collection is no longer limited to the time you spend on keyboards staring at screens. The hype about 5G, the Internet of Things, and Smart Cities is a techno-optimistic way of describing a reality in which the internet follows you when you move through city streets, across a plaza, or in a park, whether to picnic or protest. Companies such as Palantir, Clearview AI, and Axon power the security in buildings, the spot counters in parking garages, and the tag readers on office buildings. We leave digital trails when we actively go online and when we go outside.

It's a useful visual to imagine the work done by all the nonprofits, foundations, political groups, and protestors in the country as a few folders on the hard drives — otherwise known as the “cloud” — owned by Amazon, Google, Microsoft, Facebook, Clearview AI, and Axon. There is nothing independent in this scenario. Civil society, nonprofits, and foundations are subsumed in a digital world dominated by governments and companies.

A few nonprofits, such as the American Civil Liberties Union, the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, and Fight for the Future, which organizes campaigns for digital rights, have tracked the digital trackers and fought to protect civil liberties in digital spaces for decades. Most, however, have allowed themselves to be seduced into ever expanding dependencies. Corporate philanthropic gifts of free or low-cost software, cloud storage, or hardware (think “Tech for Good” programs) are visible signs of this seduction. Financial contributions from these companies further entangle nonprofit organizations, which become loathe, for example, to seek municipal broadband when cable companies donate to their annual fund.

If nonprofits and foundations want to continue to think of themselves as independent from the market and the government, they will need to embrace alternative technologies, new digital organizational forms, and a commitment to creating public policies that enable the safe use of digital platforms by those taking collective actions. Fortunately, promising efforts are already underway in each of these areas.

Alternative technologies. Two of the most pervasive pieces of software in use today — Mozilla's Firefox browser and Open Whisper System's Signal messaging system — are built and maintained by nonprofit organizations. These tools, and the organizations and communities that support them, exist to provide accessible, privacy-protected, noncommercial alternatives for browsing the web or communicating with family, friends, and communities. Similarly, efforts such as the **Open Voice Assistant Lab** and the Common Voice project aim to protect privacy and encourage competition in the fast-growing area of virtual-assistant technology.

New organizational forms. Entities such as civic data trusts, data collaboratives, and **open collectives** allow digital data to be used safely and effectively to advocate for change. Think of these as land trusts for data. A group of people — say those volunteering as Covid-19 vaccine testers — could create a trust, appoint trustees who represent them by age, geography, race, gender, and other characteristics, and determine how their data is used. The trust holds the rights to the data, and the trustees would negotiate access to those data rights according to trust law and the original agreements. This would provide legal protection to use the data for medical research, for example, but not for the needs of law enforcement or immigration authorities.

Such organizations remain rare today. But just as the B Corporation movement accelerated socially positive commercial activity in recent years, this is an ideal moment to accelerate the growth of digitally positive organizations. After all, as historians Jonathan Levy and Naomi Lamoreaux have explained, the nonprofit corporation itself emerged from 19th-century negotiations between profit-maximizing investors and state governments. The modern foundation was born of a 20th-century legislative compromise between the U.S. Congress and the State of New York regarding the creation of the Rockefeller Foundation. Likewise, this is the time to imagine and collectively create 21st-century organizations that help people contribute their private data for public benefit.

Better public policy. The legal landscape surrounding digital data is broad and complex, covering seemingly distinct domains such as intellectual property, freedom of information, broadband access, and the rights to privacy, assembly, and expression. Luckily, nonprofit organizations ranging from the ACLU to Wikimedia are already providing critical expertise and advocacy on these issues. And associations of libraries and public broadcasters, media-justice and civil-rights groups, environmental advocates, and human-rights lawyers are finding common ground on digital public policies ranging from net neutrality to encryption.

Our digital systems are here to stay. We need tools, organizations, and laws that protect our rights to assemble, associate, and express ourselves as we choose — not as we are dictated to by corporate or government entities.

Democracies fall when there is no space outside the market or governments for people to gather, speak, take action, create, and care for each other. Civil society's purpose is to provide this metaphorical space. It is time to ensure that we have the same opportunities in a world awash in digital data. Simply put, digital public policies are now the policy agenda for the nonprofit and philanthropic world.

What Now? The Philanthropic Future Our Democracy Needs

By Lucy Bernholz | SEPTEMBER 22, 2020



November ... Two-and-a-half years ... Never ... Each of these is a prediction I've read in reputable national newspapers about when the pandemic will end.

The most optimistic predictions generally focus on when a tested vaccine could be ready for production. The two-and-a-half-year forecast takes into account the reality of America today, including vast disparities in health care, employment, and schooling that could hamper the distribution and effectiveness of a vaccine. And the “never” prognosticators point to the link

between climate change and infectious disease, noting that even the end of this coronavirus won't mark the end of pandemics or other health and environmental catastrophes.

In truth, no one knows when the pandemic will end. And Covid-19 is far from our only unpredictable challenge at this moment. The centuries-old struggle for racial justice continues. Income inequities are growing. And then there's the 2020 U.S. election — perhaps the biggest wild card of all.

