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Neo-Philanthropy

***Kaspar Villadsen**, Department of Management, Politics & Philosophy, CBS, Denmark*

1 Definition

Neo-philanthropy refers to the re-emergence of philanthropic activities and a growing public trust in those who carry them out as ameliorators of societal and social issues. The original term 'philanthropy' designates the donating of money or services for societal purposes or for the benefit of specific groups with some perceived need. Further, it is understood that philanthropic activities are guided by some kind of moral, religious, or humanitarian principles. The term has a rather broad range of applications, since it may both designate funding bodies that offer charitable donations and non-governmental organisations and specific services run by volunteers to help different target groups. Charitable trusts may offer philanthropic aid for diverse purposes which allegedly supersede the state's capacity for action, such as the promotion of business ethics, the strengthening of community participation, health improvement, poverty-reduction, improvement of education levels, or democratic participation. In the 19th century heydays of philanthropic poor relief, the helpers and organizers of work for the poor were called 'philanthropists'. Nowadays, this term is largely reserved for persons engaged in charitable trusts which donate private resources for social and educational purposes.

2 Main Issues

During the last twenty years, philanthropic and voluntary organisations have received growing attention in political debates on how to innovate welfare states which allegedly are in a state of crises. Some emphasise that philanthropic inputs can help make professional welfares services more responsive, while others call upon philanthropic involvement from an aspiration to reduce the size of the welfare state. Neo-philanthropy, then, appears variously as concept of hope, a descriptor of current welfare state transformation, and as a critical term to reflect upon the political effects of delegating welfare state responsibilities to non-state agents.

It should be noted that there are differences between the American and the European use of the term, key among which is that the American usage mostly refers to private initiatives that oppose or are viewed as a counterweight to state intervention, while the European debate gives more emphasis to collaboration and institutional links between philanthropy and state (Eikenberry & Nickel 2009; Procacci 1989). In Europe, the public debate has been less about philanthropy's role as donators for beneficial societal purposes or the 'celebrity effect' of philanthropy and more about the welfare services afforded by voluntary, non-profit organizations, many of which are fully or partly sponsored by philanthropic trusts.

Historically, philanthropic associations played key roles as precursors for the initial establishment of childcare, education, poor relief, and health provision particularly in Western Europe. In many cases, they developed strong links to the state which during the late 19th and early 20th century gradually took up their initiatives as part of the welfare state's expansion.

The protagonists for philanthropic action advanced their programs for social betterment partly in opposition to existing forms of religiously based charity. This is particularly visible regarding the question of how to fight 'social evils' accompanying the emerging industrial cities. While traditionally charity, in the form of alms-giving, was viewed as an act of value in itself, regardless of its practical results, philanthropists advanced more pragmatic means of achieving ends (Donzelot 1979: 66). Philanthropic reformers criticized the act of indiscriminate almsgiving and handouts as a practice that did not consider the effects of giving. Assistance had to be carefully adjusted to the pauper in question, they asserted, and a more rational and 'scientific' approach to poor relief should be established.

3 Critical Placements and Perspectives

While some commemorate the advances that philanthropists achieved as pioneers in the historical development of modern welfare, others take a much more critical view. A key critical point is that philanthropic associations generally leave aside, or even oppose, the claim for rights to the poor granted by the state. Critics also point out that calls for philanthropic and volunteering are often embedded in strategies for reducing state involvement in social issues or take part in a general, neoliberal agenda of smaller government (Eikenberry & Nickel 2009). By propagating the need for more philanthropy to solve social issues instead of addressing fundamental mechanism of marginality and poverty, the discourse on philanthropy may in effect serve to cement marginality and inequality (Roeloef 1995). It should be noted that these rather harsh critiques have mainly been directed at the big charitable foundations rather than at the specific voluntary services that carry out social service, educational activities or health promotion.

Another important question is the more fundamental one of what kind of welfare policy will develop and how it will address social issues, in as much as philanthropy and voluntary organizing is idealised as the new saviours of the welfare state. With the rediscovery of key principles from 19th century poor relief about needs, self-esteem, moral decay, and the dangers of material assistance, neo-philanthropic discourse may have significant effects upon the administrative-political space in which social issues can be conceived and debated (Villadsen 2007). To be sure, observers should avoid making a too easy á priori judgement of philanthropy as either good-hearted amateurs who can rescue the welfare state or as reproducing marginality by their use of a discourse on needs and voluntary giving which reifies the existing social order. If we eschew passing a totalizing verdict on philanthropy's moralising or ideological role, we may undertake a more circumspect interrogation of its forms of knowledge, its practices and the ways in which it intertwines with public welfare and social policies.

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Author´s Address:
Kaspar Villadsen
Copenhagen Business School
Department of Management, Politics and Philosophy
Porcelænshaven 18A
DK-2000 Frederiksberg
Denmark
Tel: ++ 45 3815 3649
Email: kv.lpf@cbs.dk