



The politics of self-help: The Rockefeller Foundation, philanthropy and the 'long' Green Revolution



David Nally ^{a, *}, Stephen Taylor ^b

^a Department of Geography, University of Cambridge, Downing Place, Cambridge, CB2 3EN, United Kingdom

^b School of Geography, Queen Mary University of London, Mile End Road, London, E1 4NS, United Kingdom

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ABSTRACT

While scholars of contemporary philanthropy have observed a concerted interest in the promotion of 'self-help,' little has been said about the political history of this investment and its significance in determining both domestic and international development priorities. We locate this modern conceptualisation of self-help in early twentieth-century philanthropic practice that sought to 'gift' to individuals and communities the precious habit of self-reliance and social autonomy. The Rockefeller Foundation promoted rural development projects that deliberately sought to 'emancipate' the tradition-bound peasant, transforming him or her into a productive, enterprising subject. We begin by documenting their early agricultural extension work, which attempted to spark agrarian change in the US South through the inculcation of modern habits and aspirations among farmers and their families. These agrarian schemes illustrate the newfound faith that 'rural up-lift' could only be sustained if farming communities were trained to 'help themselves' by investing physically and psychologically in the process of modernisation. We then locate subsequent attempts to incentivise and accelerate international agricultural development within the broader geopolitical imperatives of the Green Revolution and the Cold War. While US technical assistance undoubtedly sought to prevent political upheaval in the Third World, we argue that Rockefeller-led modernisation projects, based on insights gleaned from behavioural economics, championed a model of human capital – and the idea of 'revolution within' – in order to contain the threat of 'revolution without'. Approaching agricultural development through this problematisation of the farmer reveals the 'long history' of the Green Revolution – unfolding from the domestic to the international and from the late nineteenth century to the present – as well as the continuing role of philanthropy in forging a new global order.

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[I]t might be said that the first commandment of the entrepreneur's ethics is 'help thyself' and that in this sense it is an ethic of 'self-help.' It will rightly be said that this ethic is not new; that it forms part of the spirit of capitalism from the start.

Dardot & Laval, 2013, 264.

This after all is the basic question. Not how is society organized, but what stimulates change? Not who visits whom but what makes communication evocative? Not how is stability maintained, but how can constructive instability be provoked? Not what is the norm, but how can the deviant be more effective?

How can aspirations and self-confidence be heightened? How can the creativity of persons be unleashed? What can make society sing and ring with zest and power?

Mosher, 1976, 348.

Find the man, right the world

On June 5 1958, venture capitalist and philanthropist, Laurance Spelman Rockefeller (1910–2004) arrived at The Buckley School, New York, where he had been invited to deliver a commencement address. Rockefeller, a scion of the influential industrial family and trustee of numerous subsidiary philanthropies of the family-led Rockefeller Foundation (see Fosdick, 1952; Harr & Johnson, 1988, 1991), was keen for his young audience to understand that the next step in their careers would be challenging and potentially life-

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +44 (0)1223 339776; fax: +44 (0)1223 333392.

E-mail addresses: dpn24@cam.ac.uk (D. Nally), stephen.taylor@qmul.ac.uk (S. Taylor).

defining. As young adults the students assembled in the room had now to decide what sort of person they wanted to become, what core values they stood for, and how they would personally contribute to building a better future. With his audience's attention secured Rockefeller reinforced his point by recounting the story of a 'harassed father' attempting to read his newspaper despite the distracting antics of his son.

In desperation to get a few moments of peace and quiet, the father grabbed a map of the world lying near at hand and with a pair of scissors cut it up into a number of odd shaped pieces. Turning to the boy he said, "Here, see how long it takes you to put this together." In an incredibly short time the youngster was back with the map properly pieced together. The father was amazed and none too pleased. He said, "How could you have possibly done it so fast?" The boy replied, "Dad, I found that there was a picture of a man on the back side of the map which made it easy to put together. You see when the man was right, the world was right." (Rockefeller, 1958, 2)

To a room full of precocious young scholars this allegory must have made a striking impression. It certainly epitomised a newfound faith at the Rockefeller Foundation that before philanthropy could accomplish its bold objective of 'reforming the world' it would first have to convince people that the patterns of change it championed were both necessary and desirable (Sealander, 1997; Tyrrell, 2010; Zunz, 2012). In short, to improve the world one had first to mould the man. This conviction derived in part from ideas articulated by the industrialist and pioneer philanthropist Andrew Carnegie (1835–1919). In an article titled 'Wealth,' first published in the *North American Review* in 1889, Carnegie argued for a new way of thinking about the 'proper administration' of capital. Beginning with the assumption that the 'laws of competition' were natural and overwhelmingly beneficial to society, Carnegie nevertheless claimed that capitalist societies had to undertake some redistribution of wealth if they are to avoid enormous, polarising inequality and the likelihood of a socialist revolution. For Carnegie (1900, 23) the difficulty lay in the fact that 'most of the forms in vogue to-day for benefiting mankind only tend to spread among the poor a spirit of dependence upon alms, when what is essential for progress is that *they should be inspired to depend upon their own exertions*'. Faced with such problems 'the best means of benefiting the community,' Carnegie (1900, 18) concluded, 'is to place within its reach the ladders upon which the aspiring can rise'. As Carnegie saw it, the objective of philanthropy was to thoroughly restructure free-market capitalism, not in order to destroy it, but rather to save it from itself (see Dardot & Laval, 2013, 37). For capitalism to survive, it must embrace the strategic practice of gift giving.

