

America, Where Altruism By Any Other Name is Narcissism



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Forbes Billionaires: The richest people on the planet [Composite photo/Daily Express (UK), Getty]

Big-time philanthropy is just as narcissistic and capitalistic as any other part of American culture. The recent Los Angeles Unified School District teachers' strike is but one example of private philanthropy's underhanded impact on public institutions. Teachers had received only one salary increase since 2007, and had worked off only one three-year contract since 2011. This, in addition to overcrowded classrooms, an insufficient number of support staff, and the siphoning of public

education funds for public charter schools were among the reasons 30,000 teachers walked out for six days last month.

Some of the reasons for this strike, though, go back more than a decade, to the influences of the Walton Family Foundation and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. They seeded money and influence as part of LAUSD's push for public charter schools and a three-tiered system of teacher evaluations, both of which have been proven unreliable for raising student achievement. As Sally Ho reported for the Associated Press last year, "the Waltons are the biggest backers of the powerhouse California Charter School Association, which has gotten more than \$100 million since 2006 with support coming also from Gates, Michael and Susan Dell and the Mark Zuckerberg [sic]-backed Silicon Valley Community foundations."

At least in the case of LAUSD, teachers and parents realized that private foundations like Walton and Gates had sold them a bill of goods. But so many nonprofits, politicians, and community leaders have been willing to go along to get along, out of fear and out of the desperate need for funds and non-governmental help. It doesn't help that those involved in major philanthropy always believe that their money and their ideas are best for ordinary people, despite evidence to the contrary. In the case of Walton Foundation's K-12 Program Director Marc Sternberg, the Waltons believe they "have a moral obligation to provide families with high quality choices...that in" doing so, they "are also compelling the other schools in an ecosystem to raise their game." There's serious narcissism contained within this otherwise well-meaning statement, as if Walton spreading their dollars and their vision for privatized, non-unionized education to places like LAUSD would magically transform public schools for the better.

William and Flora Hewlett Foundation president Larry Kramer is another example of the philanthropic sector's narcissistic attributes. In his response to author Anand Giridharadas' book *Winners Take All*, one

critical of modern philanthropy, Kramer patted Hewlett and other foundations on the back for making the world a slightly better place. “In truth, much can be said for the neoliberal system that Giridharadas dismisses, which has undeniably played a crucial role in lifting hundreds of millions of people out of poverty,” Kramer wrote in “Listening to the people who think we are wrong,” his oddly titled piece for his foundation’s website. Kramer’s was the typical “we’re well meaning do-gooders with privilege, don’t criticize us” argument that Giridharadas eviscerated in his book. “The best part is that Larry Kramer and his @Hewlett_Found couch their hit job as a piece about ‘listening with empathy.’ That is some jiu-jitsu only very few of us can pull off,” Giridharadas tweeted in response to Kramer in January.

In truth, private philanthropy has been the way billionaires in the US have worked to build legacies beyond their exploitation of resources and human labor for about 130 years. It has been this way at least since the days of Andrew Carnegie. The robber baron donated millions between 1886 and his death in 1919 to have 2,500 libraries built across the country for workers who typically put in 12-hour days six days a week for a pittance. Having only Sundays off seldom enough free time to learn how to read, much less hang out in one of Carnegie’s lofty cathedrals to his largesse.

J. D. Rockefeller, Standard Oil’s magnate and the father of monopolies and cut-throat competition, was the first Gilded Age tycoon to create his own foundation, in 1913. It was initially dedicated to eradicating disease and funding medical breakthroughs, while it also helped to buttress institutions such as the University of Chicago and Spelman College. Worth the equivalent of \$340 billion when adjusted for inflation in 2018, Rockefeller once said, “Next to doing the right thing, the most important thing is to let people know you are doing the right thing,” a bit of narcissism in support of his own philanthropy.

One can draw a straight line from the good works of Rockefeller and Andrew Carnegie's ostentatious, cathedral-like libraries to Jeff Bezos' and Michael Bloomberg's announcements last fall. Bezos especially gave away his sense of narcissism when he launched his \$2-billion Day One Fund to eradicate homelessness and provide free preschools nationwide. "We'll use the same set of principles that have driven Amazon. Most important among those will be genuine, intense customer obsession. The child will be the customer," Bezos wrote in his announcement of his Day One Fund. Some would see Bezos' vision as one that would stamp the label of "Amazon customer" on three and four-year-olds long before they will memorize their ABCs.

In November, Michael Bloomberg added \$1.8-billion to his \$1.5 billion endowment to Johns Hopkins University in order to "make the campus more socioeconomically diverse." Like Gates, Walton, and Bezos, Bloomberg's gift was meant to shape public opinion—especially about them as individuals—and to reshape public policies and institutions. Otherwise, why write a *New York Times* op-ed about such giving? Bloomberg contradicted his own vision for all "qualified high school" students to gain "entrance to a college based on his or her family's bank account" with his gift to Johns Hopkins, one of the most selective elite universities in the country. It would take centuries for Johns Hopkins to spend down Bloomberg's gift on the small cadre of qualified students with low socioeconomic status they admit every year. Why not California State or City University of New York, both of which serve tens of thousands of first-generation students from low-income families? Aside from Johns Hopkins being Bloomberg's alma mater, it's far more well-known and prestigious than Cal State or CUNY, and will leave a bigger footprint for Bloomberg's legacy. It will be a firmer monument to his narcissism.

So, where's the pushback from nonprofit organizations and public institutions against such largesse and micromanagement? Mostly nowhere, because the fear of losing precious funds from major private

foundations is real. I recently did a Skype interview for a director-level position with a nonprofit that administers programs in higher education and teacher education. The executive director asked if I would have any problems toeing the official doctrine of the foundation who funded this particular program. As someone who had worked for nonprofits and had managed relationships with foundations like Ford, Lumina, and Gates before, I already knew the drill. "I wouldn't have a problem bifurcating between my own personal thoughts about some of these goals and what the funder wants," I said. The face of the executive director, though. She looked scared, as if I would immediately criticize any flawed thinking on the part of the foundation upon being hired, costing the nonprofit millions of dollars. No surprise that I wasn't offered the job.

In the Gospels, Jesus issued the warning, "when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others." In the US, this kind of anonymous, putting-others-first, big-time philanthropy doesn't exist. Instead, billionaire philanthropy is a tax break that allows the richest and most powerful Americans a public platform in which to carve the world into their own image. One as an experiment on those living with poverty and on communities of color, one in which their disdain for public institutions, for experts, and for the input of ordinary citizens is ever present in their narcissistic giving.