

## *Book Review*

*Alex Madva, Daniel Kelly, and Michael Brownstein, Somebody Should Do Something: How Anyone Can Help Create Social Change, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2025, 352 pp.*

Picking up recycling or riding a bike to work can often make us feel better about our life choices. It can also, however, make us question how much those choices matter in a world that seems to constantly be in crisis. Sorting my trash only to see it all end up in the same landfill, or giving up driving in a town where I can't tell fog from smog, can make my efforts feel insignificant, especially if I care about climate change and want to avoid being part of the problem. It then becomes easier to consider how such large problems should be tackled by systems and institutions capable of making truly impactful changes. At the beginning of their timely and aptly titled book, *Somebody Should Do Something: How Anyone Can Help Create Social Change*, the authors Michael Brownstein, Alex Madva, and Daniel Kelly directly address the "either/or" mindset that hinders meaningful social change. They reject the false dichotomy between individual and systemic responsibility. Instead of thinking that either individual choices or social-structure changes are the key to fighting structural injustice, they propose a "both/and" approach based on the idea that personal and structural changes are deeply connected. In other words, we should both make individual decisions that drive the change of current systems, while also creating systems that enable people to make better individual decisions.

To demonstrate that resisting injustice should be viewed from a "both/and" perspective, the authors focus on two of the so-called "everything problems," specifically systemic racism and climate change. These problems can't be solved by "fixing" just one issue because many interconnected causes support their persistence. Burning fossil fuels, deforestation, overconsumption, and food production are all factors that worsen the negative effects of climate change. Similarly, the recurrence of numerous obstacles created within a system, including segregation, employment opportunities, education, access to healthcare, and housing, sustains racial discrimination and intolerance. Therefore,

solving a problem that involves various social structures, such as laws, political economies, institutions, norms, and cultures, requires a structural change.

Brownstein, Madva, and Kelly, who are philosophy professors engaged with topics at the intersection of ethics, moral theory, social change, and cognitive science, discuss the concept of structural change as encompassing both large, far-reaching transformations and a process of small, incremental changes that can eventually add up. This perspective further challenges the “either/or” model of thinking by arguing that fighting injustice depends on both individual resistance and institutional reform. So, for the authors, the change doesn’t come from “within us” or “the outside of us,” but rather results from ongoing feedback between people and systems. Throughout the book, they use clear writing to communicate their ideas, present arguments grounded in social psychology and sociology, and share an inspiring message: anyone can become a changemaker. In the following sections, I will present the case the authors make for their “both/and” approach, exploring the theoretical framework that offers a hopeful and especially optimistic view of initiating and sustaining social change.

Most of us probably know the saying that comparison is the thief of joy. However, it seems that comparing ourselves or our situation to others is a universal part of the human experience. Keeping that in mind, the first step in adopting a “both/and” mindset that the authors suggest is to stop comparing our individual actions to what, for example, a city government can achieve. Feeling like our actions don’t matter enough is inevitable when we compare suggesting to our friends that they try riding a bike to work with a city’s financial incentive for everyone who uses city bikes as their main mode of transportation. To avoid this feeling, we should compare the efforts of different scales separately. We should also, as Brownstein et al. explain, think in terms of “bundles,” that is, a collection of individual choices that can trigger structural changes which, in turn, can enable impactful personal agency. Again, this should foster productive people-system feedback based on understanding that the impact of an individual action depends on the structure that shapes it, while the possibility of structural change depends on the individuals who create and maintain it.

This relationship between the environment and the individuals embedded within it forms a pathway toward the authors’ idea of “unlearning habits,” which can be applied to social biases at the core of race-based intolerance. As creatures of habit, influenced by the culture, system, and people around us, we often unconsciously conform to prevailing beliefs and behaviors. Just as learning them does, unlearning harmful habits involves shaping new social norms through interactions in which people’s actions “signal” different behaviors to others, who then interpret these signals and modify their own behavior. Seemingly small individual acts in a dynamic social context can, therefore, serve

as signals that influence others' choices. As Brownstein et al. further argue, these small acts can accumulate over time and become cascades that reach a "tipping point," a threshold that, once crossed, triggers rapid and significant structural change. However, it is difficult to predict when and how such a change will happen. We might be approaching a tipping point right now, but we might as well never cross one again. Depending on one's perspective, this uncertainty can either be quite discouraging or motivate us to join a promising social movement that could perhaps trigger the next butterfly effect.

