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INTRODUCTION

We are familiar with social reformers who promise cutting-edge remedies for entrenched social problems. We are accustomed, for example, to arguments that herald recent breakthroughs in information and communication technologies for their potential to reinvent outmoded educational systems, to develop areas of the world with high rates of poverty, or to knit together the planet in a harmonious way. Perhaps we have heard about how Massively Open Online Courses will radically democratize access to education and hence opportunities, how low-cost computers and cell phones will launch impoverished nations and persons into the digital age, or how the Internet will bring together people across divisions of nation, class, and tribe. Further in the past, some may recall confident claims about how film, radio, television, and then computers would make for a radically more efficient and engaging educational system, how electronic media would bring forth a harmonious global village, or how the printing press would create a whole new democratic world. If we are familiar with claims of this sort, then we should also be aware that philanthropic interventions premised on these arguments have repeatedly fallen short of reformers' lofty aspirations, often dramatically so.¹ If we are aware of this history, then we should not be surprised when a new cutting-edge philanthropic intervention is unable to fulfill the good intentions of those who designed and proselytized it. What is puzzling is how so many of us hope, and even demand, that the next time will be different.

I was on hand when one of these next times was unveiled in the borough of Manhattan, New York City, in the late summer of 2009. After several years of research and design, an expert team of media technology designers, academic specialists, and educational reformers opened the Downtown School for Design, Media, and Technology—henceforth the Downtown School—with a single sixth grade class.² The school was a centerpiece in an ambitious new philanthropic initiative that aspired to reinvent educational systems for the twenty-first century. According to the project's designers

and philanthropic backers, both the world and children had changed in dramatic ways, but educational institutions had not kept up. We were living in a radically new, interconnected, technologically saturated, and unequal era, the school's designers and backers argued, and inherited educational institutions had become woefully out of date. The Downtown School would help overcome this disconnect by opening the school to the world and meeting students where they presumably lived their lives. It would be a "school for digital kids," as the school's tagline read, and the entire pedagogy would be organized like a game. Instead of the rote and boring activities that were common at conventional schools, students at the Downtown School would spend their days actively and creatively working through complex challenges in designed game worlds. Rather than passively consuming media, technology, and knowledge, students at the Downtown School would learn to be creative makers, remixers, and hackers of technology and culture. Instead of taking on the identity of obedient pupils, students at the Downtown School would role-play the identities of scientists, designers, inventors, programmers, entrepreneurs, and other tech-savvy creative professionals. What is more, the school would offer its services to students from any background. Thus the new school would equitably and engagingly prepare young people for the increasingly interconnected and competitive world and job market of the twenty-first century.

This vision of a school designed for the realities of the twenty-first century garnered enviable support and interest for a new public school. Between 2005 and 2015, one of the most prestigious philanthropic foundations in the United States gave millions of dollars to the nonprofit organization that designed and launched the Downtown School, and it spent more than \$200 million on related research projects and interventions focused on digital media and learning. Other powerful philanthropic foundations also generously supported the school and its designers' associated projects. The Chancellor of New York City public schools granted the Downtown School special status as an "innovation zone" school, allowing it to bypass some of the bureaucratic hurdles that encumbered experimentation in more conventional public schools, and the Department of Education gave the school premium space in the heart of one of Manhattan's most renowned cultural districts. Transnational media and technology companies, local universities, and nonprofit organizations donated equipment, space, and services. The Downtown School had more laptops than students, the latest hardware and software for making and hacking media technologies, and one of only two "semi-immersive embodied learning environments" in the world. In addition to teachers, administrators, and staff, the school hosted an in-house team of media-technology designers and curriculum specialists. In short, the school was as well supported as just about any experimental new public school could hope.

Before it opened, many other people were already taking a special interest in the school, and over the next several years the school's fame and influence would spread widely. In the spring and summer before its first year, scores of intrigued parents attended information sessions, many applied, and more than a few were distraught when their child was not admitted. During the school's first few years, local, national, and international news organizations produced and ran hopeful stories about the new school, and the *New York Times Magazine* even featured the Downtown School as the cover story for its yearly education issue. New corporate partners, including one of the largest video game developers in the world, joined the founders' efforts to design game-based learning environments. One of the largest and most powerful philanthropic foundations in the world hired one of the school's founders to locate and fund similar experiments in digital media and learning. Educational reformers from South Korea to Los Angeles visited the school as they worked to launch similar projects back home. Philanthropists, technology designers, policymakers, academics, educational practitioners, and social entrepreneurs hosted the school's designers, educators, and even select students to make presentations about their innovative experiment in locations as varied as Aspen, Austin, and Doha. Members of the United States Congress and officials from the White House invited the school's designers to forums and workshops on the future of education. In all these cases, the Downtown School was celebrated as one of the most innovative and promising attempts to redesign schooling in the first decades of the new millennium, one that swept away antiquated educational conventions and replaced them with an innovative and improvisational culture that was more akin to a Silicon Valley startup than a traditional public school.

Long before I stopped fieldwork in 2012, the Downtown School had become much like the schools that it had been designed to replace, and it was helping to remake many of the problems that it had been designed to remedy. The school's founders and backers had imagined a playful game-based pedagogy in which students, rather than teachers, took the lead, and yet daily life at the school quickly turned into a lot of tightly scripted behavior and familiar relations of power. They had hoped to connect students and the school to the world, and yet in countless areas reformers, educators, and especially involved parents worked to close it off. They aspired to uproot inherited social hierarchies and yet ended up with a system that entrenched more deeply many of those same inequities.

And yet throughout my time in the field, many smart and well-intentioned people continued to portray the Downtown School, as well as the larger initiative of which it was a part, as a cutting-edge and morally just model of social reform that was worthy of emulation. What is more, they often did so with passion, sincerity, and conviction. If history

is a guide, these swells of idealism will eventually recede. But history also suggests that other seemingly cutting-edge philanthropic initiatives will take the Downtown School's place, and swells of hopeful optimism will once again come rushing forth. How is it that this idealism, while temporarily tarnished by recurring shortcomings and failures, does not take long to renew? Why does techno-philanthropism seem immune to the lessons of history?³ How, in other words, do we reconcile recurring "failure" with persistence? These are the central questions that this book explores.

