

WHY WE NEED BOLDNESS AND BRAVERY IN THESE TIMES OF CHANGE

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These are times of upheaval

Everything seems to be breaking down.

The economy is not working for most people. Incomes are stagnant, jobs are insecure and the future is uncertain. The political systems of many countries are in disarray, their legitimacy draining away as established parties cling to power at the mercy of insurgent populist movements emerging from the

margins and extremes. As if that were not enough, the international order is also unravelling, with increased belligerence between states and a deep-crisis in the EU. This is compounded by the threat of Islamic terrorism, with its disregard for modern, liberal values of equal rights, democracy and free speech and growing signs of tension and conflict in Africa and Asia. And this all takes place against a backdrop of mounting environmental crisis, as the climate warms and competition mounts over critical resources such as water and fossil fuel.

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These breakdowns are a product of the way that a complex, interconnected and densely technological society changes, in ways that create a kind of vortex into which we find ourselves sucked. Our society seems turned inside out by turbulent flows of migrants and money. Old, established and ostensibly powerful institutions find themselves clinging onto power they once took for granted, while new insurgent, full of energy that can be both destructive and creative emerge to challenge them without being able to put anything solid in their place. Out of this vortex comes a huge variety of unpredictable currents.

The antidote being touted is greater control

That is the world the social and philanthropic sector finds itself in, along with everyone else: desperately trying to find shelter from the storm while trying to make sense of what to do. The challenge for the sector is what it can offer to the people it serves as a way to respond to these breakdowns.

‘The control response represses human potential, denies social agency and undermines democracy.’

If the problem is that the world feels out of control to many people then lots of people are going to offer enhanced control—systems, walls, checks, barriers, rules—as a solution, and this is one competing offer we have already seen proposed to keep the alien and unsettling forces at bay. That offer of control is the calling card of authoritarian populism and the democratic recession that we’re living through. Control sells, and not just politically.

Beyond control through authoritarian politics are a bunch of other people who are offering control through technology. That’s basically Facebook, Amazon, Apple and Google. Their message is that the world will become much more manageable, predictable and controllable if we just give them all of our data and allow their algorithms and systems to make decisions on our behalf. We are being schooled to just follow what Siri or Alexa tells us to do, where to go and what to eat, what to buy, who to mate with, where to go on holiday. ‘Just follow me’ the

technology says. And in the situation that we find ourselves in many people will opt for technology as a guide rather than a politician.

The social sector offers alternative responses

If we in the social sector do not instinctively like these kinds of solutions because they repress human potential, deny social agency and undermine democracy, then what is our alternative offer?

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Here are some things that I am absolutely sure we're going to see more of. What should be the social sector's position on these tendencies?

We are going to see a lot more **escapism**. If you face a sense of existential crisis a natural response is to want to escape from it. There will be more offers of escape, distraction, relief, respite, fantasy, immersing ourselves in computer games, football on television, recreational and other drugs. Escapism, I think, comes in good and bad forms. What we have to offer is a good, uplifting utopian escapism that shows people there is a way out of the mess we find ourselves in. The social sector should be society's escape party, imagining a different future. The capitalists cannot re-imagine capitalism. It's going to have to come from somewhere else. That creates a huge opportunity for social business and social investment.

Another thing we're going to see a lot more of is **resistance** and not just resistance to Donald Trump. It will not just be people with banners on marches, important though all of that will be. It will be people's resistance to living unacceptable lives; people

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who rightly think they deserve better, to live more significant lives that matter. Following the Grenfell Tower fire we will see more acts of resistance against not being treated with the kind of dignity and respect people have a right to expect. One of the really good things about the world is the universalisation of the aspirations for dignity and respect. This is a really powerful idea which the social sector needs to stand for. And in a post-truth world that means living in truth. So says Václav Havel in *The Power of the Powerless*, written in Soviet controlled Czechoslovakia in 1978. Because when you have to submit to a system of lies, an act of resistance is to live in truth. We will see more of that: more people bearing witness to truth.

Mainly what there is going to be is a lot more **coping**, because that is what people do in a crisis. Complete control is illusory; escapism has a tendency toward fantasy; resistance is exhausting. When all those options are exhausted you end up coping. Angela Merkel and the Queen are between them, the world's copers in chief. There's no ideology, and no vision to speak of just a determination, resilience, to get by together. Keep calm and carry on. Why do we have such a public cult of resilience and grit? Because we are consciously creating our own coping capabilities. This is the social sector's strong suit: we are excellent copers, managing to do a lot with a little, rolling with the punches.

It is social organisations that can preserve humanity in these fragile times

Oddly, perhaps, I think that all of this means the social sector will be increasingly conservative, at least in the sense that it is concerned with conserving people, places and cultures that are in danger of being written off and written out of the script. The social sector is about conserving a space in which it is possible to be fully human, to be treated with dignity, regardless of who you are. What we should be against is authoritarianism, sectarianism, technological systems, inequality, anything that creates a culture of indifference to humanity.

Call it, if you like, a radical conservatism. It does involve, importantly, going back as well as going forward.

There are lots of ways in which I think we are creating this possibility of being human, and keeping open that space. That is a really powerful idea when there are so many things that are dehumanising—whether it's immigration control, or technology, or inequality. The most powerful voice for this kind of critical conservative stance on modern capitalism is of course Pope Francis. Here he is in a tweet from March 2017: 'As Christians and all people of good will it is for us to live and act at this moment. It's a grave responsibility since certain present realities are less effectively dealt with are capable of setting off a process of dehumanisation which would be hard to reverse.' This is a call not just to action but to ask challenging questions.

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To do so we must think anew and act anew

Jeremy Corbyn mobilised the youth vote in part because he came from an era of politics before spin. He stood for an old fashioned kind of authenticity. None of this will and should really satisfy people who feel they have a duty to be ambitious, to want to bring about significant change in society. So the final thing the social sector needs to offer is **transformation**. The most significant social innovations—I would count the contraceptive pill as one of those—are transformative not ameliorative. These innovations generate waves of social change over a long period of time.

The good news is that there are lots of big transformative ideas out there. We don't quite realise how big they could become. There's a big idea, basic income, which is about the future of work and income in the era of artificial intelligence. There's a

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big idea about the future of companies, of which BCorps are the start. There's a big idea in the social applications of big data and blockchain technologies so you could map an entire society and reorganise production to meet the social needs set out in the SDGs. Society is hungry for big ideas for new ways to house people, new ways to generate and distribute energy, new forms of tax and public contribution. Breakdowns are a time also for breakthrough ideas and technologies. The best way to give people more control over their lives is to transform the systems that belittle them. The pill transformed women's lives and society by offering them a form of control, but a creative form of control not a repressive one. That should be the hallmark of the social sector's offer.

That is why this has to be a time for the social sector not just to tick the box and deliver the services commissioned by the state but to think big: to offer society some challenging, exciting ideas about what a more humane, sustainable capitalism could be. More people want the kind of ideas the social sector has been promoting. As Abraham Lincoln put it: 'The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present, the occasion is piled high with difficulty and we must rise with the occasion as our case is new, so we must think anew and act anew'. That should be the rallying cry for the social sector in this time of peril but also of huge possibility.

[This essay is part of a series on transformation from the boldest voices in the sector.](#)



About the author

Charles Leadbeater is a leading authority on innovation and creativity. He has advised companies, cities and governments around the world on innovation strategy, and has authored a string of acclaimed books. The latest of these books is *We-think: The power of mass creativity*, which charts the rise of mass, participatory approaches to innovation from computer games and political campaigning.

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