We the Worldwide Network of Public Entrepreneurs
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Introducing *We the Possibility: Harnessing Public Entrepreneurship to Solve Our Most Urgent Problems*, Mitchell Weiss plaintively asks, "Can We Solve Public Problems Anymore?" (p. 1) His motivation for the book was "the sense that all over the world people [are] turning on each other" and "we should try to get them to turn together toward something else …" (p. 4)

Toward that end, he calls for the institution of *Possibility Government* in pursuit of "efforts that only *might* work, which means … they probably won't work." (pp. 4 & 5) It is counterintuitive to think that failing more often might either: a) reduce political polarization, or b) engender greater confidence in government. Yet Weiss observes that emerging leaders are "harnessing a set of techniques to get well beyond the reach of established agencies and even that of so-called experts." (p. 44)

Conversely, [Tom Nichols rails against](#) the "ignorant narcissism [of] laypeople to believe they can maintain a large and advanced nation without listening to the voices of those more educated and experienced than themselves." (p. 208) Counterbalancing that argument, Weiss says, "a competency trap seduces us into sticking with existing practices, because we have become relatively skilled at them, and this keeps us from pursuing new ones ..." (p. 66)

In the realm of *The Politics Industry*, [Katherine Gehl and Michael Porter](#) assert the way we elect public officials is such a self-destructive lair. Weiss acknowledges, "We have enough foolishness these days in our politics. We have bad ideas that are bad because we disregard the truth. We have bad ideas that are bad because ideology causes us to hold onto them…" Nevertheless, he suggests, "we can tolerate more bad ideas – in fact, we need them – as long as we can, ultimately, figure out a way to pursue the good ones that come alongside." (p. 67) In search of better ideas, he says:

- Citizens should "Demand participation at the outset of policy-generated processes" and "object when public opinions are solicited only after recommendations have been made." (p. 70)
- The process of building, measuring, and learning is a way to stop lying to ourselves. (p. 88)
- Transparency can increase public trust and engagement in government. (p. 89)

Additionally, in a case of gross understatement, he suggests public policy experiments might benefit from "some more rigor" and "targeted results". (p. 105) With respect to such shortcomings, Weiss emphasizes two ways in which we may routinely engage in self-delusion about public policy:

- Targeting the symptoms of problems and failing to identify their underlying causes. (p. 200)
- Ignoring evidence that proposed solutions cannot work. (p. 201)

With respect to the first point, the problem of polarization is [not a bug but rather an inherent feature](#) of politics. The bigger the politics, the greater the polarization. It cannot be alleviated by more of the same good, old-fashioned politics as usual ([#gofpau](#)). If the goal is to bring people together, the thought that politics might be the way to do so is delusional. Even at the local level, Weiss says, "… too often the urban tech world goes all in on solutions to symptoms. They're not worth the effort and often have unintended effects." (p. 203) Greatly magnifying that problem, Federal mandates are "all in" for everyone, are designed to help politicians to get reelected, and inevitably have vast unintended consequences.

In the case of U.S. federal agencies, the second point takes on special meaning as a case of [artificial ignorance](#). For more than a decade they have ignored [section 10](#) of the GPRA Modernization Act (GPRAMA), which directs them to publish their performance plans and reports in machine-readable format. To the degree agencies may have specified any targeted results, they have declined to report their actual results in ways readily meaningful to taxpayers and other citizens – including the intended beneficiaries of their programs, who might like to have a voice in the matter.

With reference to early participation in policymaking, valid concerns about [ex parte communication](#) lead agencies to do the opposite of what Weiss suggests, i.e., to be secretive and purposefully *exclude* input until after regulatory notices have been published in the *Federal Register*, which only lobbyists take the time to read. Meanwhile, in Congress legislation is often drafted in secret by lobbyists, and citizens only have the opportunity to learn about it *after* it has been introduced and co-sponsors have committed their reputations to it.

Worse yet, for major legislation, often in need of urgent action, Members of Congress themselves may have scant opportunity to read, much less analyze it before being required to vote. Indeed, the Speaker of the House infamously asserted that national health care legislation

should be passed so that citizens could see what was in it. It was [hurriedly pushed through](#) before a newly elected Senator could be seated so as to deny the opportunity for the new balance of power to be reflected in the vote. Surely, that cannot be the kind of experimentation Weiss has in mind, i.e., seeing how much powerful, populist politicians can impose upon the public without their informed consent.