This is a book about how genuine frustrations with the status quo and understandable yearnings for social change are converted, again and again, into seemingly cutting-edge philanthropic interventions that not only fall far short of reformers' aspirations, but that often also help sustain and extend the status quo, as well as its problems. It is a book that addresses how concerns about the putrescence of inherited institutions as well as longings for a promised polity come to be fixated on apparently unprecedented versions of familiar mechanisms for making social change, despite decades upon decades of disappointing results. By examining these processes ethnographically, the book investigates how optimism and idealism for new rounds of techno-philanthropism spring forth and mostly survive encounters that should seemingly deflate them. The book also examines what this perennial rejuvenation of optimism and idealism manages to accomplish, even as enthusiasm for a particular disruptive project or movement eventually recedes.

This book explores these themes by taking a close look at one recent attempt to radically redesign, or "disrupt," education. Educational reform projects are especially common places where philanthropic yearnings repeatedly come together with hopeful idealizations about the transformative powers of recent technological breakthroughs (Cuban 1986; Buckingham 2007), but they are far from the only places where these yearnings and idealizations recurrently conjoin. Some of the most illuminating literature that I read while working on this project focused not just on the perennial character of seemingly cutting-edge educational reforms (Tyack and Cuban 1995; Varenne and McDermott 1998; Lashaw 2008; Labaree 2008; Mehta 2013; Ames 2015), but also on international development programs and humanitarian interventions (Ferguson 1994; Escobar 1995; Li 2007; Fassin 2010), as well as on techno-scientific schemes for social improvement more generally (Latour 1988; Akrich 1992; Bowker and Star 1999; Brown and Duguid 2000; Suchman 2006, 2011; Morozov 2013). Indeed, the problems and processes that this book investigates appear to arise whenever social reformers knit together yearnings for what they see as beneficent social change with seemingly unprecedented techno-political solutions (Scott 1998; Rose 1999; Mitchell 2002).

While the themes that this book explores have broad pertinence, education is also remarkable for the extent to which it is repeatedly targeted for disruption, especially in the United States. This ambiguous distinction is partly because idealizations about education, like the market, are tightly interwoven with the state's and the polity's sense of themselves in the United States. As American educational historians have demonstrated (Tyack and Cuban 1995; Labaree 2008), when social reformers in the United States have yearned for a more idealized polity, they have repeatedly attempted to fix education, and particularly public schools, as a—if not the—means for transforming their longings into reality. This recurring tendency has not only made the school instrumental, but it has also made it difficult to question the institution too profoundly without also questioning the state and the polity. As such, public debates about education reform tend to focus narrowly on how to fix educational structures rather than on asking whether these are the right structures to be fixing in order to bring about hoped-for social outcomes.

This book takes a different approach. The book does not systematically diagnose the shortcomings and successes of this particular attempt to disrupt education, nor does it prescribe better ways to do education reform or technology design. Rather, the book examines a concrete attempt to disrupt education in order to offer an intimate perspective on how more widespread and enduring yearnings come to be interwoven with especially optimistic ideas and feelings about the transformative potential of recent technological breakthroughs.⁴ The book also takes a close look at how this braiding recurs and produces concrete effects in the world despite its routine failure to accomplish wished for outcomes.

While the case of the Downtown School is distinctive, it can take us to the heart of some of the most hotly debated questions about technological innovation, social change, and, hence, the social and political ordering of modern life. Wherever new technologies are advanced as a novel means for disrupting the status quo, public discussions tend to be deeply divided between those who are generally, if not enthusiastically, optimistic about these enterprises, and those who are predominantly, if not profoundly, cynical. These seemingly irreconcilable divisions are partly a consequence of the audiences to which each side addresses themselves. Optimists tend to address reformers, technology designers, policymakers, engineers, business people, and activists, and, as such, their discourses tend to be managerial, technocratic, and focused on potentialities. Cynics, by contrast, tend to write for other social and cultural theorists, and, accordingly, their discourses tend to be demystifying and sometimes alarmist. These divisions are also rooted in opposed assumptions about how each side understands the “real” function of the domain that reformers aim to disrupt, as well as quasi-deterministic assumptions about the role that new technologies

and techniques will play in these processes. Optimists often take it as a given that liberal institutions are fundamentally beneficent but broken (and, hence, in need of fixing) or lacking (and, hence, in need of enhancement). By contrast, more cynical accounts tend to treat these institutions as instruments that accomplish the (often unstated) interests of entrenched structures of power.

A quick glance at stalemated debates around education reform helps illustrate this dynamic. Optimists of education reform tend to fall into a long and dominant liberal tradition that understands public education as one of the main mechanisms for creating an enlightened, egalitarian, and united polity. According to this liberal perspective, hierarchical social divisions are commensurate with democratic values so long as these inequalities have been accomplished meritocratically. When confronted with systemic inequities in education and society—which conventional sociology of education consistently identifies—a key question for liberal reformers is how to redesign education so as to create equal opportunities for all.⁵ And, as we will see, one repeatedly seductive means for trying to fix education so as to fix society is to try to leverage the seemingly unprecedented possibilities of recent innovations in media technology (Cuban 1986; Buckingham 2000, 2007).

Against these dominant perspectives, cynics of educational reform tend to see public education not as a means for realizing an idealized polity, but rather as a mechanism for producing, maintaining, and extending a hierarchical and governable social order. As social reproduction theorists have argued since the 1970s, schools do not so much dismantle inherited structures of power as help reproduce and extend them (Althusser 1971; Bowles and Gintis 1976; Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Collins 2009).⁶ From this perspective, public education is understood as an apparatus of the capitalist state or, more recently, as part of a governmental dispositif that mechanistically produces and differentiates subjects so as to guide them onto the uneven circuits of a capitalist and technocratic social and political order. Similarly, cynics tend to argue that new educational interventions reconfigure and extend these techniques and technologies of control even further, beyond the school and throughout one's lifetime (Deleuze 1992; Rose 1999).

