

Top Down: the Ford Foundation, Black Power and the Reinvention of Racial Liberalism

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You'd think that people would love you for giving away money. But that ain't always so. One of the major lessons from the history of the philanthropy is that people who give away money aren't always loved. Sometimes, philanthropists get nothing but grief in exchange for their efforts. The problem is that the money looks like a donation, but in fact, donations are really one side of an exchange. Often, those who give money do so with an expectation. Every check should have a place where the donor can write 'this is what I expect of you'. When choosing a charity, or a cause, a donor signals to the rest of the world. 'This is what I think is good. This is important'. Often, donors will ask recipients to report what they did or otherwise justify the gift.

The gift, then, is not just a gift. It's not even a promise, or merely an attempt to buy the obedience of others. Rather, the gift sets a stage, a place where people act out their interests. The donor has a dream, a better world that they can gently pull into reality with their money. The dream is *their* dream, though. The beneficiaries might have a different version of the dream. The dream might be a nightmare for yet other people. These people – the donor, the beneficiary, and the antagonists use the gift as a stage to settle scores and push agendas.

This may be a harsh, and limited, way to view philanthropy, but the gift-as-stage-for-conflict approach to charity has its uses. It offers us a way to succinctly understand the complex, and often contentious, history of philanthropic organizations, such as the Ford and Rockefeller Foundations. If one can accept that philanthropy is politics by other means, then one can easily identify the same cast of characters that populate our histories of politics and social life. In American philanthropy, we have the poor, the freedmen, and their descendants. We have the monied Northern interests, and the rising managerial classes of the mid 20th century, armed with their dream of scientifically guided social progress. And the fight is the same. The conflict is the same one that's defined American domestic politics from Reconstruction to the Reagan Revolution. Minorities, organized labor, and women ally with white (often male) elites to extract some sort of concession from capital and its allies, low income whites.

Karen Ferguson's *Top Down: The Ford Foundation, Black Power, and the Reinvention of Racial Liberalism*

recounts one very interesting chapter in this decades-long struggle. The setting should be familiar to those who are well versed in philanthropic history or American history. Shortly after the Second World War, activist liberal white elites gained control of some of the major philanthropic organizations, and then used their considerable resources to kick start a social revolution. Ferguson's tome focuses on the tip of the spear in this effort, the Ford Foundation, and explains the problems the Foundation had when they tried to eliminate poverty and reform public schools. The story is not a pretty one.

It is in cases like this that the gift-as-conflict-generator metaphor is very helpful. A strength of Ferguson's account is that she very clearly situates the Ford Foundation's position in mid 20th-century social politics. There are three belligerents in the battle. First, we have highly educated (mostly) white Northern elites who became the Ford Foundation's leadership. Most historians will be familiar with people like MacGeorge Bundy, who was Harvard dean and Kennedy man before becoming Ford's president in 1966. But there is a cohort of Ford Foundation program officers who preceded Bundy that may be more important to be aware of. These officers created the organizational and intellectual framework for the Ford's activism in the 1960s and 1970s. The list includes Paul Ylvisaker, Mario Fantini, Preston Wilcox, and Mitchell Sviridoff. Many of these individuals were highly resourceful optimists who started out in leading universities and ended up in the Ford Foundation after years of working as either activists or in government.

While it would be misleading to say the Ford Foundation possessed a clearly articulated ideology, Ferguson's account indicates that they shared a 'esprit de corps'. That is, there was a shared sense that elite-driven policy could significantly address social problems like poverty. Such policy would be shaped by social science and by collaboration between government, the non-profit sector, and local activists. The Ford Foundation was a particularly apt vehicle for this idea because it had status, authority, and, above all, control over one of the largest fortunes in America. Once there was a critical mass of program officers within the Foundation who adopted this point of view, then real social change could happen. 'Top down' indeed.

The problem with this idea is that the recipients of aid had a very different view of what progress meant. While the Ford Foundation staff, justifiably, focused on life outcomes, such as education or employment, many African-Americans had a different view. Starting in the 1950s, but really accelerating in the 1960s, nationalism became the vibrant force in African-American culture. They didn't want top-down control. Social change was going to be a bottom-up affair.

Of course, this was not a universally adopted point of view. Many civil rights activists still believed in working through the courts, legislatures, and other arms of government. After the civil rights era, numerous activists turned to Democratic politics as a way to pursue their politics. However, for a period of about five years in the late 1960s and early 1970s, nationalism was the spark that created a profound rift in the coalition that supported black freedom. White liberal allies were appalled that integration was now questioned and that radicalism was being seriously entertained. The leadership of the civil rights movement itself was torn, as people grasped for a response to riots and political assassinations. And the nationalists themselves faced a dilemma. Push for community control and lose the backing their white allies, or continue working with whites who might put their stamp on the black community.