To the contrary, rather than continuing to rely on [#gofpau](#), Weiss cites the power of *technology platforms* to "bring together individuals and organizations so they can innovate or interact in ways not otherwise possible …" (p. 119) He notes that such platforms "bring together users in ways that create value for other users." (p. 120) By contrast, politics drives us into warring camps and plunders value from those who have created it for transfer to those who have not (i.e., the "[have-nots](#)").

On the other hand, to the degree existing "social" media platforms tend to inflame passions and accentuate differences, they exemplify the point made by Henry Kissinger in turning [Carl von Clausewitz's assertion](#) on its head, to wit: "politics is a continuation of war by other means." As such, the *incumbent platforms* may be a bigger part of the problem than the solution and that may be true in both senses of the word -- not only the relatively new [technology platforms](#) but also traditional [political party platforms](#).

As for where to find potentially unifying platforms, Weiss suggests starting in our own neighborhoods and that is consistent with Damon [Centola's recommendation](#) to target nodes on the periphery of networks. (p. 123) However, in order to do so effectively, it may be necessary first to address the dynamic Raghuram [Rajan has observed](#): "The state and markets have expanded their powers and reach in tandem, and left the community relatively powerless …" (p. xiii)

Regardless of particulars, the purpose of tech platforms is conceptually the same – to connect people to share information and create complementary products. (p. 124) Another way of stating that is to empower communities of results (CoRs), based upon shared values supported by common and complementary objectives. What differentiates them is the type of results delivered to their users, e.g., sharing photos and videos (Facebook, YouTube, Instagram & TikTok), bleating thoughts and emotions on the spur of the moment (Twitter), or finding new jobs (LinkedIn). Public concern about the big tech platforms focuses on the degrees to which they monopolize attention and distract from more important matters (like the education of youth to thrive in the real world) while surreptitiously shaping mass opinion to suit their own purposes and inadvertently fostering extremism disconnected from reality.

With reference to the reality of empowering CoRs, Gai Berkovich has suggested that managing a community is a kind of witchcraft – part science and part art. (p. 137) However, that is a reflection of the immaturity of the tools at hand. Whereas creativity and art will always have aesthetic appeal, business can and should be scientifically managed. When the purpose of a community is to conduct business, including the business of government, the effectiveness with

which it does so is a matter of organizational maturity rather than artistry, much less incantations and witchcraft.

In that sense, all of the existing social networking services are immature for business-quality usage. People have every right to use such services as they see fit, on their own time – for personal, social and private pleasure. Nonetheless, with respect to prospects for continuous improvement and collective progress in productive processes, Steve Jobs' assertion is highly relevant: It is not the role of customers to know what they might desire but, rather, the role of entrepreneurs to show them what they can have if they wish.

To address the desire for more cost-effective government, Weiss suggests cultivation of a new network of *trisector entrepreneurs*, with experience working in all three domains – private, public, and not-for-profit. (p. 141) However, by definition, such a network would be exclusive rather than inclusive. While taxpayers toil in support of the government for nearly a third of each year, only an elite few are actually employed by Uncle Sam and thus net recipients rather than contributors to the public coffers. Still fewer have the opportunity to work in two of the sectors, much less all three. The notion of a tri-sectoral elite also has ethical implications relating to the proverbial revolving door and would ramp up the already disproportionate power of The Politics Industry so insightfully decried by Gehl and Porter.

Nevertheless, the world's biggest, most challenging problems *do* call for cooperation among governments, businesses, and nonprofits. (p. 154) So the question is how best to enable coordination, taking into account the essence of each domain – the market (self-interested cooperation), government (politically driven coercion), and the charitable sector (personal good will toward others). The desired ends will not serve themselves. The means matter. What is required is technologically enabled interpersonal and interorganizational coordination at scale – not personalized preferential power accorded a tri-sectoral elite.

As a matter of principle, cooperation and good will should be maximized while coercion should be invoked sparingly, as a matter of last resort. Together with national defense, among the government's key roles is addressing market failures, including protecting common resources and dealing with free-riders and externalities. (p. 208) However, politically motivated dictates are no substitute for the free exchange of value among willing participants in the marketplace. Indeed, as Ann Mei Chang points out, even for charitable purposes "the most simple and straightforward engine for growth is a traditional market-driven business model." (p. 139)

With respect to the role of the nonprofit sector, Bill Gates has proffered that "... philanthropy is good at managing high-risk projects that governments can't take on and corporations won't …" (p. 209) In allocating resources among the three sectors, perhaps we should rely less upon the coercive power of The Politics Industry and more on good will exercised in the nonprofit sector.

