

Charity, Philanthropy, and Civility in American History

Review Number:

483

Publish date:

Tuesday, 1 November, 2005

Editor:

Lawrence Freedman

Mark McGarvie

ISBN:

521603536X

Date of Publication:

2003

Price:

£18.99

Pages:

467pp.

Publisher:

Cambridge University Press

Place of Publication:

Cambridge

Reviewer:

Axel Schäfer

In a curious display of cross-partisan consensus, politicians from both major parties in the US frequently tout the capacity of charitable and non-profit organisations to address the abiding problems of poverty, deprivation and neglect in post-industrial, post-welfarist, and post-Cold War society. George H. W. Bush's 'thousand points of light', Bill Clinton's agenda to 'end welfare as we know it', and George W. Bush's 'faith-based initiative' all seek to increase the involvement of charitable organisations in public policy. The desire to 'empower mediating structures' transcends the clamour of the culture war. Both conservatives enamoured of 'tough love' and liberals with nostalgic feelings about grassroots action seek to employ government to nurture the personalised care and selfless commitment associated with non-profits as an alternative to impersonal state bureaucracies and the harsh realities of market commodification.

In contrast to the political rhetoric, however, there is really nothing new about the close ties between state and non-profit organisations in the history of American public policy. In many ways the recent interest in philanthropy is more indicative of partisan adjustments than of a fundamental shift in policy. Since World War II, conservatives who used to be hostile to philanthropic foundations have embraced the instruments of third-sector organising. As their political clout grew in the wake of the economic and socio-demographic power shifts toward the South and the West they succeeded in building up a counter-infrastructure of right-wing think tanks and to forge ties with the newly politicised conservative Protestant churches. By the same token, post-60s liberals, sharing the Right's disdain for government, have not found it in their hearts to defend the distributive policies of the welfare state and to defy the mantra of devolution, privatisation and deregulation which has dominated the political debate since the 1980s.

This is only one of many insights the contributors to Lawrence Friedman's and Mark McGarvie's timely and much needed historical perspective on third sector organisations provide. In part inspired by the recent upsurge in interest in philanthropic organisations, the editors set themselves the difficult task of forging a coherent narrative by weaving together research on charities and philanthropic endeavours which has emanated from a wide range of historiographical and methodological approaches. As a result, traditional prosopographic essays which discuss the charitable impulses of individual donors are grouped next to articles which, having completed the linguistic turn, examine the empowerment of both giver and recipient in a process of mutual construction. Contributions by organisational historians trace the development of charity from individual giving to professional philanthropy and, ultimately, the welfare state, while historians of social reform movements look at the extent to which charitable work reinforced or challenged established racial, ethnic and gender divides. Finally, scholars who seek to 'bring the state back in' examine the development of the non-profit sector through public policy, while legal historians locate the origins of modern philanthropic organisations in contract law and the demarcations between private and public.

Considering that research has developed under the auspices of a wide variety of historical subfields with their own ways of conceptualising philanthropic action, the editors of this volume have largely succeeded in providing a well-designed, perceptive and stimulating book. The volume never loses track of the larger historical context and rarely gets bogged down in overly specialised case studies. Moreover, Friedman and McGarvie avoid the pitfalls of many edited collections, namely blatant qualitative differences between contributions and a lack of coherence. A rigorous selection process and pre-publication meetings helped give the volume the necessary substance and unity of focus. Friedman and McGarvie chose to organise the book chronologically, but, as the introduction shows, the thematic foci of the contributions form its most thought-provoking component. Five themes in particular give shape to the volume and define its scholarly significance: the historical shifts in demarcating the public, private and charitable realms; the relationships between the state, private business, and non-profit organisations; the institutional development of philanthropic entities; reciprocity and mutual construction of giver and recipient in charity relations; and debates about the political radicalism or conservatism of philanthropy. It is worth taking a closer look at the contributions some of the essays make to these four areas.

