

# What is a change in the world?

Par Cristina D'Alessandro-Scarpari. Le 13 May 2006

■ *How to change the world* is not a new release (it was published in 2004), but the French translation of it is certainly new. The original American book, published in the US by Oxford University Press is a luxurious hardcover book, made with good paper, made even more attractive with the addition of pictures, images and a map. The French translation is a thinner and less heavy object; it has a nice cover, showing an orange with the globe reproduced on its peel<sup>1</sup>.

Why has this text been translated? The idea of making accessible to French (or francophone) readers a book specifically written for Americans is an uncommon choice, which deserves to be underlined. If I say that the book has been produced for an American public, the reason is that the idea of powerful individuals or thoughts, followed with determination even if they appear impossible to realize, the belief that a single man or woman, not only can change the world he or she lives in, but the entire world, is typically American. Pascal Baudry (Baudry, 2003) has noticed and explained how American society is individualistic in the sense that it is based on individual actions and the individual's power. The French (and I would say more generally Western Europeans) are more likely to think that the world is changed by groups, by societies, by conjunctions of brains and ideas; by the union of individuals at the right place at the good time. Of course both of these models are true; usually they are mixed in reality. Processes of change have different steps, where the actors engaged may be not the same and the number of them may change too.

So the first interesting thing about this book is its availability in French. But one may wonder: why has a book like this one been translated into French by a famous publisher? A first answer: the author and his well-established reputation. David Bornstein is a well known journalist, author of many articles in *The New York Times* and *The Atlantic Monthly*, has achieved success with his first book *The Prize of a Dream* (Bornstein, 1996), where he explains how the Grameen Bank makes economically possible the practice of micro credits at a large scale. This book, appreciated by American readers, received awards and recognition and this second work, concerned by the same topic of social innovation, has inherited this attention.

The idea of translating this book may also have been dictated by the challenge of making accessible to the French audience a book, which is part of a recent popular and successful American tradition concerned with big transformations, worldwide changes and trying to give an answer to two sets of linked questions. How has the world become what it is today? How is the contemporary global world transformed? These readings, such as *Guns, Germs and Steel* (Diamond, 1999) and *Collapse* (Diamond, 2005) by Jared Diamond, but also Thomas L.

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Friedman's *The World is Flat* (Friedman, 2005) have had a big success in American bookstores and they seem different from what is currently produced in, and for, the French market. These books give explanations to complex questions, they make the world accessible to average people interested in understanding, for example, why some parts of the world are "more (economically) developed" than others; why some people succeed and realize ideas which seem impossible; what engendered the different evolutions of two regions having the same resources and potential; what the keys of global dynamics are. These topics may seem too ambitious for a book, for a single author or for a public not trained in scientific readings, but they raise questions and they contribute to creating awareness. *How to change the world* is part of this kind of literature and it points out the role of individuals, the capacity they have to realize projects having major consequences and repercussions, their clear-sightedness in fighting for what they know is going to work.

To this end, David Bornstein studied several cases of social entrepreneurs and he decided to limit the number of stories narrated in the book, with the intention of relating the selected stories in detail. Plus he dedicates several chapters to analysis and summary of what the specificities of these people are and why their ideas succeed. The stories one can read in this book open insights on important social problems (health, children's rights, education, disability) and on the form they take in specific regions or countries.

"I have chosen to take a global focus because social entrepreneurship is a global phenomenon [...]. Around the world, people are encountering similar problems [...]. But in poorer countries, social entrepreneurs have to reach far more people with far less money, so they have to be especially innovative to advance solutions at scale" (: 2). If the phenomenon is certainly global, looking at the map (: XII-XIII)<sup>2</sup> showing all the cases studied by Bornstein, one notices that some regions have a bigger concentration of cases (Eastern Europe, India), than others; Western Europe, for example, is empty and Africa has only four cases. Differences are certainly related to research opportunities, to networks, to founding restrictions, so to the everyday life of research. Nevertheless I am convinced that a different selection of case studies, located in other places (Africa for example) would have made for different results: the problems are not the same, the way people think and act for resolving them may diverge and the tools they have are incomparable, the difference being not only money availability, but much more the contribution of institutional forces, political powers and international institutions to their efforts, the capacity to gather energies.

But what are social entrepreneurs? How does it work? "It takes concentrated focus, practical creativity, and a long-term source of energy to advance system change and to ensure that the change becomes well rooted in institutions and cultures. Certain people, because of the quality of their motivation — their inexplicable obsessions, their action and growth orientation, their unwavering belief in the rightness of their ideas — seem particularly well suited to lead this process" (: 46). The changes Bornstein talks about are certainly social, but he chooses cases which have a very poor spatial dimension: with the only exception of the rural electrification made by Fabio Rosa in Brazil, which has produced in consequence farms activities and water access, all the other cases affected only the social dimensions of people, spaces being not transformed by these changes. A social problem which is also spatial in a way is poverty: social entrepreneurs have to deal with poverty, but Bornstein is more attentive to economic improvements: "the solution they usually come up with is to change market conditions or redesign the 'value-added chain' for whole classes of small producers" (: 151).

If social entrepreneurs certainly induce social changes, do they really change the world? This question engenders a reflection on scale and a social/spatial distinction. From the title of the book

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and from the way Bornstein describes the action of every social entrepreneur, one can think that the consequences of these actions are global. In reality repercussions are regional or national, but they do not pass national borders, with the only remarkable exception of James Grant: his child survival revolution has saved children everywhere with Unicef. May these local changes really be considered global? They are not known outside the country they take place in, they are related to the precise space/time context they take place in; they cannot influence other regions and countries, because the same problem may have other forms. Evidently social entrepreneurs' transformations are local.

Plus these social changes, sometimes very important for the way they change so many lives and so deeply in a positive way, may not affect at all the spaces where they take place: health, education and civil rights improvements are social issues but, also if they have marginal spatial effects, they are produced without substantial spatial changes. So the world, the people world at least, changes without really changing ...

David Bornstein, *How to Change the World. Social Entrepreneurs and the Power of New Ideas*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2004 [French translation: *Comment changer le monde. Les entrepreneurs sociaux et le pouvoir des idées nouvelles*, Paris : La Découverte, 2005]. 320 pages. 26 euros.

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Jared Diamond, *Collapse. How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*, New York: Viking, 2005.

Thomas L. Friedman, *The World is Flat. A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005.

## Note

1 This text is based on the English original book, but it has been inspired by the recent French translation. A constant comparison between the English and the American versions has been made.

2 This important map has unfortunately not been reproduced on the French translation.

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