While optimists and cynics typically hold opposing assumptions about the inherent function of educational institutions, they ironically tend to share similar assumptions about the special role that new technologies play in these processes. Both optimists and cynics tend to assign to new techno-scientific breakthroughs a predominant, if not determining, role in their accounts, they just cast these new technologies as heroes and villains, respectively. Optimists tend to see techno-scientific innovations as finally allowing education to make good on its democratic promises, whereas cynics

tend to see the deployment of new technologies as reinforcing the reach and power of technocratic modes of control.

Both of these perspectives are important, but both are also unsatisfying theoretically and politically. Both optimists and cynics tend to be hamstrung by functionalist assumptions about the real purpose of educational institutions—or the capitalist state, or development, or techno-science—as well as deterministic assumptions about the role that new technologies and techniques play in these processes. As Paul Willis (1977) astutely pointed out about educational debates in the 1970s and as James Ferguson (1994) echoed in his reading of the development literature in the 1980s, optimists tend to naively accept the official definition of these enterprises and hence overlook the ways in which philanthropically sanctioned interventions are always sites of power relations and politics.⁷ By treating development or educational reform as technocratic exercises, optimists depoliticize these endeavors as well as the problems they are designed to solve.

Yet more cynical accounts are often also problematic because they tend to treat designed interventions as mechanistic black boxes. In the case of educational debates, the problem is not that cynics are wrong for trying to debunk the diagnoses, prescriptions, and ideologies of liberal reformers; nor are they wrong for pointing out that educational interventions routinely help produce and legitimate unjust political and social orders. The problem is that cynics tend to rely on ideal types to explain these phenomena, and, as such, they tend to treat the outcomes as a forgone conclusion. From such a perspective, the incredibly heterogeneous ensemble of actors that have to be assembled in order for a philanthropic intervention to come to life are unsatisfactorily portrayed as either conspiring in an elite agenda or blinded by dominant ideologies and rationalities. Empirically, such claims are not satisfactory since ethnographic inquiry has long shown that there is no smooth congruence between the interests and strategies of elite groups and the complicated medley of events that actually transpire in and through the situated practices of a reform endeavor.⁸ Additionally, cynics tend to imply that those who are targeted by philanthropic intervention are “cultural dopes,” to borrow a phrase from Stuart Hall (1981), interpellated by capitalist ideologies or, more recently, seduced by neoliberal modes of governmentality (Rose 1999). In either case, resistance, acquiescence, and negotiation tend to be overlooked as constitutive forces in the actualization of a philanthropic intervention. What is more, both boosters and cynics tend to attribute to expert-designed interventions powers that they do not in fact have. As Ferguson astutely observed about debates between optimists and cynics of international development programs, “Empirically, ‘development’ projects in Lesotho do not generally bring about any significant reduction in poverty, but neither do they bring about significant economic transformations. They do not bring about ‘development’

in either of the two senses identified above, nor are they set up in such a way that they ever could" (1994, 16). As the chapters that follow illustrate, a similar inadequacy characterizes purportedly unprecedented attempts to disrupt education.

TECHNO-PHILANTHROPISM IN PRACTICE

If debates about cutting-edge philanthropic interventions appear to be stuck in a familiar stalemate, then perhaps what is most needed are theoretical and methodological approaches that refuse the assumptions of either camp. For both Willis and Ferguson, the key shift that was needed in order to move beyond this unsatisfactory stalemate was to forgo assumptions about the inherent purposes of planned interventions and to instead look *ethnographically* at how these projects actually worked as well as what they managed to produce, even as they often failed to fulfill their professed aims. Ethnography was needed, these authors argued, so as to hold off the functionalist assumptions that often undergird the work of both optimists and cynics, and interviews were inadequate because researchers could not expect participants in these worlds to report fully or accurately on what transpired.

How can we build on these insights?

Anthropologists Dorothy Holland and Jean Lave (2001, 2009) have developed one powerful mode for conducting such an inquiry, which they refer to as "social practice theory." Rooted in a historical and material conception of social life, Holland and Lave suggest that the starting point for an inquiry into the workings and consequences of a designed intervention should be persons-in-practices, that is, persons being made through their participation in a historically produced world as they simultaneously help make the world what it is through their participation in it.

Such a perspective has important implications for how scholars come to understand the ways in which different actors contribute to continuity and change. From this perspective, participants in a philanthropic intervention actively and creatively help make history through their materially mediated cultural practices and productions, but they do so on an inherited terrain that is highly uneven and with cultural resources that they did not invent. One way that they do so is by participating in socially differentiated and culturally figured worlds that preexist their arrival. Rather than seeing these historical formations as fields, as would be the case in a Bourdieuan problematic, or as complexes or assemblages, as would be the case in many political-economic and poststructural analytics, Holland and her colleagues developed the notion of "figured worlds" (Holland et al. 1998), which has

much in common with Lave's notion of "communities of practice" (Lave and Wenger 1991). One of the advantages of these conceptions of historically differentiated domains of praxis is that they help analysts resist the temptation to reduce participants in a philanthropic intervention to either strategic actors pursuing their interests or puppets in broader political-economic and discursive structures. Instead, both notions draw attention to how culture and structure make and remake each other through people's ongoing participation in the situated practices that sustain and change different figured worlds. From this social practice theory perspective, it is through people's participation in historically produced, intersecting, and culturally figured worlds of practice that broader structures of power and privilege are reproduced and changed, even if these effects are not the aim of a world's participants.