In addition to recognizing that personal agency is crucial for signaling the need to challenge existing norms, the authors emphasize the importance of developing "structure-facing skills," which underpin specific social practices aimed at bridging the gap between individuals and the system. These practices stem from an understanding of how social structures work and from acknowledging the concrete steps we could take to tackle a specific issue. Some of the many structure-facing skills that people can learn are, for instance, intersectional awareness, counterfactual thinking, cognitive flexibility, and abandoning political hobbyism. People with these skills tend to be less judgmental and prejudiced, making them more willing to work with others and build alliances with those who have different viewpoints but share common struggles and goals. They are also more likely to understand that "everything problems" require a multifaceted approach, to imagine different scenarios and outcomes when thinking about solving problems, and to feel more motivated to become politically active and involved, rather than treating politics as a hobby discussed with strangers online from the comfort of their own homes. Dedicating one's time and effort to developing structure-facing skills is, therefore, another both/and endeavor that offers a perspective enabling people not only to see how their choices relate to structural mechanics but also to understand it from multiple viewpoints. This can further reveal different roles one might assume on the way to meaningful change.

Recognizing an opportunity to act from where you are and practicing structure-facing skills, whether by joining a labor union, participating in organized boycotts, or publicly advocating for policy change, also involves acknowledging that the results of our efforts won't happen overnight, that their success is always possible but never guaranteed, and that persistence, though it may be tedious, is key to igniting, implementing, and sustaining change. Once all of this comes together in a both/and mindset, the philosophical significance of Brownstein, Madva, and Kelly's fundamental arguments becomes clear: no one is expected to single-handedly "fix" the entire system, but rather to help create the conditions for overcoming systemic inertia.

There is no denying that this theoretical framework is compelling; it offers an invaluable guide away from the "either/or" perspective, emphasizing the potential of each personal choice to develop into a

cascade. Still, even though the authors are aware of the material and psychological constraints that keep people passive, I believe their optimism about the importance of individual acts rests on a somewhat idealized view of human agency that overlooks how difficult it is to become willing to *do something*. Although our capacity to initiate change may seem limited compared to institutions, shifting our focus to individual actions can often lead us to compare our resources with those of our neighbors. The issue then shifts from an either/or mindset to thinking, “I could, but someone else might do it better.” If a person next door has a higher-paying job, no children, and more leisure time overall, a tired working parent who has given in to political hobbyism might believe they are “doing their part,” expecting their neighbor to do more, since the neighbor appears to be in a better position to do so.

Moreover, even if someone in a better position decides to take that first step and signals to others that it is time to act, motivating them to, for example, join town council meetings, only to see that nothing they propose is ever realized, staying persistent might begin to seem like a luxury many lack the resources to continue investing in. Not feeling discouraged by a lack of results and working to develop structure-facing skills that would prevent us from this kind of linear thinking is challenging, especially when many people operate this way. We are taught from an early age that hard work leads to rewards, whether it’s a good grade, more job opportunities, a raise, or the ability to afford a home. Breaking out of that cycle of thinking requires cognitive energy often spent on tasks and responsibilities that secure our livelihood. Before changing the system, a person should first carefully consider what they could modify in their life to become a potential changemaker, a task that is often quite demanding in itself.

Facing structural injustice and feeling motivated to find your role so you can participate in a feedback loop between your community and the system becomes even more difficult if your surroundings are not responsive to your plea. For many people, the need to belong outweighs the urge to speak up for change. When someone’s only support network, whether it’s family, friends, or coworkers, doesn’t see the need to question the status quo, expressing disagreement can mean risking social isolation. Considering that possibility, along with the aforementioned contextual obstacles, adds another reason why individuals might feel stuck in their efforts. Furthermore, the authors’ optimism about cascades and tipping points may overlook how resilient entrenched social structures are to attempts to disrupt the current system. While these structures are not immune to meaningful signals, they often benefit more from maintaining the status quo, accepting small compromises that enhance people’s sense of agency without destabilizing the power dynamics. By offering inexpensive, limited solutions and few concessions, the system resets the feedback loop, silences the movement, and leaves activists exhausted but with a fleeting sense of achievement.

Under these conditions, the both/and approach proposed by Brownstein, Madva, and Kelly reaches a point of vulnerability: the central question becomes not only how to ignite collective action, but also how to protect that fragile flame from being extinguished by a wary, risk-averse community or a system that only pretends to evolve.

In the end, *Somebody Should Do Something* provides its readers with an indispensable psychological and philosophical guide for dealing with the overwhelming complexity of “everything problems.” By challenging the false dichotomy of the either/or mindset, Brownstein, Madva, and Kelly effectively argue that individual actions are not trivial, but essential signals within a dynamic, interdependent system. Their framework issues a loud call to action to those seeking to bridge the gap between personal choices and public transformation. However, as this review has suggested, while serving as a powerful blueprint for how change could occur, the authors’ both/and approach assumes a certain level of stability and resources that systemic injustice often undermines. Ultimately, what makes the book so compelling also reveals its main tension: it shows that *anyone* can help create social change, but implicitly suggests that not *everyone* can afford to take the first risk. By identifying the tools for structural change, the authors equip those positioned to act. What remains is to distribute responsibility more evenly so that a both/and mindset becomes standard practice rather than a privilege of the resilient.<sup>1</sup>

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