Philanthropy, though commonly regarded as a separate space between government and the private market, developed in relationship with both realms. Moreover, the borders between 'private', 'public' and 'third sector' are fluid and constantly negotiated. One of the most intriguing contributions in this area is Mark McGarvie's essay (chapter 4) on the 1819 Dartmouth College case in which the Supreme Court struck down efforts of the New Hampshire state legislature to turn a religious college into a state university in the pursuit of republican and secular educational goals. In his analysis, McGarvie shows that the Court's assertion of the superiority of private contract rights over the public interest and its rejection of the colonial integration of church and state became the legal basis of modern philanthropic organisations. In a manner reminiscent of J. G. A. Pocock, McGarvie views this as an example of a counterrevolutionary impulse which benefited Protestant churches and promoted the development of a liberal ideology which elevated individual freedoms over the communitarian values of republicanism. The judicial insistence on church-state separatism and contract law thus recognised individual rights as superior to the public good.

Similarly, one component of Peter Dobkin Hall's essay (chapter 17) provides insights into the legal and institutional construction of the third sector. He maintains that the modern charitable sector was the creation of federal tax policies after 1945. Internal Revenue Service (IRS) codes also imposed regulatory controls and accounting procedures, placed restrictions on excess business holdings, political advocacy, and donor control. By establishing exemptions and tax deductibility, government policies made charitable giving attractive to donors. IRS codes also allowed organisations such as the Sierra Club and the American Association of Retired Persons, gain tax-exempt status, even though membership in these organisations was mainly a political and financial act, rather than a social commitment.

A second set of articles explore in more detail the particular relationship between the state and the non-profit sector. In doing so, the authors challenge the notion that an expanded welfare state eclipsed philanthropic

entities. Their research suggests a synergistic relationship in which both sectors developed in conjunction with each other, while their respective remits shifted with the winds of political change. As Roy E. Finkenbine shows (chapter 7), the Civil War and Reconstruction 'temporarily restructured the traditional division between America's public and private sectors' (p. 163). During the war, government emerged as a positive force which promoted new interventionist policies and expanded upon existing philanthropic endeavours by turning the US Sanitary Commission, which had been built upon the basis of charitable nursing organisations, into an effective bureaucracy. The post-war period saw the continuation of these impulses in the Freedmen's Bureau and in the efforts of Republican state legislatures to create public health facilities, utility systems, and State Boards of Charities. By the late 1870s, however, a fragmented, weakened, scandal-prone party returned to a traditional ideology of limited government and private property rights, its public service ethos replaced by the economic promises of westward expansion.

David C. Hammack (chapter 12) shows that despite the mutual hostility between New Dealers and the leading philanthropic foundations, federal money began to flow to charities under the auspices of federal social programmes. The Second World War, in particular, established new traditions of federal funding for both secular and sectarian international relief agencies and hospitals. In turn, post-war foundations re-shaped their programmes to take advantage of federal funding in health care, higher education and the arts. The foundations worked effectively 'to increase federal funding in these fields, while minimizing federal controls' (p. 280).

The most detailed analysis of the relationship between government and the non-profit sector is provided by Peter Dobkin Hall. He maintains that, as federal fiscal practices changed after the Second World War from balancing the budget to ensuring the fulfillment of specific strategic objectives, government grants fuelled the growth of both non-profit and for-profit organisations. The welfare state was 'devolutionary and privatizing from its inception' (p. 380). It centralised revenue gathering and policy making, but decentralised implementation of programmes. Programmes such as the G.I. Bill, federal subsidies for 'voluntary' hospitals, and federal support for medical research underwrote the expansion of the nation's human service infrastructure. Moreover, the programmes of the Great Society, vilified by the political right, pioneered the funding streams and the involvement of religious providers, which conservatives today advocate as an alternative to the welfare state.

Finally, Gary Hess (chapter 15) highlights the close ties between government and philanthropic foundations in foreign aid policy during the Cold War. Expressing faith in the universality of American values and institutions, and embracing the mantra of economic growth and democratic institutions, foundations and the foreign policy elite saw the Third World as key to winning the Cold War. As a result, the Ford, Rockefeller, and Carnegie foundations often functioned as non-official extensions of US policy. Close organisational ties and a revolving door in personnel marked their relations. Dean Rusk and John Foster Dulles, for example, moved from the Rockefeller Foundation to the State Department, while McGeorge Bundy and John McCloy moved from public service to the Ford Foundation. Though small in monetary terms, the impact of foundation efforts was significant in training African elites, the 'Green revolution' in agriculture, and in population control. During the heyday of the 'development decade' foundations projected an image as liberal and non-ideological and gained political access where the US government failed to do so. By the 1970s, however, many of the hopes had been shattered as authoritarian governments, poverty, and economic dependency showed that foreign assistance was often used as an instrument of capitalist expansion.