So, where does this leave us? We can seek paths forward by imagining a better future and expand on efforts that have already shown us what “better” can look like. At the same time, we need to also look backward to identify and fix what's standing in our way. My provocations below are meant to do both.

New Rules for Collective Action

Nonprofits and foundations are defined by laws. They exist to provide an alternative or complement to governments and markets. They are by no means the only such alternatives. We worship together; we create aid networks or cooperatives; we pool our resources to build everything from libraries to independent neighborhood Wi-Fi networks; we provide care to others as acts of reciprocity; we share our voices and our resources; we build digital communities and physical communities, and we take action by connecting the two.

The laws that define which organizations and forms of donating are given tax breaks, required to report on their activities, and recognized as community assets need to change. They need to account for the differences between deeply rooted cultural traditions of care, such as mutual-aid networks, and decentralized global grass-roots movements such as those currently pushing for government action on climate change. To understand our public life, we need greater visibility into the data that flows through proprietary payment and crowdfunding platforms that power all this civic action.

We also need ways to determine how digital platforms shape whom we associate with — an important issue for membership organizations whose ranks are increasingly filled by those who “find” them on Facebook and other social-media platforms. Given everything we've learned about the spread of disinformation online, we should investigate how digital profiling shapes what groups we learn about, what events we attend, and which organizations we ultimately join. Without new rules to guide us, we are in danger of allowing the companies that sort algorithms to determine our engagement in civic life.

Beyond Tax Exemptions

Tax systems and budgets are signs of a society's priorities. As long as the U.S. tax system prioritizes wealth accumulation over fair economic participation, the social issues that nonprofits and foundations address will get worse, not better. A tax agenda that seeks to

limit wealth inequalities would provide greater public funding for social, educational, and environmental services. While it might limit the growth of new philanthropic contributions, the sum of resources available and the public control over those resources would likely lead to more equitable systems of care than any amount of private philanthropic largesse.

Philanthropy and nonprofits have the potential to demonstrate practices that other institutions might follow. We've seen this with mission-related investing and grant-making approaches that shift funding decisions to groups and individuals in the communities that foundations serve. In recent months, foundations and nonprofits have made statements of solidarity with the cause of racial justice, and some have made real changes in their practices. **Justice Funders**, for instance, is a community of philanthropic leaders committed to redistributing wealth and shifting power and economic control to communities most in need. **Liberated Capital** applies the lessons of decolonization by trusting and supporting those harmed most by historical and systemic racism.

But much more is needed. Might we, for example, see a foundation not only pledge to engage community members in selecting grantees but also go further and dedicate its assets to the communities and people from whom the wealth was originally extracted? Will foundations pay reparations to descendants of the enslaved people whose labor capitalized them or the **indigenous stewards of the lands** on which they sit? Some white-led nonprofits are beginning to embrace the “spread the abundance” model practiced by bail funds, which give any extra money raised beyond what that group needs to other bail funds — rather than stashing it away for themselves. This erases the normative model that says donors should dictate where their money goes and instead puts the decision in the hands of those closest to the need. These are edge practices now, but what would “better” look like if such approaches became the norm?

While tax changes that encourage more equitable participation in civil society are worth considering, we should keep in mind that money is not the only thing we donate and tax breaks aren't our only motivator for participation. We have plenty of room here to get creative. Perhaps greater civic participation rests not on tax cuts but on broadband access? Universal child care or kindergarten might unleash more civic and political involvement than any tax benefit. Economic policies that center equity and environmental care might do more to save the planet than tax changes.

We have countless ways to participate, to organize, and to make change in our communities. It's time we expanded our imaginations about the policy levers we could use to support them.

Better Digital Systems

Digital systems can fuel collective change, as long as people have agency over them. Digital systems are **on/off switches** for many more aspects of our lives than we pay attention to.

They connect our energy networks and our schools; we use them for health care and managing public utilities; we rely on them for news and personal communication, transportation, public safety, political participation, civic action, employment, and almost every interaction we have with an organization.

If these systems and the data they generate and rely on are to serve us, we **must** govern them to ensure that equitable access — not profit — is the priority. We need laws, public policy, and regulations that **put society in control**, rather than allowing companies to define the digital bounds of our daily lives. This is particularly important for nonprofits, foundations, and civil society, which cannot function as a counterweight to governments and corporations, given their dependence on digital systems made and monitored by companies and states.

Redefining Where ‘Good’ Happens

The enormous growth of nonprofits and philanthropy since the end of World War II has limited our imaginations about where society’s good works happen. But these entities have never made up the whole of civil society. Since the turn of the 20th century, numerous new options have come knocking at the door. They include impact investing, new forms of journalism; giving circles, B corporations; open-data collectives, native American repatriation funds, and a horizon’s worth of other “nonprofit-adjacent” institutions that have taken hold.

It’s a critical time to look at this spectrum of structures and strategies and reconsider what gets privileged, certified, and supported in this country. If we are to plan for a better future, we need to remind ourselves that we are starting from a much more dynamic, diverse, and inclusive space than we officially credit.

