Philanthropy and the Politics of Well-Being

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"What are the roles for philanthropy and government and their partners? How are these new roles challenging the conventional wisdom? What are the rules of engagement? What drives the sectors to forge these new arrangements? What does success look like? And what are the downsides?"

— James Ferris, 2016[1]

Although the relationship between philanthropic institutions and government in the United States dates back more than a century (Zunz 2012), the past decade has been marked by a renewed enthusiasm about more partnership between the two (Ferris and Williams 2015; Schuyt 2010), as well as by arguments about the effectiveness of emergent forms of social investment (Salamon 2014) and innovation (Reich 2016). This excitement has been accompanied by a new wave of ethical justifications for such practices (Illingworth, Pogge, and Wenar 2013; Prewitt et al. 2006) and concerns about their ethical and democratic implications (Goss 2016; Kohl-Arenas 2016; Skocpol 2016). In this article I suggest that if we are to consider the broader transformative significance of philanthropy, the important question is not whether such partnerships are effective, democratic, or both but rather what the current emphasis being placed on philanthropy tells us about how well-being is politically interpreted today. I begin by identifying philanthropy scholarship as a discourse about—among other things—welfare-state politics. Next, following Fraser's (1989) framework for understanding the interpretation of need in welfare-state societies,[2] I argue that prior to understanding philanthropy as a transformation of the state or as a transformative social movement, it is critical to first understand that well-being is itself a political construction that is manifest through varying institutional arrangements across history[3]—one of which is philanthropy.

DISCIPLINARY PURSUITS OF PHILANTHROPY

Although disciplines as such are now taking notice in more definite ways, philanthropy has been studied across varying disciplines since at least 1951 (Hall 1999) and has been institutionalized as an area of study since 1980 (Katz 1999). In his response to Katz's (1999) history of the "serious study" of philanthropy, Hall (1999) deftly highlighted the ways in which the continual reestablishment of philanthropy as a field of study not only neglects significant scholarship but often does so in such a way as to establish the observer as uniquely prescient. The important point here is that philanthropy is not simply interdisciplinary; it is uniquely interdisciplinary today because the label "philanthropy" ascribes significant normative weight or legitimacy to a discipline prior to debate about what these disciplines themselves assume and what the implications would be for such normative claims; phrases such as "Nash altruism" (Elster 2013, 68) cannot resolve problematic assumptions of neoclassical economics (see Nickel 2012). The "ethics of philanthropy" approach often frames philanthropy in abstract terms of calculation and "strategic philanthropy" (Dunfee 2013, 245); the editors of *Giving Well* (Illingworth et al. 2013, 11–12) explicitly state that their objective is to provide "affluent people" with a "credible ethical framework" for giving. An ethical framework that fails to provide terms against which someone who is not affluent can make a claim fails to be "ethically credible."

In 2016, *PS: Political Science & Politics* featured a symposium exploring the question: Why should political scientists study organized philanthropy? (Skocpol 2016). Authors in this current symposium answer with criticisms of the role of foundations and the institutionalization of philanthropic governing capacity (Nickel and Eikenberry 2010) and also provide a rich empirical picture of philanthropy today. This is a key contribution at a time when our everyday environment is saturated with "philanthropic opportunities"; the distinction of *organized* philanthropy from the less concentrated everyday opportunities for individuals to participate in philanthropy is an important one. However, I am concerned here with the way in which philanthropy is facilitated through a particular politics of well-being derived from assumptions about what resources ought to be available to those in need and who will decide on what basis individuals might obtain such resources. In other words, I argue that philanthropy is political precisely because it potentiates a vast array of arguments for how resources are accumulated and distributed.

It is important to analyze the practices in which foundations are actually engaged, but it also is important to analyze what is *commonly said* about foundations. If we are to engage in substantive debate about philanthropy, I do not think that we can, as Reich (2016, 470) suggested, "quickly reject one common idea to justify foundations: that they provide welcome assistance to the poor or disadvantaged, thereby defraying what might otherwise need to be spent by the public." Although it may be false, the fact that a *common idea* is empirically untrue does not make it any less important to political discourse. It is precisely because the idea is a common one—indeed, a legitimizing one—that it must be addressed *as such*.

If, as Reich argued, the amount of funding that foundations redistribute is disproportionately small in relationship to their public perception as benevolent actors, this perception is not something to be dismissed as inaccurate, but rather fully engaged.