A third theme in the volume is the transition from charity to philanthropy and the development of modern, professionalised non-profit organisations. While charity denotes individual acts of compassion in the tight-knit communal contexts of colonial societies, philanthropy describes the organised efforts to reform society via voluntary collective action. The former means caring for individuals within the context of families and communities, whereas the latter is associated with formal institutions, such as poorhouses, hospitals and asylums. According to Robert A. Gross (chapter 1), philanthropies 'well in advance of railroads . introduced antebellum Americans to modern bureaucracy' (p. 43). They were instrumental in the emergence of professional social workers and foundation executives. Similarly, Ruth Crocker (chapter 9) and Judith Sealander (chapter 10) depict post-Civil War philanthropic foundations as managed like business enterprises

and as pioneering modern forms of administration. The 'scientific philanthropy' practiced by the foundations set up by Carnegie, Rockefeller, Rosenwald, Filene, Olivia Sage and others used corporate models with boards of trustees, paid managerial staff, and modern accounting and reporting procedures. They funded the development of the modern medical research and social science infrastructure, helped standardise the training of social workers, lawyers and engineers, and pushed universities toward adopting corporate accounting systems. Bureaucratisation had its costs, however, as corporate foundations had little contact with the vast army of volunteers which were the mainstay of nineteenth-century reform.

A perceptive contribution to this aspect is Mary J. Oates's (chapter 13) essay on the transformation of Catholic charities from local, ethnic and autonomous entities to centralised organisations. The movement to consolidate charity organisation and fund-raising, which culminated in the formation of the National Conference of Catholic Charities in the early twentieth century, she maintains, 'had its roots not only in the conviction that the traditional decentralised approach was inefficient, but also in a growing desire among church leaders to collaborate meaningfully with government and civic organisations in social welfare activities' (p. 288). By the 1960s, 15 per cent of the Catholic charity budget came from government. By 1984, this had increased to over 50 percent. At the same time, centralisation and government funding caused problems with mobilising grass-roots involvement.

In addition to institutional studies which revise our established understanding of philanthropy, many essays apply cultural history to the study of charitable activism. Seeking to avoid 'older frameworks' which see philanthropies either as beneficent agents of uplift or as instruments of social control and capitalist hegemony, these scholars point to the transformative effects on both giver and recipient and the agency exercised by recipients. They shift the focus away from white male Protestants toward the role of women and minorities, and examine the extent to which philanthropy helped destabilise established racial and gender constructions. Amanda Porterfield (chapter 2) shows how philanthropic activism among Evangelicals caused a shift in emphasis from soul-saving and conversion to the social gospel. Emily Rosenberg (chapter 11) shows how charity and reform in missionary relief, peace work and health care gave way to a secularised emphasis on uplift through science and technology. Stephen Warren (chapter 5) depicts missionaries seeking to convert Indians as inadvertent agents of preserving Indian cultural identity. Reflecting the New Western History, he notes that between the War of 1812 and the Kansas-Nebraska Act, missionaries supported by government funds helped transform Indian gender roles and ended up defending Indian rights. Evangelical Christianity did not just impose its values and institutions on a powerless people, but also provided Indians with a chance to live their religion in new ways. Breeding familiarity with American institutions strengthened the ability of Native Americans to negotiate terms of dependency and cultural survival. Westward expansion, however, spelled the end of the philanthropic dream for white-Indian relations as infringement on Indian land and the Jacksonian impulse of dislocation and dominance prevailed.

Finally, the political impact of philanthropic activism and the extent to which it sustains or challenges established power relations and social norms is a core theme of many contributions. Examples for both aspects abound. Wendy Gamber (chapter 6) concludes that female involvement in various nineteenth-century 'enthusiasms' had both radical and conservative potential. Examining the campaigns for insane asylums, utopian communities, the temperance movement and abolitionism, she reiterates that the millennialism of the Second Great Awakening constituted a crucial impetus behind the increased charitable activism. However, this also resulted in a renewed urge to morally transform the poor and an 'unyielding faith in the virtues of self-control' which 'encouraged philanthropists to think of poverty as an individual failing, not a structural problem' (p. 134). By the 1850s, the moralistic distinction between worthy and unworthy poor had widened the gap between reformers and recipients and informed the philanthropies' emphasis on efficiency and organisation, rather than on charity. Reform thus reinforced conservative social norms and promoted the creation of a stable source of cheap labour for urban industrial society.

