

Philanthropy and Social Welfare Policy:

Observations from a Painting by Alice Neel

by Alice O'Connor

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IN 1933 A YOUNG PAINTER NAMED ALICE NEEL got a chance to see how members of the the “other half” were dealing with poverty in Depression-era New York. For Neel, who had been raised poor in rural Pennsylvania and would soon find employment in the arts section of the WPA, an impromptu tour of the city’s settlement houses and unemployed councils became the occasion for a sort of slumming in reverse: the “other half” Neel encountered were the wealthy philanthropists of the Russell Sage Foundation, who at the time were engaged in a public inquiry into social conditions in the city’s poor, heavily immigrant neighborhoods. Neel recorded her impressions on canvas in a painting with the deceptively straightforward title “Investigation of Poverty at the Russell Sage Foundation.” In it, a group consisting of alter-

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nately haughty, stern, and puzzled-looking men (among them a Catholic priest and a minister) and two compassionate women encircle an elderly female supplicant. On the outer edges of the circle sit two similarly

bedraggled men, one humble, bent over as if by the humiliation of asking for help; the other pockmarked and red-cheeked, perhaps from the ravages of drink. As indicated by the pad and pencil in the hands of the two female interrogators (one a secretary, the other a social worker, Neel later reported) the philanthropists are gathering testimonials from the poor people they are ultimately positioning themselves to judge.

Thus, in a painting worth at least the proverbial thousand words, Alice Neel offers any number of trenchant insights into the often hidden dynamics of philanthropic social welfare investigation. Neel's painting is in turn an effective conduit for observations about the influence of philanthropy in the course of twentieth-century U.S. social welfare policy—an influence, I would argue, that can only be fully appreciated by exploring the dynamics beneath the surface of legislative politics and policy research (although those are important as well). In the next few paragraphs I will use what Alice Neel “saw” to highlight what philanthropy tends to ignore: the unavoidably political, ideological, and broadly cultural nature of philanthropic policy interventions; philanthropy's nevertheless ostensibly apolitical, ideologically neutral mode of operating in the policy world; and philanthropy's impact—or lack thereof—on the very social hierarchies it would claim to soften and ameliorate. I should add that these observations are based on the experiences of the large, general purpose foundations that for many became the ultimate expression of the “liberal establishment” in the post–World War II U.S., and of what seemed to be its hold on social politics through the 1970s.

My first observation takes off from Neel's depiction of the conflicted, deeply troubled (but rarely acknowledged) relationship of power between the investigators and the investigated in her painting. In social welfare policy, as in

social investigation, the influence of philanthropy is an exercise of power that is both political and ideological in nature, and that has expressed itself not only in ideas and policy debates but in the underlying cultural values and narratives foundations have cultivated in support of social policy reform.

The philanthropists in Neel's painting, though not political actors in the conventional sense, are nevertheless exercising immense political power in their capacity to shape and control the categories of “deserving” and “undeserving”—much as foundations have exercised political power in the policy process in their capacity to shape and control prevailing definitions of the social problem, the categories of analysis and intervention, and the accompanying terms of policy debate. So, too, in Neel's rendering, we see philanthropic investigation as a deeply ideological enterprise, which plays the role of reinforcing and hardening as well as of challenging and opening up old ideological predispositions. More important, though, than the individual minds it does or does not change, has been philanthropy's role in variously reinforcing, challenging, containing, and, on rarer occasions, more fundamentally shaking up the ideological boundaries within which social policy choices are framed and pursued.

Such expressions of a deeper level of political and ideological influence can be seen in the part played by Russell Sage and other leading foundations in the construction of what, over the course of the long Progressive era, emerged as the New Deal welfare state. To be sure, foundations and foundation-sponsored experts had a hand in crafting specific pieces of legislation in housing, child welfare, maternal and child health, and labor standards. Philanthropy also provided the wherewithal for the veritable storehouse of policy ideas—cultivated in foundation-subsidized Progressive-era reform networks, in increasingly professionalized schools of social work, in policy research institutes that would only later be known as think tanks, in publications such as the Sage-sponsored *Survey*, and in the ongoing transatlantic policy conversation about models of social insurance that informed Franklin D. Roosevelt's Brain Trust, as well as his Committee on Economic Security and the National Resources Planning Board.¹ Equally important, however, was how all the work con-

ducted over the course of several decades contributed to laying the political, ideological, and cultural groundwork for the fundamental reorientation of policy and political culture the New Deal accomplished. That work was often heavily empirical in content, but in its framing of the issues it served ideological purposes as well.² Through such work, the foundations aimed to reframe the “social question” to emphasize its roots in social and economic rather than individual failures. And through such work, the foundations hoped to shatter the mythology of free market individualism, self-regulating markets, and the tyrannical state—a mythology, they believed, that stood in the way of the federal government’s assumption of collective responsibility, and, more generally, of socially enlightened reform.