Thus, for Holland and Lave the foci and loci of both continuity and change are "local contentious practices," which can be understood as the concrete activities through which history-in-person and history-in-institutionalized-struggles are coproduced (2009, 2–5). The notion of local contentious practice is similar to the concept of friction, as developed by Anna Tsing (2005) to account for how global connections are historically made and animated, as well as Tania Murray Li's (1999, 2007) and Gillian Hart's (2004, 2009) recommendation to attend to how regimes of rule inevitably involve compromises, unexpected contingencies, and contradictions, especially as rationalities of rule are transformed into efforts to enact them. All these scholars encourage analysts to pay attention to the ways power relations and politics are manifest in even the most quotidian realms of social life, and they ask us to notice how everyday struggle, contestation, acquiescence, and negotiation are *constitutive forces* in designed interventions and, hence, in processes of structural production and change. They also encourage scholars to attend to the slippages, fissures, and contradictions that characterize any social reform endeavor, for it is in these openings that alternative possibilities for more far-reaching changes can in part be found.

Another key advantage of examining disruptive philanthropic interventions through the lens of social practice theory is that doing so provides guidance for understanding how those who participate in an intervention often contribute to the maintenance and expansion of the very structures that they aim to dislodge and dismantle. Holland and her colleagues give particular emphasis to the importance of collective imaginings in social life, what they call the "as if" character of figured worlds. According to this perspective, the experts who design and attempt to implement a cutting-edge philanthropic intervention coordinate their thoughts, emotions, and activity in part through collectively realized fictions, dreams, myths, and even fantasies. For example, Holland and her colleagues note how participants in the figured world of heterosexual dating and romance on college

campuses in the United States act *as if* women have to worry about whether they are attractive to men and how participants in some figured worlds within academia act *as if* books are so important that they spend years writing them, even though few people may actually read them, let alone understand what their authors had hoped to convey (Holland et al. 1998, 49).

Paying attention to the *as if* character of social life is especially important when studying the figured worlds of the people who design and carry out seemingly disruptive philanthropic interventions because most participants in these worlds act *as if* what they are doing is both novel and beneficent for others—or at least that their collective efforts could be so with more tweaks and adjustments. In the case of seemingly unprecedented educational interventions, designers and reformers coordinate their activity, thoughts, and feelings *as if* they are disrupting inherited institutional arrangements so as to help remedy social problems, such as opportunity gaps and social divisions. By and large, the people that inhabit these worlds are not cynical, nor have they simply been interpellated by a dominant group's ideology. In many cases, experts participate in these worlds not only sincerely, but often also passionately (Lashaw 2008, 2010).

To say that the figured worlds of the people who design and implement a cutting-edge philanthropic intervention are produced in part through the realization of collective fictions is not to say that these fictions are just ideology, instances of false consciousness, or some other (presumably wrong) mental content that is simply in need of enlightened debunking (Mosco 2004, 22–31).⁹ Nor are these fictions just culture, in the conventional sense of internalized schemes of norms, values, beliefs, and so forth. Rather, these *as if* imaginings exist and operate as *lived fictions* for participants in a figured world. These fictions exist only so long as they are repeatedly and collectively realized in and through reformers' coordinated material practices. They have to be constantly remade, maintained, and repaired in order to survive. Reformers' embodied skills, ensembles of discursive and material artifacts, and configured environments structure—and are structured by—these lived fictions. From such a perspective, skills, artifacts, and environments are not simply means that facilitate, support, or mediate what really matters (e.g., experts' philanthropic plans and intentions); rather, they are mediums through which reformers' practices, and their fictions, take the forms that they do. What is more, by coordinating activity in part through these lived fictions, participants in a philanthropic intervention produce social relations and other effects that are not imaginary.¹⁰ All social reality, from this perspective, entails the ongoing production and maintenance of collectively lived fictions.

Without the continuous production and maintenance of these collectively lived imaginings, the figured worlds of the experts who design and enact disruptive philanthropic interventions, as they are currently

organized, would fall apart. Recognizing as much draws our attention away from various forms of top-down determinism and toward the concrete work by which various actors' lived fictions are sustained, repaired, and renovated in practice. Such work is especially important in the figured worlds of experts who design and implement cutting-edge philanthropic interventions because their efforts are constantly under assault, both from within their figured world—as different factions jockey for resources, status, and approaches while also struggling to get a grip on problems they do not have the power to solve—and from various outsiders who criticize specific reformers and projects for failing to make good on their promises. When seen in this light, the endurance of these figured worlds is a rather stunning feat that raises important anthropological and political questions. Any explanation of how designers, reformers, and other experts contribute to the construction, maintenance, and extension of broader regimes of rule needs to account for how their collectively lived fictions are maintained, repaired, and renovated despite round after round of often disappointing setbacks.

DISRUPTIVE FIXATION

The chapters that follow investigate the cyclical processes by which swells of optimism and idealism for seemingly disruptive philanthropic interventions often produce a countercurrent, or undertow, that paradoxically helps lock social processes into enduring and regressive forms while also, and ironically, renewing faith in the promise of more rounds of cutting-edge interventions. As shorthand, I call this recurring, yet ultimately contingent, cycle disruptive fixation.

To sketch the movements and rhythms of this cyclical process, it is helpful to consider the polysemous character of the term *fixation*. In common contemporary usage, the term fixation often refers to a seemingly unhealthy psychological, cognitive, or cathectic attachment, much like an obsession or an *idée fixe*. Fixation, in this sense, has to do with directing intense emotional, cognitive, and perceptive energies towards something in particular while excluding awareness of and concern for just about everything else. When people use the term in this way they often do so pejoratively and with the implication that whomever is fixated needs to get over their obsession. In a related, but less pejorative, sense, the term fixation can also mean directing one's gaze towards a particular object. Like the more pejorative use of the term, this sense of the term fixation also implies a narrowness of view, yet such intense focus is not necessarily considered a bad thing, and indeed one could argue that any form of craftwork

involves countless instances of fixing one's attention rather narrowly and intensely (see appendix).

Both of these uses of the term *fixation* refer to subjective phenomena, and both are fairly recent inventions. But there is also a much older, less psychological, and less pejorative use of fixation. With roots in alchemic practices, fixation can also refer to processes that transform volatile energies and forces into something more settled and stable. In this sense, fixation refers to material processes of trying to make order from apparent disorder, of trying to get a grip on forces that appear to be unwieldy and out of control. It is from this notion of fixation that we now typically use the phrase *to fix*.

