

Philanthropy in History: German and American Perspectives

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On March 31 and April 1, 2006, twenty-one German and American historians and social and political scientists followed the invitation of the German Historical Institute in Washington D.C. and of the Stiftung Deutsch-Amerikanische Wissenschaftsbeziehungen im Stifterverband für die deutsche Wissenschaft to participate in an intensive two-day long conference „Philanthropy in History: German and American Perspectives.“ The conveners of this international conference, Thomas Adam, Simone Lässig, and Gabriele Lingelbach, hoped to provide an opportunity for a transatlantic exchange between researchers who study philanthropy and related phenomena such as class, gender, ethnicity, religion, and the non-profit economy.

The conference was opened, on the evening of March 30, with a keynote lecture on „Sacred Space: Women, Philanthropy, and the Public Sphere“ by Kathleen McCarthy. In her lecture, McCarthy analyzed the emergence of philanthropy in the United States within the context of a transatlantic community that predated the nation state. Tackling the issue of American exceptionalism, McCarthy reminded the audience that European philanthropy predated American philanthropy. In fact, European women's associations and philanthropic institutions provided the model for American associational life. Alexis de Tocqueville, so McCarthy, missed in his admiration for the democratic and associational culture of the United States that these associations were built upon European blueprints. This theme of transatlantic similarities and a shared philanthropic/non-profit culture provided the background for the two days of intensive discussions. At the beginning of the first panel, Lester Salomon encouraged historians and social scientists to relinquish ideological and political blinders that obscure the underlying reality. In his experience, German and American researchers tend

to highlight the differences between both societies with regards to the provision of social welfare. If one studies, however, these two systems without preconceived notions of distinctiveness one is likely to discover two very similar realities. Salomon suggested that it is less the realities that divide Germany and the United States but rather the different prisms and terminologies used by researchers in the analysis of these systems. Stressing rather the similarities than the differences between both national cases, too, Thomas Adam explored the model function of British and German social housing enterprises for the provision of social housing in American cities in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Building upon the concept of transatlantic history, Adams stated that European and American philanthropic cultures were in many ways similar because American philanthropy did not emerge within a vacuum but as a result of transatlantic exchanges throughout the entire nineteenth century.

Christof Biggeleben's paper on philanthropy in Berlin's merchant community during the Wilhelmine period opened up a lively debate about central questions with regards to the future research on philanthropy. In his paper, which is based on an extensive empirical study of Berlin businessmen and their associations, Biggeleben discussed the financial support for *Standesgenossen* (middle-class compatriots) and their families who experienced social hardship and impoverishment as one aspect of philanthropy. Such a definition adds to the growing number of concepts and theories about the nature of philanthropy. While some historians see every act of kindness even within families (Frank Prochaska) as philanthropy, others define it in more restrictive ways as volunteering time, money and material resources for the betterment of society (McCarthy) and some in relation to the legitimization of social classes (Francie Ostrower). While it was not the goal of this conference to arrive at a commonly acceptable definition, the discussion certainly stimulated further thinking and scholarly discussion about the many ways of conceptualizing this phenomenon. Biggeleben, further, contributed to a reevaluation of nineteenth-century philanthropy in Germany: If one compares, for instance, the amounts Berlin businessmen left for charitable and philanthropic purposes to the amounts accorded to the same purposes by American entrepreneurs, it becomes clear that Germany's upper class gave on average much more for

philanthropy than their American contemporaries. While New York's wealthiest never left more than one to two percent of their fortunes to philanthropies, affluent Germans such as Arnhold, Mosse and Simon gave between one quarter and one third of their net worth to charities. Germany clearly had a charitable class that was willing to give large sums for the betterment of society. Larry Frohman, who discussed the changing parameters of voluntary welfare in nineteenth-century Germany, indirectly supported this argument by suggesting that all important elements of Bismarck's welfare state had their origins in the voluntary sector and were, thus, not new to Germans.

Frohman also added to the attempts at defining philanthropy by suggesting that nineteenth-century charity was concerned with the individual case and an immediate response while philanthropy aimed at the elimination of the underlying causes of philanthropy. He further suggested that in Germany throughout the nineteenth century endowed foundations were replaced by voluntary associations in the field of philanthropy. Frohman, thus, painted a picture of the German philanthropic sector that differed from what historians know about the American case, where only only three big gifts (such as the Smithsonian Institute) had been made in the United States before 1850. The majority of gifts for the establishment of universities, colleges and poor relief associations were small in size. Big donors such as Astor, Carnegie, Vanderbilt, and Rockefeller became active only in the later half of the nineteenth century. It is left to future research to verify Frohman's assumption about the decline of endowed foundations throughout the nineteenth century.

