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Books Worth Reading

Nudge: Improving Decisions about Health, Wealth, and Happiness

By Richard H. Thaler and Cass R. Sunstein
Yale University Press, 2008

With its snappy one-word title, this book calls to mind recent releases like *Blink*, *Sway*, and *Flip*. And in the spirit of bestsellers like *The Tipping Point* and *Freakonomics*, books that purport to reveal the “hidden dimensions” of this or that, this work is targeted at a broad, general audience. But unlike so many books in the genre, this one tries to do more than just inform and entertain. It takes a serious academic subject and makes a strong case for more enlightened social and economic policies.

Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein contend that the way public choices are framed and presented goes a long way toward determining the kinds of decisions people make. Summarizing four decades of research in what they call “the emerging science of choice,” they show that people do not always act logically or in their own best interests. They eat more from large plates, care twice as much about losing money as gaining it, and agonize about rare events like plane crashes instead of common ones like auto accidents. While we like to think of ourselves as rational creatures, studies show that the choices we make tend to be unrealistically optimistic, biased toward the status quo, and undercut by a subtle and unthinking conformity.

What such research suggests, Thaler and Sunstein say, is that *choice architecture*—like the architecture of a well-designed public space—can guide, or “nudge,” people toward making better choices. A nudge is a way of organizing and presenting choices “that alters people’s behavior in a predictable way without forbidding any options or significantly changing their economic incentives.”

To count as a nudge, the intervention must be easy and cheap to avoid. “Nudges are not mandates. Putting the fruit at eye level counts as a nudge. Banning junk food does not.”

By understanding the power of nudges, they argue, choice architects—those charged with the responsibility of organizing the context in which people make decisions—can help to coax people into making decisions that serve them better. Much of the book is given to practical examples of how this can be done, such as taking advantage of people’s propensity to expend a minimum of effort (ensure the default option serves the greatest good for the greatest number) or making use of subtle social influences (suggest how other people are inclined to choose under similar conditions).

Thaler and Sunstein acknowledge that nudges might be viewed by some as an infringement on people’s liberties. But at bottom, they say, there is no such

Richard H. Thaler
Cass R. Sunstein

Nudge



Improving Decisions
About Health, Wealth,
and Happiness

thing as a context-free choice. Knowing this we can either leave the framing to chance (or, perhaps, to advertising and PR firms), or we can consciously decide on it. What is needed is an approach that both preserves freedom of choice and guides people to make decisions that are in their personal and collective best interests. They use the term *libertarian paternalism*, a deliberate oxymoron, to describe this philosophy. The term is useful, in their view, because it sums up the underlying rationale for nudges—to influence people’s behavior in order to make their lives longer, healthier, and happier while, at the same time, preserving their basic freedom to choose as they please.

If people want to smoke cigarettes, eat unhealthy foods, pick an unsuitable health-care plan, or fail to save for retirement, libertarian paternalists will not stop them, or even make the choice difficult for them, Thaler and Sunstein write. “Still, the approach we recommend does count as

paternalistic, because private and public choice architects are not merely trying to track or to implement people's anticipated choices. Rather, they are self-consciously attempting to move people in directions that will make their lives better. They nudge."

—Scott London

Scott London is a long-time associate of the Kettering Foundation. His Web site is www.scottlondon.com.

Democracy as Problem Solving: Civic Capacity in Communities across the Globe

by Xavier de Souza Briggs
MIT Press, 2008

Briggs is a professor of sociology and urban planning at MIT, now on professional leave as associate director of the White House Office of Management and Budget. His recent book argues that "many ideas about making democracy work stop at asking the question: how might we improve the relationship between citizens and their government?" Though this is an important problem, he, following John Dewey, proposes a broader one: "how might we improve the relationships among citizens, government, and private parties (including businesses and unelected interest-group advocates and philanthropies that bring vital resources and capacity) *in relation to important public problems?*"

Briggs contends that democratic theorists and practitioners have often assumed one of two pictures of democracy. The first sees it as a contest between interest groups, in which public participation is limited to lobbying against other power brokers. The second understands democracy as an instrument of deliberation, where increasing opportunities for ratio-

