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Book Review by Alicia Schatteman

Philanthropy in America: A History. By *Olivier Zunz*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2012. 396 pp. ISBN: 9780691128368

Philanthropy: Not made in America but remade decidedly American. The first question one might ask when confronting a book with such a scope as this one is why take on describing and analyzing philanthropy in America almost since its inception? To ask this question, however, is to miss the point, as *Philanthropy* is much more than a chronology from the 18th century to today. Instead, Zunz has woven social commentary along with the evolutionary tale of philanthropy, consciously tying this story to where we are today. The purpose of the book is to tell the story of how philanthropy in America began as a tale of the incredibly wealthy, but slowly evolved into mass philanthropy, involving Americans of all means. This book also deals with how the nonprofit sector developed, which the author describes as a partnership from its earliest beginnings between government and philanthropy, a hybrid of capitalism. The work is academic in terms of the rigour of research but written in a language and style accessible to all readers.

The book is divided into nine chapters, with an introduction and conclusion. The chapters are written chronologically, beginning with the post-Civil War era. The author describes how personal wealth had grown quickly, creating more than 4,000 millionaires for the first time ever. John D. Rockefeller Sr. and Henry Ford were in fact billionaires by 1916. Individuals with such vast wealth had the means to contribute to philanthropic institutions. They had lofty ambitions, such as improving mankind, but also had the means to make progress towards that goal. It was the era of infrastructure development, with the building of many prestigious institutions, like libraries, museums, hospitals, and universities. Reformers and the new philanthropists worked together to address large social problems instead of doing typical charity work.

One of the most important creations from this era was the “foundation,” as a way to centralize donations and then distribute those funds across various organizations and for a variety of causes. The foundation, Zunz argues, is an American invention created as a result of the incredible wealth realized around the turn of the 20th century. Foundations have radically changed the philanthropic landscape, both in the United States and around the world. Private foundations such as the Carnegie Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation reflected, and still reflect, the personal priorities of the donor.

As new forms of philanthropy were invented in the US and abroad, there was also a shift toward funding to address larger public problems, such as public health. World War I brought to light many health issues which could be addressed with a concentration of resources and the dedication and interest of a broad and

engaged community. Philanthropists supported sanitation schemes and a number of disease prevention initiatives associated with hookworm, malaria, yellow fever, hunger, and influenza.

Zunz points out that most of these new ideas about philanthropy were predominantly evident in the northern United States. But what about the south? Philanthropists and reformers alike both felt that universal access to education was the key to solving the race relations crisis. Yet, without a vote, and therefore without political power, reformers could not raise the political capital to provide tax money for black education. Instead, philanthropists had to work to garner funds that were outside political control. This is just one example of how Zunz takes us on a journey of self-reflection and illuminates a nearly forgotten history of giving, sacrifice, and perseverance.

Zunz then traces the development of mass philanthropy, with the expansion of the ideal of giving to the middle and working classes. The culture of giving, interestingly, centered on the ideal of thrift, as a way to improve your own personal well-being and the well-being of others. The idea emerged that you could be a “good” American if you invested some of your savings in others, especially to support a potential health threat that could affect anyone. At this time, in the early 1900s, community chests and community foundations were also established to pool resources at the local level that would support local charities. In this way, philanthropy was broadened (across the country and around the world) but also deepened, with average Americans adopting a philanthropic role in society.

Although the book is well researched, the writing is also accessible. The author also does not shy away from the more controversial assertion that philanthropy is intertwined with politics. The American government has attempted to place distinctions between the education of stakeholders and the advocacy or lobbying of policymakers, although these distinctions are continually being tested and regulations rewritten.

The only possible shortcomings of the book, which would add to its hefty size, would be additions to the text and format to make it more useful as a teaching resource, particularly at the graduate level. This could mean the addition of a visual timeline with significant highlights illustrated or key points summarized at the beginning of each chapter. Although not intended to be a textbook per se, the text has great value as such. At nearly 400 pages, it is impossible to highlight every notable characteristic. Instead, this review has touched upon only a few of the book’s contributions to explain the evolution of philanthropy in America, how philanthropy is responsible for growing democracy, and how Americans turned a basic value of giving into a decidedly American value. Others have tried to do justice to this rich and vast history (see, for example, Freidman & McGarvie, 2003), but Zunz has written a book so obviously well researched and detailed, yet accessible to all audiences. Philanthropy is wrapped up in the story of American civil society and Zunz takes readers on this journey of discovery. It is a book worth spending time with, dipping into chapters or spending long hours immersing ourselves.

There are definitely two major strengths of this text. The first is the contextualization of philanthropy in America and how it was made distinctly American. Although continuing to evolve, this historical treatment of philanthropy is ambitious, but achieved. The second major strength is the gap filled by *Philanthropy* as a teaching resource. Zunz not only models the scientific method of research using in-depth evidence collected through multiple methods and extensive citations for each chapter, but makes the results understandable for all audiences, including undergraduates. As a professor of nonprofit studies, I believe *Philanthropy* should be required reading for introductory classes in the field, as well as for more in-depth analyses of the notions of philanthropy in America. It is noteworthy that the book is being translated into French for release in Fall 2012,

which will broaden its accessibility to audiences in French Canada and other parts of the French-speaking world.

Reference

Friedman, Lawrence, & McGarvie, Mark, Eds. (2003). *Charity, Philanthropy, and Civility in American History*. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.

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