Top Down helps us understand how this conflict played out by exploring the Ford Foundation's encounter with 'community control' in the mid 1960s. Ferguson uses two episodes to help us understand the limits of white liberalism in this era. First, the Ford Foundation worked with various leaders in New York's school district to help Puerto Ricans. Later, they also targeted African-Americans. The basic idea was that schools would better serve their constituents if the school district was decentralized. The fundamental problem was the New York City School Board did not actively pursue desegregation after *Brown*. If 'local' control were established, schools could bypass the Board of Education and integrate schools in a more meaningful fashion.

The problem with this plan, as Ferguson notes, is that it immediately forced the Ford Foundation to choose sides in some very bitter 'local' fights, such as the brewing conflict between Columbia University and its African-American neighbors. That was not the only the conflict. As time passed, the Ford Foundation

discovered that 'local' control often meant ceding authority to activists who did not share their view of racial progress defined by integration and individual uplift.

Second, Ferguson relays the story of the Ford Foundation's involvement in the arts, which was another attempt to promote racial liberalism of a multicultural variety. Here, the Foundation decided to fund artistic groups that embodied the emerging black consciousness in the arts. The grants that Ferguson analyzes went to support groups like the Negro Ensemble Company and the New Lafayette Theater. Ferguson argues that the Ford Foundation's involvement resulted in a short term distortion of that artistic scene. The Ford Foundation grants required the groups to strive for self-sufficiency, which meant embracing the mainstream theater world rather than maintain a commitment to nationalism in the arts. Ultimately, though, the Foundation's support of the arts was successful in that it created an incubator for the more mainstream drama that its officers preferred.

So, what, in the long run, was the result of this titanic effort? The Foundation spent a lot of time and effort trying to manage, shape, or control important educational and cultural institutions. At the very least, it created a stage for controversy. For example, the Foundation's attempt to decentralize school control attracted the ire of New Yorkers who resented outside interference in their schools. It also made a lot of African-Americans mad, when the Foundation did not completely buy into their version of community control. In the world of the arts, sponsorship probably allowed more mainstream artists to have careers in the arts, while more radical artists may have had to find work elsewhere.

More broadly though, all this conflict might have fed into the view the Foundation engaged in adventurism by jumping into thorny political fights. It was during this era that the Foundation became the focus of Congressional action, leading to the Tax Reform Act of 1969. Surely, much of the animus would have been directed at any wealthy patron who unabashedly sided with Civil Rights groups of any stripe. But by participating in a three way brawl with New York City school officials, Harlem residents, and an emerging crop of nationalists, the Ford Foundation made themselves a highly visible target to conservatives upset with the fundamental rewriting of the contract that bound blacks and whites together in America.

In reading to the concluding chapters of *Top Down*, one gets the impression that the Ford Foundation staff did not properly understand the emerging landscape of post-civil rights America. Nowhere did I sense that Ford Foundation officers in the 1970s had any inkling of the major problems that would soon face black America in the 1980s: mass incarceration, the war on drugs, and the subsequent erosion of voting rights. As has been argued by many, the shackles of Jim Crow were replaced by the bars of the state prison. Instead of dealing with these problems, the Ford Foundation first retreated into a more piecemeal strategy of working with community-development-corporations and other mechanisms designed to slightly improve the economic landscape of impoverished neighborhoods.

Perhaps *Top Down* might be read as an indictment of American philanthropy in general during this period. During an emotionally intense period, major philanthropies jumped whole heartedly into hard social problems, but they were not prepared for the long haul. They were first blindsided by localism and then by the nationalist surge. The third strike landed when Congress shook up the entire field of philanthropy with a new world of cumbersome regulation. Punch drunk, the world of philanthropy didn't develop a new strategy attuned to the emerging reactionary atmosphere of the 1970s. Instead, they moved on to less contentious versions of their old strategies, whereby the Foundation chose leaders with new backgrounds, such as Franklin Thomas, to energize lagging programs that were formulated or instituted during the Great Society era. Now, we know that insufficient funding to local non-profits and community development corporations was not the most pressing problem that the African-American community would face.

What lessons should be drawn from a book like this? Historians must reconsider, or modify, the view that philanthropies are effective agents of social control. Even the most powerful philanthropies can encounter powerful social trends that they are powerless to stop. Without the coercive power of a state, or the cultural authority of a religion, groups like the Ford Foundation may find their plans in ruins. Practitioners in philanthropy should probably draw a different lesson. Nonprofits in the 20th century identified the correct

problems – repression, poverty, and a lack of access to resources – but were unable to come up with convincing and politically viable solutions. I would argue that practitioners in the present day are in the inverse position. The policies that are offered are more acceptable to the various parties that dominate American politics but these policies do not address the underlying issues that face the black community. Once American philanthropists face the fact that the largest and most important problems in African-American life may well be to do with mass incarceration then they will have the moral high ground to enact bolder initiatives.

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