



PhilanthropyRoundtable

STRENGTHENING OUR FREE SOCIETY

The Vision Thing

Conservative philanthropy's 'vision' is to make grants with the American grain—not against it.

[William A. Schambra](#)

May 1, 2004

Good news for conservative philanthropists! Liberal scholars and nonprofit groups are dotting on you. In particular, they're praising the strategic effectiveness of your public policy grantmaking.

The bad news? The praise comes in reports with titles such as *Justice for Sale; Buying a Movement: Right-wing Foundations and American Politics; Who Is Downsizing the American Dream?*; and *No Mercy: How Conservative Think Tanks and Foundations Changed America's Social Agenda*.

These reports all follow a pattern. First, they construct an elaborate matrix, listing well-known conservative grantmakers along one side, conservative grant-seekers along another, with the amounts awarded in a given period filling the resulting multi-celled table. The matrix is then scrutinized for clues about the strategic patterns of conservative grantmaking, usually resulting in breathless speculation about conspiracies so byzantine and insidious as to be worthy of Russell Crowe in the movie *A Beautiful Mind*.

Foremost among the left-leaning groups that regularly mix praise for conservative methods with blame for the end results is the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy (NCRP). A self-styled philanthropy watch-dog group, NCRP sponsored Sally Covington's 1997 study *Moving a Public Policy Agenda: The Strategic Philanthropy of Conservative Foundations*, which the group has recently updated and expanded as *Axis of Ideology: Conservative Foundations and Public Policy*.

One gets a whiff of conspiracy theory when *Axis of Ideology* solemnly claims that conservative philanthropy's intention is to reinforce the Bush administration's "pendant for waging war, curtailing civil liberties, and slashing taxes and social spending." By and large, however, the latest report stays away from the farther reaches of paranoia, providing a thoughtful description of the methods pursued by conservative grantmakers.

Conservative foundations are effective, NCRP suggests, because they focus grants on a "small number of grantees . . . all working toward a common goal"; they frequently make grants for general operations, rather than for specific projects, thus permitting grantees flexibility while avoiding heavy-handed foundation scrutiny; they are in it "for the long haul," often renewing grants to the same groups for many years; they fund efforts that affect all stages of policymaking, including agenda setting, public mobilization, media coverage, and regulatory and legal challenges; and their staff and boards share with their grantees an "organic alignment and cohesion" so deep as not to require "deliberate coordination." Reflecting Sally Covington's earlier observation that, above all, conservative foundations "bring a clarity of vision and strong political intentions" to their grantmaking, NCRP's executive director Rick Cohen noted at a March 2004 Hudson Institute event that "the grantmaking of these [conservative] foundations adds up to a concerted theme, a concerted strategy."

While conservative grantmakers might be tempted to bask in this lavish praise, doing so would miss the point of these reports. Their real purpose is to shame liberal foundations such as Ford, Rockefeller, and MacArthur—each one of which annually disburses more than the 79 foundations NCRP studied combined—into adopting the techniques described. NCRP and its allies assume that if one could just attach effective conservative methods to liberal purposes—that is, if one made grants for general operating support over many years to groups marshaled behind a coherent liberal vision—the result would be a progressive movement in America every bit as powerful as the one nurtured by conservative foundations.

So why have big establishment foundations resisted this plea? As historian James Allen Smith notes in his foreword to Covington's report, these foundations tend to regard their grantmaking as not at all political, but rather as "grounded in

the traditions of American pragmatism.” “Testing, probing, questioning, and experimenting with specific projects are all central to the ethos and practice of mainstream and liberal foundations,” he continues. As a result, each grant is treated as a mini-laboratory for some social science hypothesis, with the outcomes carefully monitored and measured by trained professionals on the foundation staff. These white-coated social lab technicians seldom raise their sights from the sliver of reality at which they’re peering under the microscope in order to consider the larger political ends their work may or may not be serving. Consequently, grantmaking by the establishment foundations seems to the folks at NCRP to be scattered, narrow, limited, and technical, rather than coordinated, encompassing, and strategic.

Ironically, it was scholars of the radical left who first challenged social science—based philanthropy during the turbulent 1960s and ’70s for being too conservative. They claimed its alleged objectivity and dispassion concealed an agenda of mass manipulation by wealthy elites. In *Philanthropy and Cultural Imperialism*, for instance, Robert Arnove charged that “the elitist and technocratic dimensions of foundations—their imperious and imperial stance—inhere in their belief that social change can occur and social ills can be redressed by highly trained professionals (scientists and technicians) who produce knowledge and proffer solutions.” When the landmark Commission on Private Philanthropy and Public Needs (often referred to as the Filer Commission) contemplated the future of philanthropy in the mid-’70s, left-wing scholars and activists calling themselves the “Donee Group” echoed Arnove’s indictment. Establishment philanthropy “has, for the most part, patterned itself after its corporate and governmental counterparts,” they argued, becoming “bureaucratic, safe, and more conservative and less willing to take risks.”

