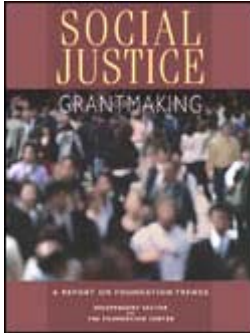


The Twelve Most Common Objections to Social Justice Philanthropy



P O S T E D B Y A L B E R T



Inside the painfully polite, frequently conservative world of mainstream U.S. philanthropy, the term “social justice philanthropy” often suggests an unwholesome radicalism in one’s approach to grantmaking. This fact, if it is a fact, should give us pause. What kind of an enterprise is mainstream philanthropy that it can be so easily rattled by the notion of social justice?

The 2005 publication, [*Social Justice Grantmaking: A Report on Foundation Trends*](#), did much to help make the philanthropic world safer for discussions of social justice. It attempted to step carefully around—or rather through—the thornier questions, some of them related to a precise definition of the term “social justice philanthropy.” The report’s working definition was this:

Social justice philanthropy is the granting of philanthropic contributions to nonprofit organizations based in the United States and other countries that work for structural change in order to increase the opportunity of those who are least well off politically, economically, and socially.

The authors of that report did an admirable job of balancing competing perspectives.* Going forward, while there might be some skirmishes related to the category of the “least well off,” most of the battle will shift, in my view, to the kind of “structural change” that effectively addresses the roots of social injustice.

Of special interest in the report was a chapter written by Henry Ramos and Scott Nielsen in which they described their interviews with program officers and foundation executives, some of whom were apparently skeptical about the project of social justice philanthropy. These interviews uncovered an eye-opening—and sometimes eye-popping—array of objections to social justice as an organizing concept.

What follows is my attempt to address the objections I believe are most commonly raised against social justice grantmaking. Some of these are drawn from the work of Ramos and Nielsen; many come from my own experience as an apologist for the field.

So here goes, in no particular order. Hold on to your megaphones ...

1. The poor will always be with us.

The unfair advantages accorded one group over another might or might not result in substantial income and wealth disparities, so that while a strikingly unequal distribution of income and wealth is frequently an outcome of social injustice, it isn't necessarily so. Racial discrimination, second-class citizenship for gays and lesbians, draconian treatment of legal immigrants under [IIRAIRA](#) laws: these are unjust in and of themselves, whether or not they lead to significant income disparities.

There's no denying that in Matthew 26:11 Christ tells us that the poor are always with us. But a sensitive reader of the Gospels would not on this basis conclude that we should do nothing to reduce their numbers or alleviate their suffering.

The deeper question here is, what can social justice philanthropy reasonably hope to accomplish for the poor (see objection 8, below)? We have a fairly clear idea of how to help individuals and individual families escape poverty. The challenge in the U.S. context is to better understand how our values, habits of mind, institutions, and economic and political structures enable poverty to persist in marginalized communities defined by race, ethnicity, class, national origin, and other characteristics.

Finally, if eliminating poverty were the only goal of social justice work, this objection might carry some weight. But it isn't, so it doesn't.

2. Social justice work is anachronistic at best and radical at worst: my board would never agree to it.

The objection here, if I understand it correctly, is that the trustees of U.S. foundations would generally resist the notion of social justice. If that's the case, could there be a stronger argument for damning the enterprise of American philanthropy and dismantling its institutions? If the notion of fairness raises so many objections in the boardroom, hasn't the American foundation stopped serving a useful social purpose?

I'm not convinced, however, that notions of justice or equality of opportunity will ultimately prove so alienating to trustees. Remove the rhetoric, the partisanship, the unpleasant associations, and you're left with an idea—justice as fairness—that all good people can embrace.

As for the charge of anachronism, it's true that discussions of social justice have an ancient pedigree. Mencius, Plato, Christ, and thousands of others have weighed in. But we've been arguing about morality for as long a time, and nobody's suggesting we move past the notion of ethical behavior.

3. Social justice philanthropy can't be properly evaluated.

It can be and has been. Many frameworks for assessing social justice philanthropy have been developed over the years. Here's a [link](#) to just a few.

