

Understanding Philanthropy: *time for a new research agenda*



Understanding Philanthropy: Continued

‘The problem of the distribution of wealth is, in this country, much more urgent than the problem of its creation.’

A century after the Quaker businessman and philanthropist, Joseph Rowntree, made this observation, the University of Kent is spearheading the first concerted effort to understand the philanthropic distribution of wealth. Over the next five years a team from the new Centre for the study of Philanthropy, Humanitarianism and Social Justice will be operating as a ‘research spoke’ for the ESRC Centre For Charitable Giving and Philanthropy.

There is a long tradition of philanthropy in the UK. Philanthropists in previous centuries have built many of the municipal facilities that the public regularly use, including schools, hospitals, libraries, parks, and theatres. The current generation are beneficiaries of scientific and medical discoveries funded by philanthropic research grants and endowments, and contemporary philanthropy continues to facilitate the private funding of a vast and diverse array of activities that promote the public benefit in areas ranging from the arts, to social welfare to educational provision. Arguably, life in the UK would be bleaker without the contribution of private philanthropy. Yet we should not exaggerate its importance, as less than 1% of GDP is given philanthropically, against government spending on welfare of nearer 30% of GDP. However, the importance of philanthropy lies less in the quantities it represents than in the qualities it reflects.

Modern society is often characterized as governed by self-interest and profit maximisation, making the voluntary transfer of money from private purse to public benefit a puzzle. One commentator likened the emergence of philanthropy to another ‘strange and improbable creature’, the giraffe – in both the literal jungle and the jungle of capitalism neither could possibly exist, but they do.

Most of us freely choose to engage in this ‘exotic’ pursuit by giving away some portion of our own money to support charitable causes, and some

rich people make substantial philanthropic contributions, yet the academic discourse on giving in Western societies is almost non-existent. Just as nature abhors a vacuum, so this gap in genuine understanding has been filled by views that are dragged in the wake of political and personal ideologies, particularly in relation to the largest philanthropic acts of the elite. Critics see such acts as selfish, egotistical and manipulative, whilst supporters see selfless, redistributive altruists who want to tackle inequalities and heal a divided society. Whether philanthropy is an ‘obituary-improving activity’ or the ‘moral cement’ of society may, ultimately, be a matter of taste and personal opinion. But moving beyond this infertile dichotomy of altruism versus egoism, we might instead agree that philanthropy involves both personal and societal benefits and that it is time to start exploring questions about the meaning, purpose and impact of this fascinating and significant area of social life.

For example, philanthropy raises fundamental questions about society and the human condition: what is a good life? What is a good society? What responsibilities do we have to others? Can we (should we?) use private resources to promote the public good? Kent’s role within the ESRC-funded centre on charitable giving and philanthropy is precisely to focus on some of these more beguiling questions, especially the distributional consequences of philanthropy. Our research team – Dr Iain Wilkinson, Dr Baliyar Sanghera, Dr Matthew Bond and myself – will explore a variety of issues including public awareness of the nature and distribution of charitable benefit; relationships between givers and receivers and the social space bridged by donations; the representation of need in charitable appeals and its impact on beneficiaries; and the organisational and social meaning of corporate charitable donations.

Why has philanthropy finally become a topic for academic enquiry in the UK? It is in part propelled by philanthropists’ current place in the spotlight; they have



become a staple of media profiles, appear in lists that rank their generosity and have access to presidents, popes and pop stars. Yet their huge media profile has become increasingly disproportionate to any substantive understanding of their role and impact on society, as social scientists have tended to focus on the problem of poverty and tax-funded redistribution, rather than the existence of riches and philanthropic distribution.

Governmental efforts to put philanthropy on the political agenda have also brought attention to this topic. Since the Finance Act 2000, tax breaks for giving have been almost on a par with those found in the USA; the endorsement of philanthropists, including awards and honours, by the present and previous prime minister has substantially raised their visibility and status; and the 2005 Home Office report ‘A Generous Society’ has led to strategic government funding for pro-philanthropy initiatives such as the Giving Campaign, Philanthropy UK and the ESRC research centre of which Kent is a part.

Please contact any of the Kent team for further details of our work in this area. We are all based in the School of Social Policy, Sociology and Social Research but are keen to establish contacts elsewhere. Together we will advance the understanding of philanthropy, because it is an interesting and important part of social and economic life that deserves to be better understood.

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