While these different senses of fixation are often used independently, in cases of techno-philanthropism they are perhaps more helpfully understood as mutually constitutive. When we consider the different notions of fixation together, our attention is drawn to how attempts to design and enact seemingly cutting-edge philanthropic interventions tend to produce fixation, in both senses of the term. Some of these fixations are akin to the lived fictions that Holland and her colleagues identified as constitutive of all figured worlds. So, for example, the people who design a cutting-edge educational intervention act *as if* their intervention is both innovative and capable of uprooting entrenched social problems, like bureaucratic rigidity, inequality of opportunity, and social division. These collectively realized fixations are not problematic in themselves because they help coordinate activity, emotion, and thought, but they can become problematic under conditions in which specialists are tasked to fix problems that they do not have the power to solve. Under such conditions, attempts to disrupt the status quo can paradoxically remake and extend the regimes of rule that reformers aim to dismantle, while also, and ironically, renewing confidence in the philanthropic potential of similarly inadequate remedies.

How does this happen?

Fixation, in the sense of tunnel vision, occurs through the processes by which concerns about the status quo and yearnings for social change—what the anthropologist Tania Murray Li (2007) refers to as the “will to improve”—are translated into concrete programs of expert designed intervention. These fixations allow reformers to imagine and design interventions that they can foreseeably implement and to argue for their project's moral relevance to themselves and potential supporters. But they also produce blind spots and distortions of just about everything that cannot be easily measured with their diagnostic tools or manipulated with their proposed remedies. Critically, part of what this tunnel vision often excludes are political-economic relations, which is why James Ferguson (1994) famously characterized the development industry as an “anti-politics machine.”

As Li (2007) helped explicate, this tunnel vision occurs through two key and interrelated processes that allow yearnings for beneficent social change to be translated into designed interventions. The first is problematization and the second is what Li, drawing on Rose (1999) and Mitchell (2002), calls “rendering technical.”¹¹ Problematization refers to the processes by which reformers specify problems that need to be fixed or improved. So, for example, the founders of the Downtown School problematized many aspects of conventional approaches to schooling—its severing of the school from the rest of the world, its reliance on top-down and tightly scripted pedagogic activities, its disregard for students’ out-of-school lives and interests, and so forth—all of which, according to these problematizations, prevented schooling from fulfilling its liberal-democratic promises.

Rendering technical refers to the ways by which experts imagine and conceptualize the worlds into which they plan to intervene as both intelligible with, and amenable to, the instruments they have on hand or are designing. To make these worlds intelligible and seemingly fixable with the tools in hand, reformers render the worlds into which they plan to intervene as made up of bounded systems of objective relations that their diagnostic instruments can accurately measure and their designed interventions can foreseeably manage and transform. In this sense, rendering technical is akin to Scott’s (1998) famous analysis of “state simplifications,” Mitchell’s (2002) and Callon’s (1998) notion of “enframing,” and Suchman’s (2006), Brown and Duguid’s (2000), and Dourish’s (2007) respective analyses of the reductive idealizations used by technology designers. Critically, the solutions, or fixes, that reformers have on hand or are designing are intimately linked to experts’ processes of specifying problems. The fixes that experts have on hand shape the problems that they construct, and new technologies and techniques for intervening lead reformers to construct new problems. So, for example, social reformers have long rendered more general problems, such as inequality and social division, as educational problems, such as achievement gaps, the latter of which experts can measure and potentially remedy with new educational interventions. More recently, reformers who have been inspired by the educational potential of new digital technologies have rendered structural social divisions as “digital divides” and “participation gaps” (Jenkins et al. 2006). The implication of such diagnoses is that new educational interventions centered on digital media can ameliorate, if not fix, larger problems, such as inequality of opportunity. In all cases, the entwined processes of problematization and rendering technical entail tunnel vision because much of what reformers cannot manipulate with their fixes, and particularly political-economic relations, is left out of the picture.

While professional experts do much of the work of specifying problems and solutions, their fixations are not simply products of their own making.

These experts' power is "fragile" (Mukerji 1989) and "compromised" (Li 1999) in part because they rely on the support of more powerful outsiders in order to follow up on their insights and to promote their work. As Howard Becker (1963, 147–63) observed in his analysis of morally charged social reform movements, powerful people who are generally not experts in the worlds they seek to philanthropically transform tend to play an especially influential role in social reform enterprises. Because Becker was concerned with the construction of various forms of deviance, he called these powerful reformers "moral entrepreneurs," which I will modify slightly as entrepreneurial reformers, given this book's focus on calls for innovation and disruption.¹² While entrepreneurial reformers have historically arisen from numerous worlds, many contemporary entrepreneurial reformers in the United States have amassed their power in the business world, particularly in the financial and high-tech sectors. At the Downtown School, the most influential of these entrepreneurial reformers accrued their wealth, power, and expertise in high-tech industries, and, as such, they were especially optimistic about the philanthropic potential of new media technologies and the innovative work cultures of high-tech designers (chapter 2).

As Becker observed, moral entrepreneurs are often fervent and confident about what they perceive to be wrong with the world, and they are often equally zealous about what a fixed version of that world would look like. Yet they generally are not motivated simply by self-interest or an attempt to dominate others. While their visions of social transformation often entail trying to change how other people live their lives, often in ways that more closely approximate the reformer's own self-image, entrepreneurial reformers tend to see their efforts in philanthropic terms: they believe that the transformations they seek will lead to a better way of life for others. Given these philanthropic aspirations, education reform is one of the figured worlds that entrepreneurial reformers routinely descend upon when they seek to make social change, and international development is another. For example, the entrepreneurial reformers who helped sponsor the Downtown School wanted to provide everyone with a chance to participate in what they saw as the exciting and rewarding work of the new economy, as well as in the public and civic possibilities of a global connected age more generally.

