

PHILANTHROPY AS SALVATION: CAN THE RICH SAVE THE WORLD AND SHOULD WE LET THEM TRY?

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The title of this text is adapted – in an act of gentle sabotage – from that of a book by Matthew Bishop and Michael Green (2008). The original is called *Philanthrocapitalism: How the rich can save the world and why we should let them*, and reads as a jubilant ode to contemporary philanthropy among the global economic elite. Today's philanthropists, argue the authors, have mastered the art of applying the best strategies and skills that business has to offer (as well as lots of money), to the world's most pressing social problems, and are perhaps our best hope for social and environmental salvation. Unsurprisingly, this argument and earlier versions of it have met with some criticism. Authors such as Edwards (2010), Roelofs (2003) and Zizek (2006) have noted, with varying levels of outrage, that the philanthropy of the wealthy looks suspiciously like a cover for the perpetuation of global inequalities under business (or capitalism) as usual, and that the logic of the market is not simply transferrable to the third sector, not least because the former depends on structural systems of inequality that the latter traditionally seeks to challenge.

The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, undisputed leader in the landscape of contemporary elite philanthropy, has attracted particular scrutiny from commentators. Its staggering financial resources – according to its website, the Foundation's endowment is currently worth over US\$41 billion, and it has already made grants totalling more than US\$34 billion – have enabled the Gates Foundation to devise an impressive programme of global health initiatives. The scale of its resources, however, has seen the Foundation rewrite the international agenda on which issues and regions of the world receive the most funding for health, resulting in a skew towards areas like malaria and HIV/AIDS and away from those such as nutrition, child and maternal health, and chronic diseases, which most affect those living in poverty. Furthermore, the Gates Foundation answers to no-one in its decision-making, and there is little incentive for improvement in its transparency and accountability (Beckett 2010; Lancet 2009; McGoey 2015).

These parallel issues, of elite philanthropy's lack of accountability and the (typical if not exclusive) faith of its proponents in market-based ideology as the panacea for all the world's problems, are the central concerns of those who question philanthropy's potential for driving real social, ecological, and economic change. During my own anthropological research amongst wealthy philanthropists in São Paulo (Brazil's largest urban centre), I had much opportunity to investigate these issues, and to discuss them with philanthropists themselves, the professionals who work with them, and their critics.

In São Paulo, however, I also encountered a small group of young elite philanthropists whose attempt to engage with Brazil's economic and social problems threw up a rather different set of issues. This took the form of a programme designed to create social change by encouraging young wealthy elites to explore the issue of inequality in Brazil, and to better understand their own role and that of their families in its perpetuation. Through a process of awareness-building, the programme aimed to encourage these young elites to adopt attitudes of social responsibility, and to commit time and money to philanthropic and other socially minded activities.

This programme was part of a wider trend in 'donor education' and philanthropy advisory services currently popular among global elites from the USA to the UK, Brazil, and beyond. The focus of this particular programme on the issues of social and economic inequality, however, and the direct objective of challenging young elites to place themselves within a wider picture of the historical and contemporary perpetuation of these inequalities in Brazil, was unusual. It provided an interesting opportunity to enter into one of many elite Brazilian communities and observe close-up the ambiguities and complexities surrounding attempts to change the world via philanthropy. It also presented a conceptual challenge for a researcher politically inclined to agree with the critics of philanthrocapitalism mentioned above, as something more politically nuanced and complex appeared to be going on here than in many of the other philanthropic projects I had encountered.