We do not need more accurate or elegant justifications of foundations as democratic actors; rather, we need an understanding of the relationship of these justifications to political discourse, especially when the transformative potential of discourse is inhibited by such actors. This is particularly important when philanthropic declarations are made with increasing frequency, not only by traditionally philanthropic institutions (e.g., foundations), (McGoey 2015; Skocpol 2016) but also by traditionally nonphilanthropic institutions (e.g., private corporations) that produce products announcing philanthropic commitments (Nickel and Eikenberry 2009) and an emerging "social investment" market, which rejects the distinction between philanthropy and investing as "old-fashioned" (Salamon 2014, 16). Simultaneously, philanthropy has long been at the center of knowledge production.[4] It is unsurprising, therefore, that scholars whose work falls along the full spectrum of politics are taking notice. Although often mentioned in passing by philanthropy scholars (Salamon 2015; Salamon and Anheier 1998), the critique inherent to substantive concepts such as social rights,[5] decommodification,[6] stratification,[7] and social policy that were developed during the "golden age of the welfare state"[8] often is forgotten during what Ferris (2015) called the "golden age of philanthropy." Against this background, we must be careful to qualify—and insist on qualification of—the word *philanthropy* and also to investigate the underlying normative political claims made by philanthropy scholars.

cultural classifications in order to turn our attention to what is political about philanthropy.

PHILANTHROPY AND THE POLITICAL INTERPRETATION OF WELL-BEING[10]

To cover the expanse of global social policy today,[11] in this article I chose to use "well-being" rather than "need" or "welfare"; however, either label could be reasonably substituted. As Gordon (1994, 1–2) pointed out in the context of the United States, "today 'welfare' means grudging aid to the poor, when once it referred to a vision of the good life... welfare values and ideas are not timeless or universal." The *logic* of philanthropy to which many refer today (Ferris 2015; Hammack and Heydemann 2009; Mohan and Breeze 2016) is only *interpretation* of philanthropy in relationship to the state. Although I question their argument for institutional dichotomy—government focuses on "basic needs" and charity focuses on "needs and human flourishing"[12]—Mohan and Breeze (2016, 3, 5) highlighted an interesting 1948 statement by British welfare-state thinker William Beveridge: "[voluntary action] is needed to do things which the State is most unlikely to do. It is needed to pioneer ahead of the state and make experiments." It is important to note that, unlike contemporary innovators, Beveridge was an outspoken advocate of the welfare state and the provision of social insurance by public bureaucracies.[13] In contrast, today Ferris (2015, 1) argues that "philanthropy [provides] the *margin for social innovation*" but that "reliance on public bureaucracies to meet collective demands is questioned on the grounds that public bureaucracies lack the sharp incentives and necessary discretion for results-oriented performance that characterize private organizations operating in competitive markets" (Ferris and Williams 2015, 4). The emphasis on innovation is echoed by Reich (2016, 469),

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The argument for partnership between philanthropy and government maintains a tacit position on the liberal distinction of the state from civil society and the market; without this assumption, there could be no "market solution" or "innovation independent of public bureaucracy."[9] In the following exploration, I do not rely on the positioning of philanthropy in a particular sphere or discipline; rather, I treat the efforts of both institutions and disciplines to position themselves in relationship to philanthropy as important statements about the politics of well-being. Following Fraser's (1989, 297) framework for understanding "needs-talk" in welfare-state societies, I "treat the terms 'political,' 'economic,' and 'domestic' as cultural classifications and ideological labels rather than as designations of structures, spheres, or things." It is possible, as Fraser (1989) suggested, to treat these labels as

who argued that the democratic failings of philanthropic foundations are redeemed by what he called "the discovery argument": "[f]oundations can serve as a potent mechanism for democratic experimentalism: a discovery vehicle for innovative social policy."[14]

Whether or not it will be innovative, effective, or democratic, there can be no doubt that philanthropy has become a more significant theme in recent sociopolitical discourse about needs, or what Fraser (1989, 294) discussed as "the sociocultural means of interpretation and communication," referring to "the historically and culturally specific ensemble of discursive resources available to members of a given social collectivity in pressing [needs] claims against one another."[15] Following the broad terms of Fraser's framework, I argue that philanthropy should be treated as exactly such a discourse

and that, therefore, like other forms of needs-talk, it "functions as a medium for the making and contesting of political claims. It is an idiom in which political conflict is played out and through which inequalities are symbolically elaborated and challenged" (Fraser 1989, 291).[16]