Books Worth Reading

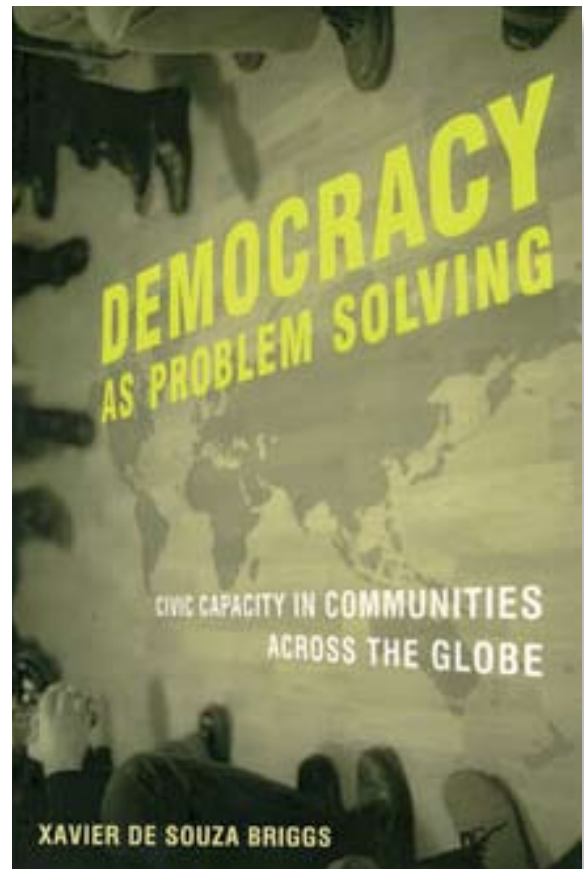
nal debate will produce better answers to problems and reinvigorate people's faith in politics. Despite the vast differences between these positions, Briggs worries that both leave the implementation of solutions to governments and ignore the possibility of citizens themselves taking action.

In order to talk about democracy in this broader sense, Briggs develops the concept of civic capacity, or "the extent to which the sectors that make up a community are (1) *capable* of collective action on public problems" and "(2) *choose* to apply such capability." He argues that dealing with problems may often require more than interpersonal relationships and shared norms, as Putnam's "social capital" might suggest. In fact, complementary action, bargaining, and multidimensional forms of accountability may be essential parts of effective problem solving in complex and heterogeneous societies.

Civic capacity is also distinguished from social capital in recognizing the need for intermediary organizations, such as stable coalitions that authorize action and alliances that actually get things done. Such structures provide space for naming problems, blend service delivery and policy enforcement, bring together different types of knowledge, and convene and coordinate disengaged citizens. Problem solving depends upon these and similar institutions as well as their continual reconstruction. If democracy is to be scaled up from the face-to-face community level, it must build upon these structures of civic capacity.

Once democracy is seen as a process of solving problems that depends upon

and extends civic capacities, it becomes clear that there are no certain formulas for realizing either. The potential for creating and utilizing civic capacity depends upon a community's history, the array of tasks at hand, and the forms of accountability that are at issue. To learn from previous problem-solving attempts and to trace the limits of this concept, Briggs undertakes a comparative analysis across a number of problems, domains, and borders. Issues of urban growth, economic development, and investment in youths in Brazil, the United States, South Africa,



and India all provide insights into the barriers to and opportunities for expanding civic capacities.

—Zach VanderVeen

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*The Difference:
How the Power of Diversity
Creates Better Groups, Firms,
Schools, and Societies*

By Scott E. Page
Princeton University Press, 2007

“In problem solving, diversity is powerful stuff,” so begins Scott Page in his book *The Difference*. The main argument of the book is that diverse perspectives can lead to better results. So much so, that Page employs a phrase throughout the work: *diversity trumps ability*. He argues that diverse groups of problem solvers consistently outperform groups made up of the best individual performers, concluding that diversity should be considered as, or even more, valuable than ability. He writes: “Without

collective intelligence, decentralized markets and democracies would have little hope of functioning effectively. Yet we do not fully understand the causes of successful collective performance. We tend to think that it rests in ability, that if we make the individuals smarter, we make the group (or mob) smarter. . . . Here I show that if we make the individuals more diverse, we get the same effects.” (p. 4)

Page posits definitions, frameworks, and models in order to understand the role of difference in problem solving, prediction, and

information aggregation. He defines the concept of diversity as cognitive differences and unpacks it into four tools: *perspectives* are the ways that people represent or name problems; *interpretations* are the ways that people categorize or frame their perspectives; *heuristics* are the ways that people almost automatically generate solutions to problems; and *predictive models* are the ways that people infer cause and effect.