Kathleen McCarthy (chapter 8) maintains that charitable work helped create parallel power structures and a distinctive female political culture. Antebellum women benefited from traditions of public-private partnerships, religious disestablishment, and limited government. Their involvement in legally chartered charitable corporations enabled them to engage in activities which had been denied to them as individuals,

namely to buy, sell, invest and sign binding contracts. Evangelical Protestantism in particular, with its decentralised organisation and egalitarian impulses, fostered the female mobilisation for reform causes. Women's growing political clout culminated in post-Civil War efforts to influence the legislative process via publicity, lobbying and petitioning, and in the construction of a 'maternalist' welfare state exemplified by the Sheppard Towner Act and the Children's Bureau in the early twentieth century.

The essays also highlight the political conundrum of female reform activism. Women's influence tended to thrive under the conditions of public-private partnerships, rather than under effective welfare state structures. In other words, the conservative demarcation of public and private based on contract law described by McGarvie (chapter 4) both limited the potential for effective social change and enabled female political participation. By the same token, the emergence of bureaucratic, entitlement-based systems of social provision tended to restrict female control. Mary Oates highlights another aspect of this conundrum. Nuns and other Catholic women provided the main workforce in hospitals, nursing homes, orphanages, and parochial schools, but the efforts to centralise Catholic charities and cooperate with government led to a loss of influence. Oates attributes the steep decline in the number of nuns since mid-1960s in part to this loss of control.

The role of philanthropies in overcoming the racial divide is equally ambivalent. Roy Finkenbine maintains that Northern philanthropic support for Southern education during the 1880s and 1890s helped reify segregation. Under the guise of 'scientific philanthropy', organisations such as the John F. Slater Fund helped prepare blacks for subservience by providing massive funding for Hampton and Tuskegee Institutes and turning industrial education into the dominant curriculum. In a similar vein, Claude A. Clegg (chapter 16) stresses the limitations of philanthropic impulses in overcoming racial inequality after the Second World War. He points out that foundations participated in attempts of successive administrations to control the militancy of the Civil Rights movement. Foundations funded conservative policies, such as voter registration drives and leadership training programmes. Nonetheless, Clegg regards philanthropy in conjunction with governmental assistance as crucial in the struggle for racial equality and inclusion.

Friedman and McGarvie themselves also conclude that reliance on private and non-profit agencies has contributed far less to the alleviation of poverty than traditional New Deal and Great Society programmes. While civil society helps sustain a democratic order and patterns of social solidarity against both state control and the ravages of the market, it also frequently reinforces established social norms and political ideologies.

In conclusion, the editors have produced a book that reflects the research and thinking of the current generation of American history scholars, but there are some problems which need to be pointed out. A number of chapters contain textbook-style summaries of historical developments, which, while making the volume more accessible, limit the depth of insight. William B. Cohen's epilogue on 'The European comparison' introduces a different dimension not in keeping with the rest of the volume and thus reads like an add-on. The book also suffers from a lack of a clear sense of what constitutes philanthropy and charity. The essays employ a variety of definitions, including traditional eleemosynary giving, reform movements, corporate foundations and lobbying organisations. Some chapters barely even mention philanthropy and discuss charitable impulses in terms of 'sensibilities' (G. J. Barker Benfield in chapter 3) and ethnic identities (Stephen J. Whitfield in chapter 14). By the same token, key forms of collective action, such as labour unions, are not studied at all, and there is little debate about whether or not to include groups such as the Ku Klux Klan. Moreover, socio-economic and class issues tend to get short shrift, reflecting a scarcity of research in this field. General philosophical questions, such as whether benevolent giving is ultimately more demeaning to the recipient than impersonal bureaucracies, are not explored. Finally, footnotes would have been more useful for the researcher than the listing of 'further readings'.

The book goes a long way toward addressing the lack of sustained historical research into philanthropy. It shows yet again that Americans saw themselves as cooperative members of groups and societies more than as isolated individuals. The history of philanthropy still needs to be written, but the book is a powerful reminder that neither the history of the modern state nor the construction of gender, race and class can be

written without paying attention to the way in which they were shaped by philanthropic and charitable activism.

Other reviews:

[2]

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/483#comment-0>

Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/2522>

[2] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>