At the beginning of this **series**, I referred to a term used in medical anthropology — syndemic — to describe the challenges when multiple crises intertwine. In 2020, those crises — structural racism, a novel coronavirus, climate catastrophe, and the uncertainty of electoral democracy — threaten to overwhelm us. But as we’ve seen, this time of profound need is also teaching us positive lessons about collective care and action. Let’s remember those lessons as we consider where we go from here.

APPENDIX

YOU SHOULD ALSO READ, WATCH, AND FOLLOW

This series draws from (and, I hope, builds on) the work of many activists, writers, filmmakers, and scholars. Many sources are hyperlinked in the series. Because there are no footnotes, I've created this list to help you find some of the people whose work goes before me. Check my Twitter feed to see who I **follow**. I use the **like button** as a bookmark for people/things to learn about (though not always – no guarantees).

BLOGS/WEBSITES/REPORTS/NEWSLETTERS

The **Equitable Evaluation Framework** from the **Equitable Evaluation Initiative**, @jdeancoffey

Mikealia Davis, **Risks for the Future We Want**, *SSIR*, July 23, 2020

Cheryl Dorsey, Jeff Bradach, Peter Kim, **Racial Equity and Philanthropy: Disparities in Funding for Leaders of Color Leave Impact on the Table**

Civic Hall's **First Post** newsletter. Now – Micah Sifry's **The Connector** Newsletter @msifry

Crystal Hayling, **On the Precipice. Get In and Stay In.** @CHayling

HistPhil Blog, @HistPhil

Vu Le, **NonprofitAF** @nonprofitaf

Public Books' Newsletter @PublicBooks

Ethan Zuckerman, **The Case For Digital Public Infrastructure**, @ethanz

MOVIES/VIDEOS/PODCASTS, ETC.

African American Policy Forum, **Under the Blacklight** series

Crip Camp, movie and resources. @CripCamp

Intersectionality Matters with Kimberlé Crenshaw (podcast, includes video interviews from AAPF Under the Blacklight Series) @sandylocks

Hear to Slay, Roxanne Gay and Tressie McMillan Cottom, podcast, @rgay and @tressiemcphd

Philanthropy and Social Movements **Podcast**, class taught by Megan Ming Francis

Through The Night Film, by Loira Limbal, @DJLaylo

RECENT SCHOLARSHIP

Ruha Benjamin, *Race after Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code*, @ruha9

Andre Brock, Jr: *Distributed Blackness: African American Cybercultures*, @DocDre

Sasha Constanza-Chock, *Design Justice: Community-Led Practices to Build the Worlds We Need* @schock

Nick Estes, *Our History is the Future: Standing Rock Versus the Dakota Access Pipeline, and the Long Tradition of Indigenous Resistance*, @nickwestes

Lina Khan, *Amazon's Antitrust Paradox*, (not new, but critical), @linamkhan

Tressie McMillan Cottom, *LowerEd: The Troubling Rise of For-Profit Colleges in the New Economy* (not new, but critical), @tressiemcphd

Alondra Nelson, *Body and Soul: The Black Panther Party and the Fight Against Medical Discrimination*, (not new, but critical), @alondra

Victor Ray, "Why So Many Organizations Stay White," Harvard Business Review (Paywall temporarily removed) <https://hbr.org/2019/11/why-so-many-organizations-stay-white>, @victorerikray

Dorothy Roberts, *Fatal Invention: How Science, Politics and Big Business Re-Crete Race in the Twenty-first Century* (2012, not new, but critical) @DorothyERoberts

Caroline Shenaz Hossein, *Mutual aid and physical distancing are not new for Black and racialized minorities in the Americas*, @carolinehossein

Edgar Villenuava, *Decolonizing Wealth: Indigenous Wisdom to Heal Divides and Restore Balance*, @VillanuevaEdgar

Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *Race for Profit: How Banks and the Real Estate Industry Undermined Black Homeownership*, @KeeangaYamahtta

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HistPhil's Bibliography, <https://histphil.org/2020/06/12/updating-histphils-reading-list/>

Critical Race and Digital Studies Syllabus, <https://criticalracedigitalstudies.com/syllabus/>

Philanthropy and Social Movements *Syllabus* (Megan Ming Francis)



Stanford PACS

Center on Philanthropy
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The Stanford Center on Philanthropy and Civil Society (PACS) is a global interdisciplinary research center and publisher of the *Stanford Social Innovation Review* (SSIR). Stanford PACS develops and shares knowledge to improve philanthropy, strengthen civil society, and address societal challenges. By creating a shared space for scholars, students, and practitioners, Stanford PACS informs policy and social innovation, philanthropic investment, and nonprofit practice.

ABOUT DCSL

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The Stanford Digital Civil Society Lab seeks to understand, inform, protect and promote civil society in a digitally dependent world. Our goal is to foster a thriving and independent digital civil society rooted in a democratic commitment to freedom of association and assembly, freedom of speech and privacy. Our approach is interdisciplinary and cross-sectoral.