The creators of this programme were two young women from wealthy São Paulo families. Unlike many of their peers, both had eschewed careers in business, finance, or law in favour of a commitment to working in the third sector in the

pursuit of social change. The programme, designed for members of the Brazilian economic elite (inheritors or self-made) aged between 25 and 40, took place over a series of residential weekend seminars during the course of a year. It focused on the personal development of participants, and on the belief that social transformation begins with changes in individual perception and self-awareness. The programme's coordinators aimed to broaden participants' understanding of the causes of social and economic inequality in Brazil and of the development and current activities of the third sector, and to explore the role of philanthropy, CSR (corporate social responsibility), and other forms of elite social action within this landscape. These themes were explored through meetings with third-sector, philanthropy, and CSR professionals, site visits to third-sector organisations, readings, group discussions, artistic activities, and 'self-awareness exercises'

While the programme encouraged participants to increase their philanthropy and to practice it in different ways, this was only one of a much wider range of possible outcomes that the programme's coordinators imagined for its participants. A significant outcome might be a participant using his or her influence on the board of their family business to introduce fairer or more sustainable business practices to the company, or leaving a job in finance to work in the third sector. But small changes in participants' everyday behaviour, such as the cultivation of more responsible consumption patterns (e.g. deciding against the purchase of a second – or third or fourth – car) or paying domestic workers a higher wage, were considered equally important outcomes of the programme.

During my research, however, I soon discovered that while these dual objectives of the programme – the raising of awareness of participants concerning inequality and their own role in perpetuating it, and behavioural change in accordance with this raised consciousness – were clearly defined in theory, they often appeared to be difficult to achieve in practice. This difficulty was the subject of much discussion and anxiety amongst the programme's coordinators, particularly on the part of Paula (not her real name), a consultant hired to help design and facilitate the programme.

Unlike the founders and other coordinators of the programme, Paula did not come from an elite background. She worked for an NGO that

provided advisory services to a wide range of other third-sector organisations, from grassroots social movements to CSR initiatives, and she brought a highly critical perspective on Brazil's elite philanthropy sector to her role. In an interview with me she outlined this perspective (which she emphasised was her personal view and not necessarily representative of the views of the programme or of the NGO she worked for), telling me she believed most Brazilian elite philanthropy was motivated by a desire to maintain "social and market control". Elite philanthropists were keen to reduce financial inequality, she said, as this was good for business. But they were not interested in tackling "inequality of participation in decision-making. They [the philanthropists] want to continue making the decisions, except that now [the poor] have mobile phones, sound systems and freezers, so they tell them to stop complaining" (interview transcript, in my translation from Portuguese).

Paula was a strong adherent – along with the founders of the programme – of the idea that social change begins with the raising of individual consciousness. She believed, however, that the programme's founders were often too hesitant to challenge the worldview of the programme's participants, and to include content in the programme that would go too far beyond the parameters of their own elite experience. The question of how and to what extent participants should be challenged to think beyond these parameters appeared in decision-making around the programme regarding everything from what kind of hotels should be chosen to accommodate participants during modules, to programmatic content. Paula told me in interview that the programme's founders were nervous of upsetting or shocking the young elite participants of the programme by introducing them too quickly to social and economic realities that were too challenging or too far outside their comfort zone, as this might lead them to disengage from the programme altogether. So while an introduction to the themes of social business and social investment was seen as appropriate content for the programme, for example, a visit to meet members of the MST (*Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra* – Brazil's famous Landless Workers' Movement which has campaigned for agricultural reform since the 1980s) was not.

While Paula understood the point of view of the programme's founders, she was frustrated by this hesitancy to challenge their young elite clients to explore deeper and more uncomfortable

truths about their own role in perpetuating inequality; truths such as those that might be revealed during a visit to the MST, concerning the continuing monopolisation of Brazil's agricultural land by a small handful of elite families, and those families' collusion in the historical persecution of the MST by private and state mechanisms for social control. In the absence of such challenges, Paula feared that the impact of the programme could be no more than "*epidérmico*" (skin deep).

Paula did, however, find small ways to challenge participants further during the programme, such as during two group discussions that she related to me in an interview. In one, she had explained to a participant who had pointed to Brazil's drug trade as a source of social problems that this trade was in fact sustained by middle- and upper-class consumption. In the other, she had challenged another participant to explain how profits were achieved within his own private equity firm, drawing attention to the relationship between poverty, unemployment, the redundancy measures central to his firm's activity, and said profits. When I asked how he had responded, she said that he had gone very quiet.