Reformers' fixations are also shaped by the more general conditions of a given historical conjuncture. Calls for techno-philanthropism tend to proliferate and exert an especially strong moral and normative force when seemingly intractable political and economic problems—such as poverty, entrenched social divisions, shrinking economic opportunities, and so forth—threaten the hegemony of a reigning political-economic order, a phenomenon that Stuart Hall (1987), citing Gramsci, referred to as a "crisis of authority." In these moments, discontent with established authorities

and institutions, such as schools, tends to spread, and these general feelings of discontent provide openings for entrepreneurial reformers to articulate calls for disruptive interventions. As chapter 2 explores, the Downtown School was imagined and launched during one of these crises of authority in the United States.

While entrepreneurial reformers play a significant role in a cycle of disruptive fixation, their visions of change are not smoothly converted into concrete programs of intervention. As Becker observed, entrepreneurial reformers do not tend to have deep expertise in the worlds that they seek to transform, nor do they often have time for, or interest in, working out the specificities of an intervention (Becker 1963, 150–52). As such, they call upon and often offer to support various professional experts. For example, the entrepreneurial reformers who helped sponsor the Downtown School recruited especially well-regarded technology designers, scholars of learning and technology, and educational reformers to their cause. These experts were amenable to the entrepreneurial reformers' calls for disruption not only because they were in a compromised position, as discussed earlier, but also because they tended to share much of the entrepreneurial reformers' visions for a better future. Additionally, these experts had strong ideas and feelings about the right and wrong ways to remake education, and these ideas and feelings mostly resonated with the entrepreneurial reformers' more general sense of how education should change. For example, both the entrepreneurial reformers and the professional experts that committed themselves to the Downtown School were proponents of educational interventions that promoted student agency, creativity, and improvisation, and all were also critical of what they saw as overly scripted and top-down approaches to instruction, the latter of which had become increasingly dominant in the United States in the prior decades (chapter 2). Because of these divisions within the figured worlds that specialize in reform, experts can associate their problematizations of other experts' approaches to reform with outsiders' more general calls for disruptive change, especially when the former's approach to reform is currently not dominant. In this way, one reform project or movement's shortcomings become fodder for other reformers' practices of problematization. While these practices of problematization entail partial insights into the limits of recent approaches to reform, they leave intact the lived fiction that a redesigned institutional apparatus can finally fulfill the philanthropic ideals with which it is routinely tasked.

In the chapters that follow, I primarily use the term *fixation* to refer to the collectively realized forms of tunnel vision that occur through the interrelated processes of problematization and rendering technical. Fixations, in this sense, are the lived fictions through which participants in a disruptive philanthropic intervention plan and imagine their project as

well as the worlds into which they plan to intervene. A good deal of the book—chapters 3–6—focuses on what these collective fixations, once realized, do as well as how they fare in practice. Because fixations narrowly “enframe” (Callon 1998) how reformers imagine the world, once a project is launched, factors and forces that were excluded during processes of problematization and rendering technical overflow the project and threaten its stability. Despite years of careful preparation, once the Downtown School was launched, it suddenly felt as if the project was a ship caught in an especially tumultuous tempest, bombarded from all sides by unanticipated forces that showed no signs of letting up and, if anything, appeared to be multiplying. Technology did not work, students did not respond to the gamelike pedagogy as anticipated, cutting-edge after-school programs struggled to attract a diversity of students, privileged parents put increasing pressure on school leaders, contentious racialized class struggles reared their head, and so on.¹³

Thus, for the people who design a new intervention the most important initial consequence of fixation is urgent and even existential crisis. At the Downtown School, reformers began to worry that their project could suddenly and embarrassingly collapse on the second day of school, and these seeds of concern grew into a full-blown crisis within a few months of the school’s opening. In theory, these crises are moments when reformers could perhaps break out of their fixations; reformers could, for example, attempt to trace the sources of the destabilizing forces that they are encountering so as to better understand the worlds into which they are intervening, and some reformers do begin to reexamine aspects of their fixations in these more extensive ways. But the predominant tendency is not so much to question fixations as to engage in a different and more pragmatic form of fixation: reformers attempt to quickly stabilize the project against the unanticipated forces that are unsettling it. As mentioned before, at the Downtown School many reformers worried that the project could embarrassingly collapse, and under such conditions the dominant response was to look for stabilizing resources wherever they could.

Ironically, many of the ready-to-hand stabilizing resources and techniques come from the traditional versions of the institution that the reformers hope to disrupt. In a process that DiMaggio and Powell (1983) have described as “mimetic isomorphism,” reformers at the Downtown School tended to borrow and affix canonical and often quasi-Tayloristic techniques for producing order and discipline in schools, many of which Foucault (1977) chronicled. However, and in a departure from DiMaggio and Powell’s classic analysis, reformers also tried to stabilize the project by forging alliances with powerful locals, in this case with privileged parents, even though these locals in no way represented the interests of all the people that the intervention had been philanthropically sanctioned

to help and often exerted isomorphic pressures that were at odds with reformers' disruptive aspirations. These powerful outsiders became influential insiders in part by stoking reformers' fears of collapse while also, and simultaneously, offering stability in exchange for concessions and power sharing. While these partnerships helped temporarily stabilize the Downtown School and hence ease reformers' anxieties about an embarrassing collapse, they also turned much of daily life at the school into the sorts of tightly scripted activities that reformers had hoped to relax, and they helped remake many of the same social divisions that reformers had hoped to mend.

REPAIRING IDEALISM

One of the curiosities about the dynamics I have been sketching is that many of the people who committed themselves to the Downtown School continued to act *as if* they were taking part in a disruptive philanthropic endeavor even as they helped make the project more and more conventional and more and more conventionally problematic from the standpoint of substantive social change. Their idealism for the project seemed impressively immune to the forces that repeatedly thwarted their efforts. This resilient idealism not only helped keep the project going, but it also helped sustain and spread the project's reputation as an innovative model of reform that could and should be emulated. The resilience of this idealism in the face countless setbacks is a rather amazing cultural accomplishment as well as an important anthropological and political puzzle.