He rightly notes, however, that difference is not a cure-all. For diversity to produce benefits, certain conditions must exist. First, diversity must be relevant to the problem at hand, so, for example, adding a poet to a medical team won’t miraculously enable them to find a cure for the common cold. Second, in order for the diverse group to function, its members must get along, if not, the differences between people can lead to a kind of siloing of ideas.

Page’s work is relevant for those interested in collective decision making. Importantly, he argues diverse collections of people, none of whom are experts, have been able to make accurate predictions and more critically have been able to find more and better solutions to complex problems. Second, his work comprehends that complex decisions require a diverse set of individuals working in conjunction. He concludes his Prologue by writing:

I’ll end with an observation: as individuals we can accomplish only so much. We’re limited in our abilities. Our heads contain only so many neurons and axons. Collectively, we face no such constraint. We possess incredible capacity to think differently. These differences can provide the seeds of innovation, progress, and understanding.

The Difference is written in an approachable, but in-depth manner. Page, a complexity scientist, moves beyond the anecdotes that have become prevalent in much work on collective problem solving and provides theories, evidence, and models about the value of difference, as well as when difference is valuable. While using a series of mathematical models to defend his claims, the book is accessible to a nontechnical reader. Indeed, one of the book’s strengths is its skill at linking the highly technical literature of scholarly literature to work targeted to a general audience.

—Dana Walker

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A Different Kind of Politics: Readings on the Role of Higher Education in Democracy

edited by Derek W. M. Barker and David W. Brown

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Allison N. Crawford, University of Georgia School of Law

Sean Creighton, Southwestern Ohio Council for Higher Education

Joni Doherty, Franklin Pierce University

William J. Doherty, University of Minnesota

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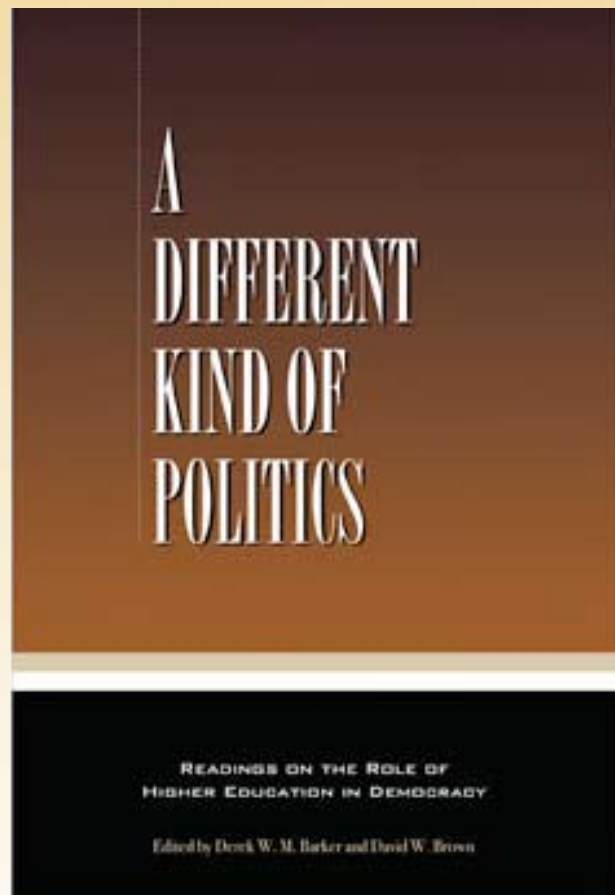
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The Kettering Foundation, chartered in 1927, is a research foundation rooted in the American tradition of inventive research. Its founder, Charles F. Kettering, holder of more than 200 patents, is best known for his invention of the automobile self-starter. He was interested, above all, in seeking practical answers to “the problems behind the problems.”

The foundation today continues in that tradition. The objective of the research now is to study what helps democracy work as it should. Six major Kettering programs are designed to shed light on what is required to strengthen public life.

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