4. Funding for social services or youth enrichment programs or housing development etc. is social justice funding.



I'll cede the point: there's no use arguing over the ownership of the term "social justice." Moreover, I can imagine contexts in which giving a hungry man a piece of bread would count as a deeply political act. It's true that funding social services or youth programs, for example, fails the definition I've given above of social justice philanthropy. After all, providing funding for these services doesn't typically lead to structural change and might in some cases impede it. Nevertheless there's something wonderfully human, deeply *just* about giving assistance to someone who needs our help.

There is, however, another kind of funding that aims to address the upstream causes of our downstream problems, that asks *why* some communities are much more desperately in need of social services or affordable housing than others, or why the young people in these communities attend schools that are falling down around their heads. It's the kind of philanthropy that analyzes how power and privilege are brokered and maintained in this country. It's the kind of philanthropy I'm championing here. I'll call it "social justice philanthropy plus" perhaps, "or turbo philanthropy" or "Maureen." Rather than fight for possession of the term *social justice philanthropy*, I'd happily yield it to whomever would claim it since ultimately it doesn't matter what we call it, it matters only that we do it.

5. We fund social services or youth enrichment or housing etc. Social justice philanthropy has *nothing* to do with us.

Periodically, history affords us a few moments of clarity. By the grace of a higher power, or by chance, the light of insight burns away the mists and we come to understand more clearly who we are and what we do. Hurricane Katrina was for many not only an opportunity to respond but also to reflect. Few events in recent U.S. history have so clearly put the lie to the idea that we can effectively address the challenges faced by low-income communities by ignoring the effects of race and class or by side-stepping issues of power and privilege.



Robber Barons

6. Social justice philanthropy is an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms.

In an [NCRP](#) publication titled [Understanding Social Justice Philanthropy](#) the contradiction was expressed this way:

Foundations are tax-exempt institutions with the dual purpose of holding excess wealth and benefiting the public good. This excess wealth is quite often the result of the inequitable distribution of economic, political or social power. The question becomes then, “How can tax exempt institutions that benefit from power inequalities and control great wealth work toward equal opportunity and social, economic and political power for those without it?” Without market (economic or political) signals to determine the demand for social justice, how can institutions that are the result of the private market and inventions of public policy determine such a demand?

Along these same lines, there are critics who argue that it’s no accident that grand philanthropic gestures coincide with moments in our history when wealth becomes concentrated in very few hands and the gap between the rich and the poor grows unacceptably large. (Consider, for example, the founding of the first large American foundations around the time of the Robber Barons, or the record-breaking foundations being created today.) These critics argue that now, as in ages past, philanthropy has functioned as a social safety valve, redistributing just enough wealth to keep people in low-income communities from becoming uncontrollably militant. In a context such as this, they ask, is it really possible for philanthropy to become the snake that bites its own tail, to challenge the very institutions from which it draws its power?

Some of these critics assume that social justice philanthropy will necessarily lead to revolution rather than evolution; that any effort to help the marginalized will require bringing capitalism to its knees. This is an absurdity of the first water, equal in absurdity, perhaps, to the claim that a perfectly efficient market will solve all of our social ills.

We have not, in my view, taken the first step toward change, which is simply to *see*, to understand where we are and why. If and when we attempt this, I would urge us to avoid

what I call the “systems heresy”—the idea that just systems will necessarily lead to just people who produce just outcomes. Let’s not presuppose what the solutions will be until we clearly understand the problems.

7. Funding advocacy is against the law.



No, thankfully [it isn't](#)—despite the best efforts of some members of Congress. More importantly, advocacy is only one of many tools used by individuals and organizations working for social change. Other perfectly legal tools include research, community organizing, policy analysis, voter registration, movement building, leadership development, and public outreach, among others.

8. The problems are too big: we don't have the capacity to address them.

We once thought the ocean too wide and too deep to cross. Then somebody invented the boat.

Even a system as large and complicated as the United States has undergone dramatic shifts in its treatment of marginalized communities and in how it grants access to power and privilege. Slavery has been abolished, women have won the right to vote, and the great social movements of the 1950s and 60s have moved us closer to widely shared ideals of social justice. The broader goal of a world without want where all people thrive and nations live in peace, where all have equal access to opportunity and all contribute according to their means—this world might be farther off, but there’s nothing in principle to stop us from creating it.