My second observation builds on what I read as the deliberate irony in Neel’s juxtaposition of a blandly descriptive title against the emotionally fraught encounter she depicts. There is a parallel, unacknowledged irony in social welfare policy and politics. For most of the twentieth century, the country’s leading philanthropic institutions have proudly exercised their political and ideological influence in ostensibly apolitical, non-ideological ways. The neutralizing impulse—and the claim to neutrality as a sign of legitimacy—reached its height with the rise of so-called “con-

sensus” politics in the immediate post-World War II period. Then, in the context of the Cold War against communism and widening postwar affluence—and despite the growing urgency of the civil rights movement—foundations



kept an arm’s distance from reform politics while stepping up support for social science, policy research, and, toward the 1960s, social policy “demonstrations.” Though couched in the neutralizing language of advancing knowledge and promoting the public interest, such projects would provide the intellectual underpinnings of a Cold War liberalism that was initially more expansive in its ambitions for “third world” modernization than for the domestic welfare state or the struggle for racial equality.

Of course, in claiming theirs to be an apolitical, nonideological purpose, foundations were exercising a considerable degree of political and ideological control, not in the least by treating key tenets of the so-called liberal “consensus” as beyond ideological contention, but especially by circumscribing the boundaries of public debate. For this, they would come under persistent criticism from both the McCarthyite right and the social democratic left.³ Meanwhile, philanthropic influence would be more visibly reflected in the vast institutionalization of ideologically “neutral” expertise in policy think tanks and government agencies, and in the politics of knowledge that established their empirical, problem-solving approach as the dominant mode of policy and policy-“relevant” social scientific research. Though dwarfed by the expansion of federal contracts and research funding, foundations continued to serve as a kind of linchpin in the postwar liberal research and policy establishment. By the early 1960s, encouraged by the promise of John F. Kennedy’s New Frontier, foundations were positioning themselves to translate this expertise into a series of increasingly ambitious community-based demonstrations and experiments, most prominently the Ford Foundation’s Gray Areas program, based on the neutral-seeming premises of political consensus and accumulated learning for application in social policy. Although such experiments indeed became the basis of many community action projects in the War on Poverty, here again an equally if not more important aspect of philanthropic influence occurred at a deeper level: in the attempt to institutionalize a self-consciously apolitical, technocratic style of reform within the highly conflicted, deeply racialized political culture of social welfare, anti-poverty, and social change politics.⁴

Ultimately, Neel speaks most directly to a third observation, about the philanthropic encounter with the poor. Neel’s painting is a vivid example of investigation taking place within and reinforcing existing social hierarchies, as reflected in the descending order of class, gender, and status we see in the reactions of disdain, skepticism, and compassion among the investigators. Conservative critics to the contrary, foundations have done far more to preserve and protect than to challenge the prerogatives of capital and a capitalist political economy in their social welfare policy interventions. And

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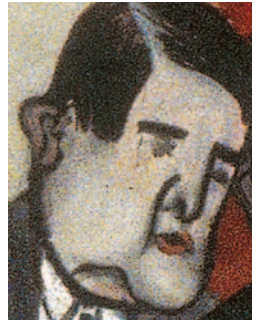
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despite support for the legislative and legal gains of the civil rights and women's movements, mainstream foundations have kept an arm's distance from movement-building organizing or structural reform. Indeed, with their insistence on purportedly apolitical, neutralizing interventions, foundations have fostered an approach to fighting poverty that is largely confined to improving poor people rather than to engaging structural inequalities in any sustained or meaningful way.⁵ And their similarly neutralizing penchant for pathologizing poverty (the "underclass"), racial inequality (the "dark ghetto"), and the struggles of single mothers has reinforced the social distances underlying the illusion that such problems can be redressed without a major redistribution of power and economic resources.⁶ Nor, amidst the rising economic inequality of the past three decades, have liberal foundations confronted what is certainly the most uncomfortable fact of their existence: that the economic divide, and the policies that sustain and exacerbate it, has yielded the vast concentrations of wealth that sustain the philanthropic enterprise, even as philanthropy is used to justify the retreat from redistribution in social and economic policy.

There is thus a certain element of discomfort—with wielding, or at least admitting to wield political power, with acknowledging ideological commitments, with its origins in great capitalist fortunes and reliance on rising concentrations of wealth—that has characterized and in turn shaped philanthropy's role in social policymaking, much as Alice Neel's painting must have created discomfort at the Russell Sage Foundation in 1933. I suggest that this discomfort has become the defining—and the single most disabling—feature of liberal philanthropy in a political culture that is now, more than any time in recent historical memory, organized along ideological lines. Nowhere is the failure and looming irrelevance of liberal philanthropy better captured than in its incapacitation in the face of the growing power and influence of an alternative, explicitly right-wing conservative philanthropic tradition, and the self-consciously "counterrevolutionary" research and policy establishment it has helped to create.

The conservative philanthropic tradition begins from the belief that philanthropy *should* be both ideological and forthright about its ide-

ological commitments—to economic and cultural conservatism, and to the not-always-compatible values of limited government, free-market capitalism, individualism, and "traditional" (Victorian) morality.



