

## **BOOK REVIEWS**

### **Philanthropy and Activism**

Daniel Faber and Deborah McCarthy (eds.), *Foundations for Social Change: Critical Perspectives on Philanthropy and Popular Movements*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005.

*Michael Goldman*

*Foundations for Social Change* is an astute, clearly written, and empirically rich book on the layered world of U.S. philanthropic foundations and the world they try to regulate. The editors brought together a group of writers well-versed in the topic, each with a distinct expertise in U.S. philanthropy. The volume covers right-wing and social-justice funders, examines environmental and neighborhood-based funding, and explores the internal dynamics, tensions, and the angst of the next generation of wealthy philanthropists. The question pursued is one of power: How influential is this realm of civil society? The book's punch line is best summarized by this observation: "Civil society without power analysis is the opiate of the funding class" [p. 9]. Readers are in for an enjoyable and informative ride through the varied world of the wealthy elite and their decision-making that ultimately influences the trajectory of social change in the United States.

Some of the questions that this book invites the reader to contemplate are: What has been the role of foundations in the professionalization of social activism? The voluntaristic turn in the provision of social welfare goods and services? The continued push for privatization of public goods, the public sphere, and civil society writ large? The moderation of social movement strategies, of group-based mobilization, of short- and long-term agendas for radical social change? As the authors show, the largest foundations have been like Woody Allen's Zelig, mysteriously appearing at key moments in history and influencing the trajectory of social change. As in the cases of the civil rights and environmental movements, foundations bypassed activists' desire for direct action, radical agitations, and principled stances and financed more moderate and law-based options.

In the introductory chapter, Faber and McCarthy do an excellent job of framing the research and demonstrating how America's largest foundations direct their resources towards elite class-based institutions and away from organizations serving the most vulnerable communities. Foundations engage in what they call "philanthropic exclusion" of both popular social movements and select organizations within normally funded popular movements; and they engage in "philanthropic colonization" of radical groups and movements. Faber and McCarthy argue that foundations often overstep the apparent institutional boundary of "giving" to set the agendas and make the pivotal decisions for their recipients, much the way the World Bank and IMF conduct their business of "aid" in borrowing countries in the global South.

The book is full of compelling arguments. In Robert Bothwell's chapter on conservative public policymaking, he argues that since giving for core support for organizations can be "revolutionary," foundations prefer to give to higher education and the arts rather than to grassroots organizations. Foundation leaders, he argues, "can trust Yale

University and the Metropolitan Opera to do the ‘right thing,’” but not activist immigrant or low-income neighborhood groups [p.122]. Robert Brulle and Craig Jenkins find that membership-based environmental organizations receive a small fraction of what non-membership-based ones receive, and as a consequence most nonprofits end up depending heavily on foundation funding for their existence. Instead of acting on behalf of members, organizations respond to the will of foundations. In the case of the environmental movement, foundations tempered the more progressive and activist-oriented elements within organizations and across campaigns and movements. As Faber and McCarthy show in their own research, foundations have systematically excluded the progressive environmental justice movement and have fostered its integration into the mainstream in ways that have alienated members and leaders, and muted their message and organizing strategies.

One tension the book’s authors address, albeit unevenly, is their desire to appeal to foundations to increase funding to those who most need financial support (e.g. progressive activists directly serving the most disenfranchised). Yet they also acknowledge that when philanthropists do get involved, they often undermine the progressive politics of recipients. In an effort to think through this dilemma, a few authors follow the hand-wringing of young foundation inheritors trying to buck their conservative parents and infuse a more caring and progressive approach to giving away their millions. Yet, when an elite class chooses to give away millions of dollars, it possesses more than just money, the power to give, and the potential to care for the right people. Givers and their recipients become entangled in a mission to manage the worst effects of social inequality and pressures for wealth redistribution. Whenever a hurricane rips apart a city or poverty tears through a neighborhood, an array of possible society-wide actions could occur. Yet the discourse of charity is one that erupts and eclipses others, and the politics of national voluntarism kicks in, leading to a distribution politics shaped by the whims and fancies of the wealthy elite and their charities. Fundamental and supposedly guaranteed human rights become privileges afforded only the “good” and “deserving,” and not others.

In other words, philanthropy in moments of acute and systemic disasters often trigger processes that can further privatize and individualize social responsibility, *de*-legitimate the more democratic processes of societal and government responsibility, and legitimate the role of elites to decide what’s best for “others,” which of course also structures the outcomes of what is best for themselves. The performativity of giving, caring, and receiving affects interactions within and between social classes in profound ways. Hence, we ask: What are the effects of promoting a philanthropic world? What might be the effects of *increased* progressive philanthropy, if it is intimately tied to the legitimation of more disciplinary—and de-legitimation of more socialized—forms of responsibility?

This edited volume provokes these and many other important questions on the politics of wealth and redistribution. It is a wonderful source for thoughtful discussion and ideas that help elucidate what is at stake in this complex historical conjuncture of rapidly increasing forms of philanthropy and neoliberalized social welfarism. I recommend it to scholars, students, and activists alike.