Needs-talk is characterized by "unequal distribution of discursive (and nondiscursive) resources" (Fraser 1989, 296) for interpreting what are and are not legitimate needs. This is a critical point when attempting to understand the political implications of the emphasis on philanthropy and government. Fraser (1989, 303–304) distinguished between oppositional needs-talk, expert discourses, and reprivatizing discourses, which "contest oppositional discourses as legitimate political problems" and "[defend] the established social division of discourses."[17] However, these reprivatization discourses "tend to further politicize those needs in the sense of increasing their cathectedness as foci of contestation..." (Fraser 1989, 304). Philanthropy indeed may be increasing its "cathectedness as a focus of contestation" as it surely is bypassing civil society, the public sphere, deliberative democracy, agonistic pluralism, networks, and other phrases over which

If philanthropy is indeed an institutional logic, which social relationships and claims does it institutionalize? Fraser's (1989) framework demonstrated that these pursuits involve political interpretations of the needs of others. Thus, we must ask—as Kohl-Arenas (2016) does in her ethnography of private foundation activity in the Central Valley Region — what power relations are involved in the interpretation of the contemporary language for addressing needs? Kohl-Arenas's (2016, 5, 7) study demonstrated how such innovation often involves foundations that "fail to address poverty and inequality by setting firm boundaries around definitions of self-help" and set "the terms of the debate...shifting the focus away from the social, political, and economic relationships of power that produce and maintain poverty." Oppositional needs-talk is easily institutionalized and reprivatized in such partnerships. Yet, as Fraser's framework envisaged, Kohl-Arenas (2016, 75) argued that "a story of top-down co-optation and control [is] insufficient in explaining the relationship between the movement and funders in that it neglects the complicated negotiations between foundations and movement leadership."

Not only are politicized needs reprivatized (Fraser 1989, 304, 308)—that is, depoliticized—the "authorized means of interpretation and communication" also is at least potentially restricted to philanthropists, government experts, and market-driven innovators.

authors—and sometimes their governmental partners—have competed in recruitment of these words for their efforts at needs-interpretation. One of the most politically problematic aspects of philanthropy may be that although it is decidedly about "innovative approaches" to needs, "innovative" often is wrongly perceived to mean "oppositional" in the sense of being "from below." For example, "fair trade" coffee is perceived as oppositional needs-talk rather than the stabilization of trade.[18] As a result, there is little *contest* over needs; public issues remain private responsibilities.

Although social problems often are addressed in wider philanthropic discourses, philanthropic partnership and innovation risk becoming expert-needs discourses serving a broader discourse of reprivatization. In their brief on partnership between philanthropy and government, Ferris and Williams (2015, 3) argued that the key feature is "a shared commitment between philanthropy and government to work together to solve public problems. These partnerships involve two parties who have common missions, possess their own assets, and value their autonomy and independence." This statement privatizes need through the use of assumptive language: public problems are treated as something commonly understood by governments and philanthropists with assets, autonomy, and independence. Such enthusiastic "thin-needs talk"[19] neglects the *interpretation* of needs (Fraser 1989, 294). New idioms such as logic, partnership, and innovation do not simply *become* institutionalized; they must be interpreted, and it is this interpretative step through embedded power relationships where the politics of philanthropy takes place.

When we understand philanthropy as a contemporary discursive resource for contesting needs, a key question emerges: Do philanthropic claims made by those who possess resources to be distributed for the well-being of others (claims to privatization) displace political claims that would make such resources a matter of entitlement (claims to rights)? Or, does talk about innovative partnerships involving philanthropists, governments, and markets involve only expert and reprivatization discourses? In what terms can one make oppositional needs-talk today? And, in such a partnership, to whom would such discourses appeal and according to what claim? If philanthropy *politicizes* needs in the sense of creating a space of contestation where previously unrecognized needs achieve recognition (Fraser 1989, 297, 301), then perhaps it has the potential to transform power relations. However, the "offices of strategic partnership" (Ferris and Williams 2015) that recapture such "runaway needs" (Fraser 1989, 300) potentially reinstitutionalize a depoliticized and discretionary version of such needs *prior* to their institutionalization as rights claims.[20] My concern is that *appeals to* innovative partnerships among philanthropists, governments, and markets may be pre-emptive de-politicizations aimed at institutionalizing needs-talk in the least-transformative ways. In other words, such partnerships capture the "site where successfully politicized runaway needs get translated into claims for government provision" (Fraser 1989, 301). Not only are politicized needs reprivatized (Fraser 1989, 304, 308)—that is, depoliticized—the "authorized means of interpretation and communication"

also is at least potentially restricted to philanthropists, government experts, and market-driven innovators.