The Donee Group also began to develop the larger, substantive vision or theme that they hoped would fill the vacuum left by social science’s value-neutral pragmatism. Philanthropy, the group insisted, operates “in the context of a society in which power and resources are grossly misallocated,” and in which “racial, ethnic, sexual, and other forms of discrimination deny many the political, economic, and social advantages enjoyed by other Americans.” A truly progressive philanthropy, it continued, would require foundation boards to include “significant representation from the general public and nonprofit agencies, in particular, women and minorities.” Less funding should go to elitist cultural and academic institutions, more to smaller, politically aggressive grassroots groups that would carry the multicultural views of oppressed races, ethnic groups, and genders into national councils. This remained the goal of the Donee Group when it evolved into today’s National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy. As Rick Cohen noted at Hudson, “People of color; immigrants; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered people; and the urban and rural poor—perspectives from those constituencies infuse a great deal of our work.”

NCRP’s multiculturalism certainly supplies a political dimension otherwise missing from pragmatic, science-based establishment philanthropy. But would it amount to the “clarity of vision” or “coherence of theme” attributed to conservative philanthropy? Probably not. Todd Gitlin, Richard Rorty, Russell Jacoby, and other thoughtful commentators on the left have questioned the left’s current infatuation with multiculturalism precisely because it fails to provide a unified, coherent vision for progressive reform. Instead, it disperses and fragments reformist energies into a cacophony of mutually exclusive racial- and gender-based projects. Robert Bothwell, NCRP president emeritus, concurs, noting that “racial/ethnic minority rights, women’s rights, gay/lesbian rights, disabled rights—all have been promoted” at the expense of the “broad central vision” needed to sustain a coherent “social justice” philanthropy.

Establishment philanthropy seems baffled by the “vision thing” because it is beyond the purview of scientific pragmatism. Radical critics—appreciating full well the importance of vision—nonetheless offer one that is insufficiently focused or coherent.

How, by contrast, have conservatives managed to develop “clarity of vision” and “coherence of theme?” The statement of purposes issued by the conservative Bradley Foundation declares that it is “devoted to strengthening American democratic capitalism and the institutions, principles, and values that sustain and nurture it.” It is particularly interested in cultivating “a renewed, healthier, and more vigorous sense of citizenship among the American people” through “healthy families, churches, neighborhoods, voluntary associations, schools, and other value-generating ‘mediating structures.’”

This is not a list of humanity’s problems, with shining promises to get at their roots and solve them through social science work. Nor is it a stirring indictment of the injustices of our past, opening onto inspiring vistas of an egalitarian, multicultural future. It is, rather, a sober, modest pledge to remain true to the American constitutional system as it came to us from the Founders. Social science—driven experimentation, insofar as it transfers authority to manipulative, professional elites (here Bradley tends to echo NCRP), can only erode limited government and active citizenship. Consequently, Bradley does not embark on bold new social experiments, but rather spends much effort trying to undo the effects of prior bold new experiments inflicted on American society by foundation and government bureaucracies throughout much of the twentieth century. Bradley’s work on welfare reform, for instance, aimed to re-invigorate the welfare state’s seemingly passive, helpless clients, restoring them from dependence on governmental handouts to their

full status as self-governing citizens. Its education voucher program likewise intends to shift control over schooling away from the failed bureaucratic behemoths of public education back to parents, neighborhoods, and voluntary associations.

Bradley's version of conservative philanthropy also agrees with NCRP that smaller, civically active grassroots groups merit more support than they receive. But it has no particular affection for groups animated by radically egalitarian, multicultural understandings of justice dramatically at odds with the Framers' view. Rather, it supports groups that cultivate, within local civic institutions, the everyday, citizenly virtues of self-governance so essential to the nation's flourishing. More broadly, conservative philanthropy supports think tanks and university programs that challenge the radical egalitarianism and multiculturalism so fashionable among today's academic and intellectual elites, but so much at odds with America's original constitutional design.

The vision of conservative philanthropy strives to be the vision of the Founders. Establishment foundations tend to ignore that vision, radical foundations to despise it. A non-conservative foundation hoping to duplicate conservatism's success simply by adopting its philanthropic techniques overlooks one important explanation for that apparent effectiveness: When conservative foundations enter the field of public policy, they are not trying to make something happen that is at cross purposes with America's underlying political and institutional framework, but rather fully in accord with it. The Founders, in turn, built their framework on the basis of a realistic view of human nature. While they hoped to nurture humanity's virtues, their more modest and attainable goal was to minimize its vices. In short, beyond any particular technical trick of the grantmaking trade, the success of conservative philanthropy is to be explained by the fact that it works with, not against, the grain of our constitutional order. And that order likewise runs with, not against, the grain of human nature.

—William A. Schambra (William@hudsondc.org) is director of the Hudson Institute's Bradley Center on Philanthropy and Civic Renewal. Krista Shaffer, Center research assistant, contributed to the review.