I address this puzzle in more detail in the conclusion, but a few key themes should be introduced now since they play an important role in the following chapters. I have already suggested that philanthropically sanctified fixations occur through processes of problematization and rendering technical and that these fixations exert an especially strong moral and normative force during a more general crisis of authority. These processes are particularly prevalent during the design phases of a philanthropic intervention, and they help explain why reformers face a torrent of unanticipated forces once they attempt to realize their designs in practice. But processes of problematization and rendering technical do not adequately account for how many participants in a disruptive intervention manage to repair their idealism even as they witness the shortcomings of their efforts firsthand and even as they help make their projects more isomorphic to that which they aim to disrupt. To account for how seemingly futile cycles of disruptive fixation persist, we need to consider how the lived fictions that help organize and morally sanctify a cutting-edge philanthropic

intervention are not just produced but also maintained, repaired, and rationalized in the face of corrosive forces.

In part, many of the people who committed themselves to the Downtown School were able to more or less maintain their idealism for the project because they were able to overlook and downplay many of the practices that contradicted and undermined their professed values and aspirations. Reformers recognized that their introduction of stabilizing resources was a move toward the sorts of organizational forms and processes that they had hoped to disrupt, but they also often discounted and underestimated the extent to which they were remaking and extending these forms and processes. One likely reason that they were able to do so is again made evident by DiMaggio and Powell's (1983) notion of mimetic isomorphism. Because the stabilizing resources that reformers deployed were so common in the figured worlds of professional educators and educational reformers, they were often taken for granted among experienced educators and reformers, especially after they had been introduced. Additionally, a spatialized division of labor, as well as asymmetrical relations of power across these divisions, tended to separate those who designed, managed, and most forcefully promoted the intervention, some of whom were relative newcomers to education reform, from those who made the intervention run on a daily basis. While the former held power over the latter, the former were also often absent from the messy business of keeping the school running day after day. Because of this spatialized division of labor, the intervention's designers and boosters could remain especially idealistic about the project while the more regressive features of the project became part of the taken-for-granted background of executors' everyday routines. Additionally, neoliberal rhetorics about consumer choice appeared to have helped some reformers dissociate the intervention from some of its divisive effects, and popular tropes from the world of technology design—such as “fail forward”—likely helped temper feelings of dismay among those who were more familiar with the project's recurring setbacks.

Yet the maintenance of idealism depends on more than just practices that overlook, downplay, excuse, and rationalize actions and policies that appear to undermine and contradict a philanthropic intervention's professed ideals. The maintenance of idealism also depends on the periodic orchestration, documentation, circulation, and ritualistic celebration of practices that appear to fulfill the intervention's innovative philanthropic promise. These practices, which I call *sanctioned counterpractices*, played a relatively minor role in the day-to-day routines of the intervention, and their role diminished as practitioners attempted to stabilize their project against forces that were not anticipated by their fixations. Yet sanctioned counterpractices played an outsized role in sustaining idealisms for the project, especially for

reformers, for outsiders upon whose support these experts depended, and for the factions of the local population that found ways to use the intervention's resources to enhance their power. Sanctioned counterpractices were front and center when reformers told stories about the Downtown School to themselves and various supporters and potential allies, including parents, funding agencies, other reformers and practitioners, governmental officials, corporate partners, academics, journalists, and even the general public. At the Downtown School, showcases, festivals, assemblies, ceremonies, publicity materials, wall decorations, Web sites, conference talks, e-mail updates, social media posts, and tours for guests all regularly featured and celebrated the school's sanctioned counterpractices, which focused on student engagement and agency, often with the aid of new media technologies. By contrast, the school's more canonical practices were almost never featured in these ritualized self-representations, and they were sometimes even purposefully erased. As representations of these sanctioned counterpractices were staged and circulated, they not only helped affirm the intervention's novel philanthropic character in the eyes of allies upon whose support the project depended, they also helped repair reformers' sense that their project was a cutting-edge and morally just intervention that could and should be generalized.

Of course, these selectively cheerful self-presentations are hardly surprising. As Howard Becker (1998, 90–93) bluntly put it, organizations often tell lies about themselves to outsiders. Yet it seems to me that it would be a mistake to interpret the outsize attention that insiders give to sanctioned counterpractices as merely an attempt to conceal what they are really up to. At the Downtown School, the ritualistic staging, documentation, circulation, and valorization of sanctioned counterpractices over everyday routines did not so much conceal reformers' real intentions as help reformers and their supporters realize the collective experience of having good intentions and being cutting edge. One consequence of putting sanctioned counterpractices front and center was that it helped reformers secure wider support and legitimacy for their intervention, but it did so only because many reformers appeared to sincerely believe that they were participating in a project that was both innovative and philanthropic and also because many others apparently wanted to believe the same. The staging of sanctioned counterpractices exerted a strong moral and normative force not because reformers set out to dupe potential supporters but because sanctioned counterpractices appeared to verify both insiders' and outsiders' idealistic and hopeful yearnings. By sharing representations of sanctioned counterpractices with broader communities and networks, many reformers and sympathizers for the project helped convince each other that now was a moment when substantive and beneficent change was actually possible.