Interventions from Paula such as these were tolerated and even encouraged by the other leaders of the programme. Their resistance to Paula's proposal for a more radical programme of activities seemed to be less a question of differing ideologies than one of concern about how to manage the learning process of their young elite clients. Juliana (not her real name), one of the coordinators of the programme, explained to me in an interview that participants came to the programme at different stages of their development toward becoming 'agents of transformation'. While some were only just beginning to develop an awareness of social issues and the work of the third sector, others were further along in the development of their social consciousness, and needed more content to further their learning. Participants in a third stage of development were ready to transform their learning into concrete action in their own lives, and required specific types of support for this. The leaders of the programme, she told me, had to recognise the developmental stage of each participant and to work with them at that point.

This was a particularly interesting aspect of the programme's work with young elite philanthropists. While I sympathised fully with Paula's

frustration in having to treat these wealthy young Brazilians with kid gloves, my research with the programme and its participants revealed the gravity of the programme's objectives of bringing about ideological and behavioural change in their lives. "One thing I've realised" Juliana told me in interview,

... is that you make a really big change when you start to develop a new perspective on the world. It's not just a change in yourself, you start to relate differently to your friends, to your family, to your employees, to everything around you. You need a network of people to support you in this process. [...] Often this involves a rupture in relation to your family's principles, and in family relationships. Sometimes it means going against your family's story of construction [of wealth] [...] Especially if you're a person from our generation, you will probably encounter resistance from the generation above, from other people and from the wider world, because the whole world values accumulation [of wealth].

(my translation from Portuguese)

In elite worlds where wealth and its accumulation are highly valued, and where families celebrate historical narratives of the toil and dedication involved in the building of successful family businesses, criticisms of the structural inequalities created and upheld by these processes are deeply personal. During my research in Brazil, I repeatedly witnessed the frustration of young members of the economic elite participating in the programme discussed above, who found themselves unable to bring about change within the board of their family's business or philanthropic foundation, who were fearful of challenging the views of other family members or of going against the grain in financial or lifestyle decisions dictated by family or friends. These barriers to change among young members of Brazil's economic elite fed into the frustration of Paula (and the other coordinators of the programme) at the slow nature of the "transformation" of many participants, or at the apparent failure of some participants to transform at all.

So how should this programme, designed to encourage philanthropy and social responsibility among young Brazilian elites, be understood? Can this be seen as a real attempt to investigate alternatives to global capitalism and the inequalities it perpetuates? And if so, does it represent hope for the future? The possibility of serious contemplation among the rich and powerful of their contribution to the world's ills and

of their own potential role in the creation of alternative social and economic systems is certainly cause for hope. In addition, the recasting of philanthropy as a form of ethical salvation of the rich themselves is an interesting take on this practice, and possibly a more palatable one for philanthropy's critics, even if such valiant attempts are an exception to the rule within the broader landscape of contemporary elite philanthropy.

The donor education programme explored above also shows, however, that efforts on the part of wealthy elites to devise alternatives to the current global economic system are complicated by a range of factors that might not be so relevant to other socio-economic groups. Central to these is the question of ideology, relating to different ideas about the roots of global poverty and inequality, what social and economic change might actually look like, and how it can best be brought about. The acceptance of culpability among wealthy and powerful elites for the perpetuation of global inequalities is a major milestone in itself, but even if this acceptance can be reached, it does not translate automatically into transformative action. In the face of resistance from family members and wider elite communities, attempts to galvanise individuals into action (such as that discussed above) can all too easily morph into soothing forms of self-help for guilt-ridden consciences, and ideological converts may just return home to carry on their lives as usual.

If anything, the programme discussed above shows us that the personal, the political, and the ideological are closely bound together in elite engagement with questions of social and economic inequality. Attempts to create change in collaboration with those who retain power and wealth need to take this interconnectedness into consideration. Efforts to build alternatives to the current economic system from the top down should not be dismissed out of hand, not least because their potential for impact is huge. But such efforts are often riddled with complications that are not obvious to those standing outside elite worlds.

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