CONCLUSION

With an increasing number of academic stakes placed on the conceptual terrain of philanthropic responsibility, it is becoming difficult to find the substantive point. Whether philanthropy has been effective—and it should be remembered that many have argued that it has not—a discussion of philanthropy and government is a discussion about how needs will be met. To return to Fraser's (1989, 291) framework of needs interpretation institutionalized in the political discourse of the welfare state, insofar as it is the contemporary practice of meeting needs—a role variably played by welfare states and other social-policy actors—philanthropy involves precisely such "interpretive contests." The reduction of needs-talk to "partnership" has implications for how we talk about well-being and its distribution. When we consider that in its discretionary role, philanthropy involves the institutionalization of needs-talk as something other than government-guaranteed social rights, we are pressed to ask—as many critical theorists of the welfare state have asked before: On what basis are individuals presently entitled to well-being? On what basis are people presently denied such entitlements? Who decides how resources will be distributed? How do those who make these decisions achieve the authority to do so? What practices of social stratification do their decisions potentially encourage or discourage? What are the implications of such decisions for how power is distributed and experienced? To promote partnership between philanthropy and government without first engaging these questions is—at the least—premature.

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NOTES

1. Quoted in Zeiger (2016).

2. Fraser did extensive work beyond this framework, but this piece is uniquely helpful as a way to think about the politics of philanthropy.

3. See Smith and Lipsky (1993) for an excellent treatment of the spectrum shared by the welfare state and nonprofit sector. See Henriksen, Smith, and Zimmer (2015) on the welfare mix and the nonprofit sector. For a historical perspective on what social-policy scholars today call the welfare mix, see Esping-Andersen (2000), Wood and Gough (2006), and Tomkins and King (2010).

4. See Arnove 1982; Hall 1999; Hammack and Heydemann 2009; McGoey 2015; O'Connor 2007; and Zunz 2012.

5. Although social rights are not unproblematic, it is a stage of substantive theorizing that is important to attend to if we are to understand what it means to advocate partnership between philanthropy and government. It is important because philanthropy frames well-being in discretionary terms, whereas governments once framed well-being as a social right (Marshall 1950/1992). Philanthropy frames what were once social rights in discretionary terms. In his essay on the welfare state in the United Kingdom, Marshall (1950/1992, 8) argued that social citizenship involved the right at a national level to economic welfare and the emergence of a national welfare state to ensure such rights: "the right to a modicum of economic welfare and security to the right to share the full life of a civilized being according to the standards prevailing in the society." Marshall, like critical policy scholars writing today, was concerned with the stratification of such a system, but he viewed social rights as a progression toward greater equality. Although the practice of social rights by the state is not

without problems (Gordon 1994; Piven and Cloward 1971/1993; Schram 1992), the history of the concept is helpful when attempting to understand what philanthropy partnered with government might mean in practice because it necessitates that any discussion of philanthropy is also a discussion of the degradation of social citizenship. If the welfare state entitled those endowed with social rights to make needs claims against the welfare state (Fraser 1989), it is difficult to imagine such claims against philanthropy; how does one make a specific claim to a philanthropic organization of any scale? Rather, when it comes to philanthropy, it would seem that "rights" claims are made by those who possess wealth against those to whom it would be redistributed by the state. (See Schram [1992, 640] on the tension between social rights as social control and social rights as empowerment. See Kohl-Arenas [2016] on this tension in the context of philanthropy.) What distinguishes philanthropy from the welfare state is that it takes place independent of social rights; it is discretionary and does not involve a legal entitlement. The displacement of the state's responsibility for social rights into the philanthropic milieu parallels a changing view of citizenship. There are, of course, limitations to Marshall's idea of citizenship as the basis of rights. As Bottomore (1992) noted, social citizenship cannot fully account for the complexities of the contemporary global context. The key point here is that the enjoyment of well-being was at one point perceived as a matter of citizenship, not at the discretion of others. See Wood and Gough (2006) for further discussion.