Carnegie's enormously popular essay stated two principles that have guided philanthropic practice ever since. The first is the conviction that charity is not the answer to poverty; indeed it is *the* problem. This principle is neither original nor specific to philanthropic practice (Bornstein, 2009). In fact, the idea may be traced back to classical liberal thinkers such as Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) and Thomas Robert Malthus (1766–1834) who believed that the primary purpose of poor relief was to rehabilitate the poor, returning them to society minus the 'vices' that caused their indigence in the first place (see Nally, 2011). The second conviction follows from this particular conceptualisation of poverty; namely, to achieve progressive and lasting change, personal as well as political transformation is required. New laws, powers and rationalities of rule in themselves will not suffice. To truly tackle poverty it is necessary to rouse the poor and entice them to better standards of living.

Both principles were to become cardinal features of American philanthropic practice. 'The best philanthropy,' commented

Standard Oil magnate John D. Rockefeller Sr. (1839–1937), 'is constantly in search of the finalities – a search for cause, an attempt to cure evils at their source' (cited in Rockefeller Foundation, 1968, n.p.). This quest for 'the finalities' went hand in hand with a hardened belief that 'lasting gains come not from help but from self-help,' as Rockefeller Foundation Vice-President Will M. Myers remarked (Harrar, 1967; vii). The recipients of philanthropic largesse had to be actively enrolled in the process of securing their own salvation. Whereas charity addressed only the symptoms of social problems – and therefore tended to promote dependency – philanthropy would tackle *root causes* and inspire *social autonomy*. In short, philanthropy's greatest 'gift' was to provide a means of lifting communities out of squalor, whilst at the same time instilling in them feelings of 'usefulness' and habits of self-reliance (traits that Carnegie [1900, ix] termed 'the germ of true manhood').

Philanthropists such as Carnegie and Rockefeller also shared an enduring faith in progress and a belief that human nature is malleable and thus people can be worked on and nurtured to greater accomplishments. No doubt this 'modernization of the idea of helping,' to borrow a phrase from philosopher Marianne Gronemeyer (2010, 57), drew from, and was validated by, historical patterns of thought (Lambert & Lester, 2004). However, drawing on research on the emerging geographies of philanthropy (Hay & Muller, 2014; see also McGoey, 2011), we suggest that it is just as important to recognise how the impulse to give was, and indeed is, shaped by the vagaries of contemporary politics. We noted above, for instance, that Carnegie's desire to delve beyond charity was driven by his fear that massive concentrated wealth, if administered unwisely, might inspire dangerous and destabilising class tensions. Significantly, the Rockefeller Foundation's philanthropy was also motivated by fears of population growth, dwindling resources, peasant insurgency and communism (see Cueto, 2007; Cullather, 2014; Kay, 1993). To control and contain these emergent threats – that is, to prevent them from spiralling into large-scale existential crises – it was necessary to manage the pace and direction of national and global social change. At this point we argue that philanthropic strategies begin to dovetail with wider security imperatives – often to the point that it becomes difficult to tease apart geopolitical objectives from philanthropic values (Birn, 2006; Cullather, 2010; Parmar, 2012). Drawing inspiration from Gronemeyer (2010) once more, one might say that the modernization of 'helping' involved converting a mode of assistance (philanthropy) into an instrument of securitisation (see also Fassin, 2012).

It is not, of course, novel to point to the 'hidden,' strategic dimension of giving. Jonathan Benthall notes, for example, that '[g]iving is a form of exchange. The types of reciprocity that reimburse the charitable donor are not necessarily material, but may consist in prestige, or of the blessings for the recipient, or of spiritual merit' (2010, xiv). At the beginning of the twentieth century, Georg Simmel (1965 [1908], 122) put the matter baldly when he argued that the ministration of aid, far from being the solution to poverty, was part of its perpetuation: 'The goal of assistance,' he wrote, 'is precisely to mitigate certain extreme manifestations of social differentiation, so that the social structure may continue to be based on this differentiation.' Our aim in this paper is not to recapitulate Carnegie's earlier point, nor indeed subsequent theorisations of that argument (Žižek, 2009; Morvaridi, 2012); rather we seek to develop a clearer picture of how 'help' – or, more precisely, 'self-help' – enters into the sphere of strategic calculation. To this end, we take seriously the tactics deployed by agents of the Rockefeller Foundation in pioneering domestic and international agricultural reform during the twentieth century. Intersecting with, and indeed adding to, technical and institutional accounts of the Green Revolution (Jarosz, 2009; Pearse, 1980; Yapa, 1993), this paper argues

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