With respect to nonprofits, Rob Reich believes foundations "subvert democratic aims" because they lack accountability and transparency. He questions the justification for the tax deductions that fund them. (p. 209) However, that problem can readily be remedied by:

- Requiring open-book management,
- Strategically aligning (linking) nonprofit objectives to public objectives, and
- Applying machine-readable data standards to financial and performance plans and reports.

Why should that not be expected of all organizations whose plans and reports should be matters of public record, including corporate social responsibility (CSR) plans and reports, for example?

Aside from the fact that Reich assumes the government has an inherent right to commandeer unspecified amounts of other people's money (OPM), his point of view also raises a false flag in that it misdirects attention away from the fact that public agencies also commonly lack transparency, much less accountability. Indeed, Weiss bets that "if we looked at the evidence, more failures in government go unpunished than do." (p. 215) To achieve any degree of accountability, he notes, "we need an investigative press and other public watchdogs to sniff out public corruption and ineptitude." (p. 217)

Beyond that, however, Federal agencies should be held accountable for complying with the law directing them to publish their performance plans and reports in open, standard, machine-readable format. If government agencies themselves ignore the law, how can it be said that we are a nation governed by the rule of law? Indeed, to the degree that the rule of law is deemed an essential component, how can we truly claim to be a democracy in pursuit of a more perfect union?

Whether more or less law is justified is debatable but there should be no doubt about whether the law is in fact the law, based upon its plain meaning. Nor should there be any question that the political elite are at least as responsible for complying with it as the common citizen.

Moreover, in the public sphere, diffusion of responsibility means the old adage comes quite liberally into play: When everyone is responsible, no one is. By contrast, in competitive markets, discipline is explicitly and ruthlessly enforced. Performance counts and most entrepreneurs are driven out of business.

One way to level the playing field and turbocharge the necessary transformation toward a less imperfect union would be to make charitable contributions tax-creditable rather than merely tax-deductible, thereby empowering nonprofits to compete with public agencies for the right to *coordinate* the expenditure of reasonable sums of OPM.

If intended beneficiaries were empowered to choose how to allocate their respective shares of the public largesse, the impact would be dramatically inclusive and potentially highly productive. By routing income transfers through local, *community-based* employment/social service organizations, the have-nots could be empowered not only to acquire reasonable amounts of OPM through their own efforts but also to contribute to the prosperity of society in return. The

overall impact would be to leverage the coordination of the [invisible hand](#) of self-interest in a relatively apolitical market for good, based upon personal responsibility and mutual good will.

By contrast, with reference to voting as a means of divesting personal responsibility and facilitating coordination, Martin Gilens and Benjamin Page offer insight [noted by other observers](#) as well: "The preferences of the average American appear to have only a miniscule, non-zero, statistically non-significant impact upon public policy." (p. 162)

Despite suggesting that democracy has been "the architecture of the world's great scaling experiments," Weiss nonetheless asks, "How might we allow the people to self-govern?" (p. 169) Yet, even as he poses that question, he falls in line with the common wisdom/artificial ignorance by failing to recognize the inherent contradiction between self-governance and democracy as it is generally understood to encompass voting and majority rule.

As John Stuart [Mill observed](#), voting is about exerting power over others. Moreover, [majoritarianism](#) defies the will of minorities. From the perspective of the "losers," that's the *opposite* of *self*-governance. It also flies in the face of an avowed support for diversity and inclusion. To the degree that incumbents commonly prevail in ["safe" electoral districts](#), it is akin to [welfare for the rich](#).

As Weiss notes, "Only the naive would ignore politics completely, but only the timid would use politics as possibility's sole indicator." (p. 203) We can and we should do better than that. From a technical standpoint, among Weiss' ideas are to share data; think beyond software; use hardware, rules (laws) and processes (operating plans); and build integrated personal networks. (pp. 177 & 178)

Beyond those technicalities, he concludes more broadly, "there are all sorts of substantive actions we could all take, without waiting on our national leaders." (p. 218) Toward that end, his most important suggestion is to build personal networks of public entrepreneurs who are:

- Unbounded by artificial geo-political constraints imposed by national political leaders, parties, and institutions, and
- Empowered by more mature, business-quality networking services undergirded by international open data standards, like StratML.

As such apolitical communities of results (CoRs) coalesce and scale, the answer to Weiss' urgent question will become a resounding "[yes, we can](#)" come together to solve public problems – far better than ever before possible!