6. Decommodification and welfare-regime theory have been debated in depth by social-policy scholars. See Powell (2015) Barrientos and Powell (2004), Holden (2003), and Vail (2010) for excellent reviews on the origins of *decommodification* and the limitations of Esping-Andersen's (1990) use of the term. Also see Wood and Gough (2006) for a discussion of the contemporary complexities of the welfare mix in the global context. Salamon and Anheier (1998) extended Esping-Andersen's (1990) concept of social origins to the nonprofit sector but, as with Salamon's (2015) use of the phrase "welfare mix," the paper neglects much of the political theory that informs Esping-Andersen's (1990) work.

7. Stratification is one input into Esping-Andersen's (1990) welfare-regime model. Also see Gordon (1994), Piven and Cloward (1971/1993), and Schram (1992) on the problematic stratification of social rights in the United States.

8. See Wincott (2013) on the history—and potential inaccuracy—of the "golden age of the welfare state."

9. See Chandhoke (2001, 2002) on the politics of this division. Also see Webb Farley, Goss, and Smith (this issue). Also see Hall (1999, 526) on the origination of the term *nonprofit sector* in public finance. Following the work of the Johns Hopkins Center for Civil Society Studies (c. 2000–2015), it has become common to use the phrase "nonprofit sector" interchangeably with "civil society." The words *charity* and *philanthropy* often are used interchangeably; however, relative to charity, mass philanthropy is a recent phenomenon (Zunz 2012, 19). In his history of philanthropy in the United States, Zunz (2012, 10) described the emergence of philanthropic fortunes in the early twentieth century, noting that "charity had been for the needy; philanthropy was to be for mankind."

10. This heading is based on my reading of Fraser's (1989, 294) "sociocultural means of interpretation and communication."

11. See Deacon (2013) on global social policy.

12. For another two-logics argument, also see Ferris and Williams (2015, 6).

13. See Hayward (2012, 5–6) for a balanced review of the "Beveridge Report" in the context of contemporary welfare-state politics.

14. See Eikenberry and Mirabella (this issue) on innovative philanthropy.

15. As an orienting point for the reader, Fraser began the 1989 article with reference to Michel Foucault's statement in *Discipline and Punish* that "Need is also a political statement, meticulously prepared, calculated and used" (Fraser 1989, fn 27, 306). However, she was careful to note that she judged Foucault's perspective on social movements to be wrongly unidirectional. See Villadsen (2007) for an excellent reading of philanthropy and the welfare state from a Foucauldian perspective.

16. Fraser (1989) also included rights-talk and interests-talk; she was careful to note the importance of the politically constructed authority of the speaker.

17. Vail (2010, 310) argued for just such reprivatization of spheres as a way to refute proposals for its instrumentalization. However, his argument was written 20 years after Fraser's and in the context of "market triumphalism." It would be worthwhile to put these two arguments in conversation on the topic of philanthropy and government and in the context of Habermas's system-lifeworld distinction. Also see Mintzberg's (2015) suggestion to replace "nonprofit" and "third sector" with "plural sector."

18. See Fridell (2007) on the politics of fair-trade coffee.

19. For Fraser (1989, 292–3), "thin-needs talk" refers to general agreement such as "people need housing." However, "thick-needs talk" would address the important political question of what housing entails (e.g., two bedrooms and a bathroom?). In other words, thick-needs talk involves the *interpretation* needs (Fraser 1989, 294).

20. See Fraser (1989, 304) for a more extensive discussion of how reprivatizers engage in "contesting the breakout of runaway needs and trying to (re)depoliticize them."

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Named in honor of the 1950 Nobel Peace Prize winner, former APSA President, and the first African American to receive a PhD in political science, Dr. Ralph J. Bunche, the RBSI encourages students to pursue academic careers in political science. During the program, RBSI Scholars take graduate level political science and methods courses and engage in original research, culminating in a research paper and poster presentation at the APSA Annual Meeting. To date, there are over 500 RBSI Alumni, many of whom are on faculty at colleges and universities across the country. Now in its 31st year, the RBSI program is held at Duke University, under the direction of Dr. Paula D. McClain. To learn more about the 2017 APSA RBSI Scholars, visit us online at www.apsanet.org/rbsi.

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