9. All the great social justice battles have been fought and won: there's nothing left to do.

The residents of New Orleans’s Ninth Ward don’t think so. Neither do the gay and lesbian couples who are being denied full marriage rights, or the working poor who have seen their real wages drop over the past several decades. We can ask the legal immigrants suffering under draconian IIRAIRA laws about their take on American-style social justice. Perhaps those inmates being water-boarded in secret CIA prisons, or being held without due process at Guantánamo, or undergoing extraordinary rendition to countries where they’ll be tortured have a perspective on how much farther we have to go before we declare victory in the war on injustice.

All of this and more is happening in the U.S. context. The chamber of horrors becomes substantially more crowded the further afield we go.

10. There are no models of successful social justice grantmaking.

American philanthropy is blessed with many examples of courageous and far-seeing foundations that have cast their lots with the poor and the marginalized. They would be more than happy to share with you their successes. Check out, for example:

[Open Society Institute](#)

[Marguerite Casey Foundation](#)

[Liberty Hill Foundation](#)

[Hill-Snowden Foundation](#)

... and [many others](#).

11. Even avowed social justice grantmakers can't agree on a definition of the term.

It's not a matter of shared definitions, but of a shared determination to forego philanthropy as usual for a kind of giving that transforms both the giver and the supplicant, humbling the former and empowering the latter.

More to the point: How essential is it that all of us subscribe to the same definition of social justice or social justice philanthropy? Perfect justice requires that each of us have a meaningful role in shaping society's institutions and inflecting its values. It shouldn't surprise us that from this multiplicity of views there will emerge a range of perspectives on what social justice should consist in. Social justice philanthropy, we can agree, is a verb not a noun; we can expect its meaning to unfold over time. Our evolving sense of social justice would suggest that we continue to welcome disagreement, to invite all stakeholders to search for a higher truth through reasoned debate, as hopelessly old fashioned as this might sound.

12. It's not a lack of social justice that's at the root of our problems: it's a lack of personal responsibility or it's big government or ...

I would wager that it's these things and more. If our primary commitments are to social justice, to truth and to mercy, we'll find a way to sort through our disagreements. If, on the other hand, we're here in the service of narrow interests, then the idea of justice as fairness will never resonate with us.

* I believe the working definition of social justice philanthropy used by the report needs emendation, but this view was apparently shared by the authors themselves. I'll return to this question in another post.

June 08, 2008 in [Advocacy](#), [Philanthropy](#), [Social Change](#) | [Permalink](#)

[Technorati Tags](#): [foundation center](#), [philanthropy](#), [social change](#), [social justice](#), [social justice funding](#), [social justice grantmaking](#)

Comments

Bravo! Especially useful is your reminder that there's no legal obstacle to funding or doing advocacy. As you say, it's troubling to realize that the notion of social justice makes philanthropoids uneasy--until we recall that the duty of everyone who cares about human progress is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable!

Posted by: [The Nonprofiteer](#) | [June 09, 2008 at 09:31 PM](#)

This is some powerful stuff. Before I read this, I happened to write a blog about the recent announcement that more than 90% of the Dallas Independent School District lived at or below poverty. I wish I'd read this first.... although I would likely still be writing it! :)

Thanks for bringing this up.

Jeremy Gregg, Editor
The Raiser's Razor
<http://theraiser.blogspot.com/>

Posted by: [Jeremy Gregg](#) | [June 10, 2008 at 01:42 AM](#)

The path to the jury box and witness stand passes by the guillotine, so I can understand the uneasiness some people feel. A recent visit to the [Conciergerie](#) was for me a sobering experience.

The Dallas stats are stunning. I hope the tax rebates are helping with that.

