
Philanthropy and politics: all about the giver?

July 2012

[Inderjeet Parmar](#) and [Vanessa Pupavac](#) introduced a discussion about the role of philanthropy and NGOs in politics



Many of the important institutions in our society have some historical connections to philanthropists of the recent industrial and financial past. From the Portico Library on Mosley Street in Manchester to the Port Sunlight village on the Wirral, there's been a desire by people of substance to use their wealth to have an impact in changing society for the better. This isn't an English thing, but can be seen as a trend internationally, as pointed out in some detail by **Professor Inderjeet Parmar**

in his latest book '

[Foundations of the American Century](#)

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Bill Gates has joined a long list of successful business people, who have setup foundations to do good with the wealth at their disposal. The world John D. Rockefeller, Carnegie, and the Ford Foundations were established in seems a far cry from the world we find ourselves in today. So with foundations and philanthropy still widespread, it is worth considering what has changed - in terms of who is being 'helped', and perhaps more importantly, what drives those *giving* and

helping

.

The euphoria in the West with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, rather quickly evaporated as each western power manoeuvred themselves in a new world order with one remaining super power policeman of international relations. So what is the role of foundations in the American Century, and to what extent have they been sidelined by the seemingly ubiquitous Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) like Greenpeace and Oxfam?

A number of NGOs today, such as Médecins Sans Frontières and Reporters Sans Frontières, have moved to centre stage, providing a radical edge to Western interventions in the developing world. Their outward presentation of being progressive belies an absence of mandate from the people in whose territory deliver their mission. Despite not having their roots in government, these NGOs often find their greatest support amongst the leadership of the developed world who court them and their celebrity spokespeople, in order to endow themselves with meaning as they grapple with their own loss of direction and coherence. These parasitical relationships are reflected in a growing dependence of NGOs on government recognition and funding, drawing them inevitably closer to mainstream Western interests.

So, how significant is the change from individuals and foundations leading extra-governmental action in society, to one of NGOs doing so - externally in other people's countries, and increasingly perhaps domestically? Or is it just a change in form from foundations to NGOs with the same desire to sort out apparent failings in society? After all, whilst charities such as Oxfam and Actionaid appear to receive a significant proportion of their income from public donations, much of that money is spent on promotions and advertising. Funding for fieldwork, on the other hand, comes from the public purse, and has been increasing steadily for over a decade. Is the effect of today's NGOs more damaging than benign, as Western leaders conduct their power play by proxy, through organisations which are accountable to nobody - Oxfam's campaign to

[Save the Mekong](#)

being a good example?

Listen again (variable quality)...

Speaker intros and most of the discussion in one go - click on the Play button: {mp3}philanthropy{/mp3}

Some background readings

[Ethics guide: Arguments against charity](#) BBC website

[Dam campaigns](#) , by Kirk Leech, spiked 8 March 2001

[UN/NGO Partnerships for Democratic Governance](#) , Asian Civil Society Forum 2002 UNCC, Bangkok / December 9 to 13, 2002 (Final Statement)

[The Changing World Order, the Structural Role of Humanitarian NGOs, and the Protection of Displaced Persons and Migrants](#) , Professor B S Chimni, ICVA conference 14-15 February 2003

[The Emerging Roles of NGOs in International Relations](#) Jude L. Fernando, and Alan W. Heston, eds 2004

[Andrew Mwenda takes a new look at Africa](#) , TEDGlobal 2007

[Research identifies 'culture shift' towards university philanthropy](#) , by Cheryl Chapman, Philanthropy UK 24 March 2011

[A fixation with inequality, a poverty of understanding](#) , by Daniel Ben-Ami, spiked December 2011

[Egyptian Minister: U.S. Funded NGOs to Undermine Egypt](#) , by David, Project On Middle East Democracy 13 February 2012

[Foundations of the American Century by Inderjeet Parmar](#) , Reviewed by By Walter Russell Mead March/April 2012

[Global Disaster Management and Therapeutic Governance of Communities](#) , by Vanessa Pupavac, development dialogue (p83-100) April 2012

[Not so cuddly](#) , by Inderjeet Parmar, Berfrois 4 April 2012

[The Philanthropies of American Imperialism: Foundations and American Power](#) , by Joan Roelofs, Counterpunch 20 April 2012

['Let's teach these darkies about the rule of law'](#) , by Tim Black, spiked 29 May 2012

[Rio+20 has Unilever but not Cameron – a sign of our unsustainable times](#) , by Jonathon Porritt, Guardian, 21 June 2012

[How the government cynically lobbies itself](#) , by Christopher Snowden, spiked review of books July 2012

[Venture capitalist gives £75m for Oxford's poorest students](#) , by Jeevan Vasagar, Guardian 11 July 2012

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