Accordingly, it advocates a reform program based on the similarly conflicted principles of extreme economic deregulation and heightened moral regulation—in particular for poor and otherwise socially marginalized groups. Underlying this program is right-wing philanthropy's insistence on de-socializing as well as moralizing the social question—in the sense of holding individuals personally responsible for their own disadvantages and advocating a privatized and moral response. Free markets are promoted as agents of personal redemption, as much as the family, charity, and faith-based organizations. Equally distinctive about this alternative philanthropic tradition is its engagement in what conservatives often refer to as the "war of ideas," but is more accurately described as a sustained attack on the "liberal," nominally non-ideological research and policy establishment and its nominally non-ideological philanthropic sponsors.

Relying on the leadership of formerly left-liberal neoconservative intellectuals and policy entrepreneurs, this effort has paid close attention to the cultural as well as the political and ideological underpinnings of social welfare (and economic, and foreign) policy. And, as outlined in a recent insider's retrospective of three decades of conservative philanthropic activism, it measures its major policy "achievements" not only in specific legislative acts but in its impact on the broader political discourse, sense of purpose, and possibility, and culture. Among them are supply-side economics, the law and economics movement, Charles Murray's blueprint for the "end of welfare," and the galvanizing effect of such missives in the academic culture wars as Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* and Dinesh D'Souza's *Illiberal Education*.⁷ These inroads are but a part of the sweeping reconfiguration of the policy research and advocacy landscape that has occurred over the past three decades, with the emergence of a

wide network of richly endowed conservative “advocacy tanks.”⁸

But the growing power and influence of conservative philanthropy cannot be fully understood without acknowledging the corresponding incapacitation of its more centrist as well as its progressive/liberal counterparts. Perhaps most telling in this regard are the extraordinary lengths to which historically “liberal” as well as nominally non-ideological foundations and think tanks have gone to accommodate, and in the process to *empower* conservative social knowledge in the post-welfare debate. These balancing acts are justified as efforts to be fair-minded in laying out and airing the key issues for debate. In reality, and especially in the case of welfare, they have done more to validate the conservative reform agenda while skewing the formulation of “the issues” to the right. In this way, the claim to ideological neutrality, once a source of legitimacy and power for liberal philanthropy, has effectively disabled liberal opposition to the increasingly moralized direction of social policy.

What this points to, for those who would seek a different, more relevant future for the liberal philanthropic tradition, is the need to re-envision the role of philanthropy and social policy, to recognize the necessity and validity of ideological and indeed political (which is not necessarily to say partisan or direct legislative) engagement. This is not to abandon the principle of open-minded, unbiased inquiry and informed policy discourse—far less to argue for a policy and research subordinated to some pre-ordained higher truth. It is, however, to call for a philanthropy that is more forthright and honest about its ideological commitments, more forthright about where and how ideology informs its work: crucially, in the way foundations frame social problems, and in the questions and policy possibilities they are willing to explore. Can liberal foundations do this? There are inherent limits, but foundations would be more effective if they were bolder about the democratic values they aim to advance—and more willing to change their own norms and conventions to promote these values in their work. If such a change is to take place, now would be the time to make it happen as a way to counteract the influence currently wielded by conservative foundations. A bold move toward openly political and ideological debate on the part of liberal philanthropy

would enliven and enrich public discourse at a time when well-informed and more meaningful conversations are critically needed.

Endnotes

1. On the social welfare networks and their transatlantic nature, see Linda Gordon, *Pitied but Not Entitled: Single Mothers and the History of Welfare* (New York: Free Press, 1994); and Daniel T. Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belnap Press, 1998).
2. On the “new liberalism” and social knowledge, see Mary O. Furner, “The Republican Tradition and the New Liberalism: Social Investigation, State Building, and Social Learning in the Gilded Age,” in Michael J. Lacey and Mary O. Furner, eds., *The State and Social Investigation in Britain and the United States*, (Washington, D.C. Woodrow Center Press and Cambridge University Press, 1993), 171–241.
3. The full title for the essay cited in this footnote is “The Politics of Rich and Rich: Postwar Investigations of Foundations and the Rise of the Philanthropic Right,” in *American Capitalism: Social Thought and Political Economy in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Nelson Lichtenstein (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006): 228–48.
4. On Gray Areas and other community-based experiments, see Alice O'Connor, “Community Action, Urban Reform, and the Fight against Poverty: The Ford Foundation's Gray Areas Program,” *Journal of Urban History* 22 (1996): 586–625.
5. Michael B. Katz, *Improving Poor People* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997).
6. Alice O'Connor, “Foundations, Research, and the Construction of ‘Race Neutrality,’” *Souls* 4:1 (January 2002): 54–62.
7. James Piereson, “You Get What You Pay For,” *Wall Street Journal*, July 21, 2004. For an admiring, authorized account of the Olin Foundation, see John J. Miller, *A Gift of Freedom: How the John M. Olin Foundation Changed America* (Encounter Books, 2005). The National Center for Responsive Philanthropy has a number of important reports on right-wing philanthropy, including, recently, “Axis of Ideology: Conservative Foundations and Public Policy” (Washington, DC: NCRP, 2004). Report.
8. Andrew Rich, *Think Tanks, Public Policy, and the Politics of Expertise* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

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