Posted by: [Albert](#) | [June 10, 2008 at 06:58 AM](#)

You point out (correctly, I think) that social justice philanthropy is more than just the alleviation of suffering, but structural change that would, well, alleviate the need for alleviation. Fair enough. But then you ask "what kind of an enterprise is mainstream philanthropy that it can be so easily rattled by the notion of social justice?" Um, because you are suggesting "structural change." Going for big-idea change isn't that scary if you are advocating it - although perhaps it should be a little more scary than it's advocates find it to be, since the more ambitious the program, the bigger the unintended consequences turn out to be. But it's awfully scary if you are, say, a billionaire or the descendent / legatee of a billionaire, or just someone that happens to have a fairly

comfortable position at a long-established foundation. The world has been pretty good to them, and then in comes someone asking them to change the structure that got them where they are. You say "the challenge in the U.S. context is to better understand how our values, habits of mind, institutions, and economic and political structures enable poverty to persist in marginalized communities defined by race, ethnicity, class, national origin, and other characteristics." That seems to suggest a need to change, perhaps radically, our values and habits of mind (to the extent that it is even in the power of foundations' funding choices to change them), and our institutions and economic and political structures. Certainly for someone in one of the older, more established foundations, that would be one of the easiest grant denials ever - "hmm, I can either advocate for structural change that will lead to an uncertain outcome and that sounds like it will threaten my comfortable place in society, or I could just write another big check to the ballet..."

A couple of other observations: some words have become shorthand for entire political philosophies, like freedom, free markets, peace, and yes, justice. It gets even more freighted with preconceived notions when preceded by "social." People may not know what it means, but they sure *think* that they know what it means, whether accurate or not. One thing is for certain, and that is that they don't think that it's politically neutral, and I have rarely heard it described to me in a way that's politically neutral. Usually if a foundation is willing to take on such an overtly political agenda, they were founded to do just that (Tides Fdn, Heritage Fdn, etc.) - they rarely come to it late in life.

Also, it simply may not be the mission of a foundation to try to change society in such radical ways. As we all know, for any given cause, there are only a select number of foundations that are willing to fund it - you may go to the Open Society Institute for all of your structural change needs, but the local orchestra can't go to them for a grant. I don't find that anymore objectionable than the fact that you probably can't go to their funders.

Then there's donor intent - Joseph Pew and Henry Ford were politically conservative (uh, troglodytes might be more accurate), and would be spinning in their graves to see what has happened to their foundations. Are you suggesting that Pew, Ford, and others were even further from their founders intent? The counter argument is easy - no, to the contrary, they should go the other way - and has the added benefit of actually being what the founders wanted.

Finally, we have the largest, most vibrant philanthropic community in the world, with huge amounts of resources freely dedicated every year in annual donations, and still larger amounts in endowments and foundations, to fund a very large number of causes. Maybe we in the nonprofit world are the change that we have been waiting for (tip o' the hat to Barack Obama).

Posted by: Bif | [June 10, 2008 at 01:12 PM](#)

So many foundations with grand goals like "end poverty as we know it". I want to tell them you can't get there from here, at least not by putting all your money on direct services.

Posted by: erasmus | [June 10, 2008 at 04:42 PM](#)

Thanks for your thoughtful comment, Bif.

It's a great irony that some philanthropic leaders who were helped significantly by earlier social justice movements might now resist a re-engagement of that conversation.

Your point about language is well taken. Annexing "social" to "justice" takes the term out of the courts and onto the streets where it can be discussed and negotiated. It's purposely vague--a good thing, in my view--setting it apart from terms like "distributive justice," users of which generally have specific redistributive goals in mind.

I would certainly leave the symphony funders to their symphonies. Some of my best friends play the bassoon. I would also, however, endorse erasmus's comment here. I did a straw poll of our local foundations. When there's any kind of specificity at all in our mission statements or in our stated goals, these typically involve things like ending homelessness, eliminating poverty, and the like. I venture that we won't achieve these goals through direct service funding, or even through most of the advocacy funding we tend to do. We should certainly support organizations that house the homeless and feed the hungry (these are the organizations I write my checks to), but they'll be the first to tell you they're not in the business of *ending* homelessness and poverty.

BTW, I don't have the last word on what "structural change" consists in (the term is fraught), but I think it's foolish to leave this work to just a handful of big foundations like Ford, OSI, and others. It is now, and has always been, the most critical work of our time - - the work most tightly bound, in my view, with what it means to be a citizen.

