

Social justice philanthropy: introducing the series

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Everyone is talking about social justice philanthropy. But what is it? What does it look like? Why is it important? Where has it come from, what does it do, what might it achieve – and how? Over the next year, we will address these questions in a specially commissioned series of articles for *Alliance Extra*. The Barrow Cadbury Trust, the Ford Foundation, the New World Foundation and the Webb Memorial Trust support the work.

In this first article, we set out what we want to accomplish and how. We identify the key themes and reach out to readers in all parts of the globe to help us to create the series and to begin to act on its results. We want the series to be risky in content, promiscuous in method, and above all interactive. We want to create a debate, using readers' thoughts and experiences to build on our own, necessarily limited as they are by cultural background and northern geography. We want to encourage you the reader to write yourself, our aim being to build a broad-based literature that meets the needs of an emerging field, and to encourage collaborative organizing.

We are embarking on this series because writing on social justice philanthropy is in its infancy. There is little academic writing that appraises the field critically and, although there is some material from practitioners, this often takes the form of individual case studies written in isolation from wider theory and practice. We aim to produce material that is directly useful to practitioners and that encourages academics to take this area seriously.

Is social justice philanthropy harmful?

Our starting point is what statisticians call the 'null hypothesis'. That is to say, we begin with the idea that 'social justice philanthropy is harmful'. In fact, influential writers have argued both that social justice is harmful and that philanthropy is harmful. This suggests that a combination of the two might be especially harmful.

Such a starting point may shock *Alliance* readers, who may be unaccustomed to considering the possibility that their activities are harmful. But a glimpse at history reveals that this view is conventional wisdom in some quarters. Consider the views of Frederick Von Hayek, for example, who, along with Milton Friedman, has been the principal architect of economic organization over the past quarter of a century:

‘...nothing has done so much to destroy the juridical safeguards of individual freedom as the striving after this mirage of social justice.’

Philanthropy too has its enemies, and in the past opposition has been strident. Consider the Jacobins in France, the Communists in the Soviet bloc, and the Nazis in Austria – all of whom made private foundations illegal. Sometimes the motives for these attacks stem

from a painfully hollow pursuit of egalitarianism; in other cases, motives are less clear. Take for example President Vladimir Putin's growing restrictions on philanthropy and civil society in Russia. His motives are opaque but, according to Russians active in the NGO sector, appear to be related to a desire to neutralize independent thought and action.

Making the case

So we have to make the case for social justice philanthropy or be dismissed as well-meaning and confused. And that means being clear about what social justice philanthropy is and why it is important. Work on this to date has been disappointing so that the field is covered in a conceptual cloud. Other terms are in use that are just as woolly: 'social change philanthropy' is the most similar. Philanthropy is also described as 'creative', 'progressive', 'strategic' and 'adventurous'. Some academics such as Helmut Anheier (at UCLA in the US), suggest that the fuzziness is inevitable – and even a good thing – because terms such as social justice philanthropy (along with civil society and social capital) are in a transitional state and their vagueness generates debate as part of a ferment of new ideas.

But we object. The term 'social justice' has been in common currency since 1849 and yet philosopher Michael Novak complains: 'I have never encountered a writer, religious or philosophical, who directly answers Hayek's criticisms.' We believe that there is an answer to Hayek, and it is important that this is agreed with those who wish to counter growing inequality across the world, fuelled by ever-growing conservative forces. Such clarity is vital because unless we understand our goals, we're unlikely to achieve them. To reach such understanding we need joint thinking, conversation, and action. That is what we want to achieve in this series.

An opportune moment

The moment is opportune. It is as if the surface of the globe has suddenly grown hotter. Everywhere, there is a burgeoning of interest in social justice resulting in new groupings of foundations. In the United States, for example, 15 foundations comprising the 'Social Justice Infrastructure Group' are piloting support services for social justice in one state. A similar-sized group of radical 'public foundations' have formed the 'Rye Collaborative' so that they can have more influence than they would if they acted alone. In the United Kingdom the Barrow Cadbury Trust has initiated discussions with fellow foundations on the themes of social justice, poverty reduction and community inclusion, while the Carnegie UK Trust has developed proposals for a think-tank to support progressive philanthropy. In Europe the Network of European Foundations has taken some social justice initiatives. Internationally, a network of indigenous foundations working in societies divided by violent conflict has formed a new organization – Foundations for Peace – to advance equality, diversity and interdependence as a means of peace building. In June this year, the Ford Foundation launched its 'International Initiative to Strengthen Philanthropy', which is working with 19 foundations across the world, many of which have a human rights perspective. At the Council on Foundations' Community

Foundations Conference held in Seattle in the fall of 2005, conversations took place about a global movement for social justice among community foundations.

A new zeitgeist?

Are these interventions isolated or is there some new consciousness at work? In their report *Stepping up the Stairs*, Steven Burkeman and Alison Harker suggest that social justice philanthropy is the ‘new zeitgeist’. This view is apparent too in an earlier report by the Washington-based National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy: *Social justice philanthropy: the latest trend or a lasting lens for grantmaking?*

However, we must avoid the trap of seeing social justice philanthropy as something new. More than a century ago, Joseph Rowntree drew attention to the need to remove the causes of social problems rather than merely treat their symptoms, and founded three trusts in the UK that are still pursuing these goals. To understand social justice philanthropy, therefore, we need to examine its history and see how modern actions connect with older traditions. Doing so will show that there are good historical reasons why social justice philanthropy has emerged as a force now.

But we will not look only at the past. We will look also at what foundations are doing now and the philosophies that inform their work. We will look at the array of philanthropic strategies to see what is effective in supporting social justice. We will ask foundations how they find the right organizations to support. We will ask what is the best means of supporting them. We will also broach the vexed question of the correct balance between what foundations do themselves and what they fund others to do. We will look at funder collaboratives and aim to assess the relative advantages of funding alone or with others. This will lead to the ultimate question: ‘What is most likely to succeed?’

What is to be done?

Once we have got this far, we will think about the future and ask ‘What is to be done?’ If social justice is to take root, what needs to happen to bring it to scale? This question is too important to be left to chance, so an organizing strategy is required. What kind of support and technical assistance should there be? What kinds of development strategies, including advocacy? How can this be done? Who should be involved? What will you do? Will you work with us?

We need some creativity to counter the threat to our humanity posed by those who see the future as plenty for the few at the expense of the many. So please join with us to become a contributor to this series. If you have any comments on this article or suggestions about the series or experiences you’d like to share with other *Alliance* readers, please email alliance@allavida.org and we will post these on the *Alliance* website as the beginnings of a dialogue. If the articles in this series stimulate you and you’d like to write an article yourself, please email Colin Greer or Barry Knight at the email addresses below.

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