While class and religion certainly matter to German philanthropy-researches, gender has barely caught the attention of German historians who work on this topic. Pointing to the different ways in which German and American historians seem to approach the study of philanthropy, David Hammack provocatively asked: Why do German historians study philanthropy as a class phenomenon, more precisely as a bourgeois phenomenon thus neglecting other social distinctions that influence philanthropic behavior? While one could dismiss this question as rhetorical, there seems to be more about it especially if one tries to compare German and American approaches towards the research of philanthropy. While some American historians have considered philanthropy as an upper-

class phenomenon, the majority of American researchers is concerned with the economic importance of philanthropy and the competition between the state and the third sector. Hammack pointed out that in 2000 about ten percent of the American workforce was employed in the nonprofit sector. However, the growth of employment in this sector far outstripped the growth of giving. Thus, private giving becomes a declining share of the income of hospitals, social services, and educational institutions. Nonprofit organizations receive their funding today from three major sources: 1) fees (earned income); 2) government support; 3) private gifts. David Mulcahy underlined Hammack's assessment by pointing to the economic situation of museums in the United States. On average, American museums receive 30 percent of their support from the government, 23 percent from philanthropy and 47 percent from earned income. One is tempted to ask: Does the growing integration of market mechanisms in these non-profit institutions mean that they slowly leave the non-profit sector? And what exactly is the non-profit sector? Gabriele Lingelbach added to this conceptual problem by discussing the donations of West Germans for philanthropic purposes as a market-driven phenomenon. For Lingelbach, the modernization and democratization of West German society furthered the multiplication of philanthropic organizations thus creating a market, in which potential donors could choose between various philanthropic organizations and their causes. The selection process is, further, influenced by a growing media presence of philanthropic organizations. Is such giving still part of the non-profit sector (a non-profit sector which was supposed to be free of market forces)? Or can we study the non-profit sector with the methods of market-analysis?

Stephen Pielhoff - using theoretical frameworks invented by Marcel Mauss - conceptualized philanthropy as gift exchange, which is build upon a cultural duty of accepting and reciprocation (gratitude). While it was certainly not a reliable instrument of achieving social recognition, it often came with prestige and social status. Andreas Gestrich, however, pointed to the asymmetrical character of this gift exchange since the recognition came not from the institution the person gave to, but from another group (family, friends, and peer group). For Biggeleben, such gifts had to cross a certain „material threshold“ to set the benefactor apart from the members of the middle and upper

classes. Warning of the tendency to limit philanthropy to the giving of the rich, McCarthy, however, encouraged the German participants to think more broadly about the importance of giving within German society with regards, for instance, to policy making. This aspect was also highlighted by Peter Dobkin Hall who drew the audience's attention to the attempts of American liberal and - more recently - conservative foundations to influence political and governmental processes at home and abroad.

The papers given by Michael Schäfer, Michael Werner, and Gregory Witkowski discussed the phenomenon of giving within a changing world. Both, Schäfer and Werner investigated philanthropy in the period of the Weimar Republic. Using the case studies of Leipzig, Schäfer suggested that philanthropy ceased to exist with the end of World War I because inflation devaluated the financial resources of philanthropic institutions and destroyed the giving class. In contrast to Schäfer, Werner argued convincingly that philanthropy survived into the 1920s and even the 1930s. While he agreed with Schäfer that philanthropy lost its importance because of inflation and the expansion of the welfare state, Werner suggested that philanthropy was transformed to meet the requirements of a democratic society after 1918 and, after 1933, a dictatorship. In contrast to the Wilhelmine period, philanthropy in the NS period was merely led by economic interests. Its purpose, according to Werner, was the creation of good connections with the new rulers and philanthropic engagement resulted in immediate economic advantages. Witkowski's inquiry into East German philanthropy for the Third World broke new grounds in many ways. During the 1950s and 1960s, East German philanthropy for causes in Africa and Asia played an important role in the international recognition of the German Democratic Republic as a separate German state. In contrast to giving in Western European countries, East Germany's government exercised much larger control about where the money was going. For East Germans, giving for countries like Angola and Vietnam played an important part in the formation of a separate East German identity. Since their tables were still plentiful, East Germans shared their wealth with the less fortunate people in the world. For once, East Germans could feel as world citizens. Werner's and Witkowski's contributions opened up a large number of questions with regards to the character of philanthro-

py and its survival in different political systems. These are questions for future research and conferences. Philanthropy, it has become clear, can operate within non-democratic states. It survives political transformations that destroy most economic and political structures. If philanthropy, however, is capable of surviving such transformations, what does this mean for the nature of philanthropy and these transformations? It adds to the larger question about how we can conceptualize change in history.

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