Posted by: [Albert](#) | [June 11, 2008 at 10:53 AM](#)

Albert,

Very powerful observations, really well written, as always.

I'd like to hear more about the "systems heresy." Do you mean that to trend toward greater justice, you need both good people and good systems, and so can't just say "well, I'll wait for the day good systems appear."? If you get a chance, maybe that would be a good subject for a further post.

Also, I'd love to see another post and discussion going into further depth on the meaning of "social justice", along the lines of your exchange with Bif above.

Thanks for doing this (and as a board member for NCRP, thanks also for citing our publication).

Posted by: Pete Manzo | [June 13, 2008 at 02:50 AM](#)

Thanks, Pete. In answer to your question about the systems heresy: The upside of the classically Liberal conception of the state is that it provides a values-neutral framework of rights in which each of us can pursue his or her own vision of the good. The downside is that if you believe it's important for there to be general agreement about certain values (e.g., respect for the commons), that conversation about values has to be carried by institutions outside of the context of the state. This can and should happen, but there are various forces, in my view, that keep it from happening as effectively as it should in U.S. civil society. The shorter answer to your question is yes, I believe even the best systems can be subverted by sociopaths.

I'm thinking I should ask our SSIR colleague Mark Rosenman to weigh in on the systems heresy (although he doesn't express his views in these terms). He's been thinking a lot lately about values and their role in philanthropy.

Posted by: [Albert](#) | [June 13, 2008 at 02:06 PM](#)

A great post, Albert. Robert Coles interviewed wealthy parents and children about their values and way of life. A phrase that sticks in my mind from those interviews was from an heir describing the vacation homes that she and her friends had: "comfortable, comfortable places." Philanthropy and the family foundation seems often an appurtenance of such comfortable, comfortable places. Social justice to me means remembering, "There but for fortune go I," that we are where we are, in these comfortable comfortable places, not by talent alone, but also by good fortune. Justice demands that we do for others trapped in poverty what we would need if we were so trapped. This is not about doing good, but doing justice. Tzedakah. When we forget how privileged we are, we invite the wrath of a just God. He loves each of us equally, and said so. We love ourselves mostly, and it shows.

Posted by: [Phil](#) | [June 23, 2008 at 05:37 PM](#)

"We are where we are, in these comfortable comfortable places, not by talent alone ..."

Or by talent hardly at all, even here recognizing that talent and our ability to exercise it also depend on a roll of the Cosmic Dice.

Posted by: [Albert](#) | [June 24, 2008 at 05:56 PM](#)

If you ever do fall to work in a menial role among those who are down to a last chance, you come to the awful realization that they are a great deal like those you might have known in higher class places. The best rise, the best fall, the best never have a chance. Fortune's wheel or Fortune's Chutes and Ladders.

Posted by: [Phil](#) | [June 25, 2008 at 11:20 PM](#)

And the worst rise even faster.

Posted by: [Phil](#) | [June 25, 2008 at 11:21 PM](#)

We'd solve all our energy problems if somehow we could harness the power of bad faith.

Posted by: Enrique the Gay Philosopher | [June 29, 2008 at 06:17 PM](#)

Might make a good white paper for a think tank.

Posted by: [Phil](#) | [June 29, 2008 at 07:03 PM](#)

I second the motion that the comforts of privilege need to be at the top of this handy dandy list.

I run an exercise in my night class that asks tired post-grads to compare the notions of social change vs charity.

I am always surprised at how few are able to identify examples of social justice work -- these are smart people with experience in nonprofit organizations.

The big hairy moral questions of equity, power, justice, are under their noses but they don't always see them without a sharp smack from my ruler.

Phil is right. We philanthropoids and our ilk live in gauzy bubbles of privilege that do not require us to look outward, touch the sidewalk or connect to the dirt on the ground. And the distance is growing.

Even the so-called social justice philanthropoids (a most delightful contradiction to toy with if there ever was one) are regularly razzed by their grantees for their studied posturing that betrays their high-rent perch in society.

I am a regular at those fabulous lefty funder shindigs and would not be surprised should any one ask:

"Excuse me, do you happen to have any Grey Poupon?"

Posted by: Tidy Sum | [August 06, 2008 at 01:16 PM](#)