While the staging and celebration of sanctioned counterpractices helped repair idealism and thus helped secure broader support for the project, the valorization of sanctioned counterpractices also produced side effects that ironically thwarted reformers' aspirations. Sanctioned counterpractices are unique from other institutionally sanctioned practices in that, on the one hand, people in positions of authority recognize and value them positively, while, on the other hand, they have not yet been standardized, codified, and normalized as best practices across a figured world. As such, subordinates who are best positioned to coadapt with authorities' changing understandings of sanctioned nonconformity gain institutional recognition and rewards without authorities in the project or successfully adapting subordinates' tending to see those adaptations as socially and culturally moored.¹⁴ But since sanctioned counterpractices tend to be modeled after the practices of currently successful individuals and groups—in this case, professionals who worked in the so-called creative class—those most inclined and able to adapt to these constantly changing ways of being acceptably unconventional—which is often read as being creative—also tend to be those who are most socially proximate to the model groups and their practices. As such, the subordinates who are best positioned to adapt to authorities' changing understandings of permissible nonconformity tend to be those who are already privileged—in the case of the Downtown School, boys from households with creative professional parents, most of whom were also white. And it is not simply that persons and groups that are more socially distant from the exalted model groups are often disadvantaged or disinclined to coadapt with changing sanctioned counterpractices, although that is often true, but also—and as Willis (1977) evocatively demonstrated—authorities tend to have trouble recognizing, understanding, and valuing the counterpractices of persons whose communities and networks are not well represented in the exalted model groups. As such, at the Downtown School many persons from nondominant groups either felt that they were not well matched for the cutting-edge school or they tried to comport themselves to celebrated models of sanctioned nonconformity but from significantly disadvantaged positions. In either case, the staging and valorization of sanctioned counterpractices helped obfuscate isomorphic tendencies as it helped legitimate the further entrenchment of privilege.

The following chapters are organized to move back and forth between how experts' collectively lived fixations come to life through processes of problematization and rendering technical, how those fixations cause trouble for reformers once a disruptive philanthropic intervention is launched, and yet how many people manage to mostly repair and maintain their idealism even

as they help make the intervention more and more conventional and more and more conventionally problematic. Chapter 2 situates the emergence of the Downtown School within historical cycles of purportedly disruptive educational reform in the United States. It examines how reformers' inability to remedy the social and political problems with which education has repeatedly and increasingly been tasked—which reformers also recurrently promise to fix—help produce conditions in which both crises in education and calls for disruptive remedies can recurrently spring forth. Against this historical backdrop, the chapter also explores how particular fixations occurred as the Downtown School's designers and reformers responded to calls for disruption by engaging in processes of problematization and rendering technical.

Chapters 3–6 explore what these fixations did as well as how they fared once the project was launched. Each of these chapters examines how forces that were excluded by reformers' fixations overflowed the project once it was launched. They also explore how reformers and designers tended to respond to these turbulent forces by engaging in a more pragmatic form of fixation: they quickly reached for stabilizing resources even though doing so undermined and contradicted their disruptive and philanthropic aspirations. Each of these chapters emphasizes how reformers' handling of forces that were excluded by processes of problematization and rendering technical played a constitutive role in making the project what it was. The first in this series of chapters, chapter 3, focuses on how fixation limited and distorted the ways that reformers imagined space. The chapter contrasts reformers' imaginings of connected but circumscribed "learning environments" with the ways that parents and caregivers helped construct and connect socially differentiated spaces for their children. Chapter 4 examines reformers' fixations about pedagogic activity and begins to empirically develop the notion of sanctioned counterpractices. The chapter details and analyzes the surprising disparity between the limited role of sanctioned counterpractices in the project's everyday routines and yet their prominence in ritualized self-presentations of the project. Chapter 5 compares how reformers imagined subjects that would be amenable to and fixable with their intervention with the ways that students negotiated identification and difference with each other at school and online. Chapter 6 compares reformers' fixations about the relationships that they would form with the "local community"—in this case parents—with how powerful factions of that imagined community grabbed onto the project and steered it toward their own ends. The conclusion, chapter 7, addresses what cycles of disruptive fixation manage to accomplish, politically and for whom, even as philanthropic interventions routinely fail to realize their ideals. The appendix offers a reflection on how the ethnographic approach that guided this investigation tends to produce its own fixations.

Before turning to these chapters, I would like to caution against several conclusions that a more careful reading will hopefully disabuse. Since much of what follows focuses on the limitations of idealistic attempts to design social change, the book could be read as a sort of Burkean tale cautioning against any attempt at radical change. Yet the focus of the book is not on the follies of trying to make radical change in general. Rather, the book focuses on the problems that can ensue when people rely on particular approaches for doing so. Disruptive fixation appears to be quite pervasive and enduring, but it is also a historically specific phenomenon that has to be constantly remade. It is a particular mode of converting understandable frustrations with the status quo and genuine yearnings for change into concrete interventions, and other modes are both possible and preferable. Part of what I hope to show is that many self-professed disruptive and philanthropic approaches to structural social change are in fact quite conservative, both in terms of their methods as well as their consequences. As such, I hope the book helps open up conversations and imaginings about other ways in which differently positioned actors can contribute to political and social change.

Similarly, the book is not arguing that currently existing educational systems cannot be improved or that technology designers should play no role in philanthropic undertakings. Educational institutions and digital technologies are inextricable aspects of contemporary life for many people, and thus their design and organization will continue to have important political and social consequences. The book does not so much argue that cutting-edge philanthropic interventions should play no role in efforts for social change as try to show how they often play a limiting and even counterproductive role, especially when they are deployed to fix problems that they do not have the power to solve. Relieving technology designers, educators, and philanthropically oriented social reformers of this burden could open promising opportunities for contributions from each, but doing so will also require raising difficult, and often uncomfortable, questions about contemporary political-economic relations, gender and sexuality, race and racialization, the feasibility of large-scale democracy, expertise, what sorts of changes differently positioned people want, and what different roles differently positioned persons and technologies can play in these efforts. Finally, in examining how designed interventions often seem to fail, the book could be read as making an argument in favor of neoliberal or market-based solutions as a supposedly preferable alternative to top-down planning. However, and as the following chapters show, it was in part because of neoliberal rhetorics and policies—especially about consumer choice and the virtues of entrepreneurial citizenship—that the school's designers not only fell short of their stated aims but also contributed to remaking that which they had hoped to disrupt. Neoliberal rationalities and policies do

not escape the problems that this book addresses; rather, they often make reformers accountable to even more centralized, and often thinner, accountability metrics while also shifting the responsibility for (not) uprooting structural problems downward onto idealistic reformers and citizens. If the book makes a contribution, I hope it helps direct concerns toward recognition that it is not just schools, the state, neoliberalism, or technology, but also our fixations that we have to think of working on.