

**The Impact of Individuals on Philanthropy in America**  
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I am indebted to Karl Popper for the passage from the Preface to the "Saint Joan" of George Bernard Shaw:

"There are no villains in the piece. Crime, like disease, is not interesting: .... it is what men do at their best, with good intentions, and what normal men and women find that they must and will do in spite of their intentions, that really concern us."

As Shaw points out, that is the stuff of tragedy as well as of achievement.

I find the history of American philanthropy best understood through the stories of the triumphs and failures of individual men and women. Such narratives capture both fact and interpretation; they contribute to the writing of what the historian William H. McNeil calls "mythistory."

The paradigm of American philanthropy reflects four interacting elements: vision; shared values; organization; and resources. These remarks reflect on the impact of individuals in shaping the American philanthropic tradition, but individuals do not work alone, wherever among the four elements they might be concentrated.

My emphasis here is on some of the best known figures in the history of American philanthropy: the industrialist Andrew Carnegie, for one, and Jane Addams, one of the founders of modern social work, for another. I will mention others and then will conclude with speculation about the modern mythistorical personality known as George Soros and his impact on the future of central and eastern Europe.

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A comment first about the background of American philanthropy, so often singled out because of its great scale and broad scope; it is a mosaic of cultural influences: many commentators have reminded us that the Pilgrims who arrived in America in

1620 owed their very survival to native American Indian charity and philanthropy; our civil rights movement is indebted to the genius of Mahatma Gandhi; the ancient Middle East gave us the philanthropic wisdom of Egyptians, Jews, Greeks, and Romans; Islam passed along to us the wisdom of classical civilization; basic teachings of the Buddha and Confucius blend with folk wisdom of the slave culture, the Golden Rule, and the efficiency of teaching someone to fish rather than giving him fish to eat. Carnegie was influenced by the British sociologist Herbert Spencer and Jane Addams sought out the counsel of the Russian Leo Tolstoy.

Some societies rely more heavily on voluntary action for the public good than do others, but philanthropy is everywhere. In recent years we have seen the link between voluntary association and the rise of democracy. The most-often-quoted observer of American life was a Frenchman, Alexis de Tocqueville, and it is in his Democracy in America that the distinctive role of voluntary associations in shaping American society and character was pointed out as long ago as 1830.

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Andrew Carnegie wrote an essay usually entitled "The Gospel of Wealth;" it has been called "the most famous document in the history of American philanthropy." The first part of that essay is a reflection on the distinctive character of American democratic capitalism; a political and economic system that Carnegie believed to be, despite its faults, the best model the world had yet developed. Carnegie's philanthropy was intended to empower ordinary men and women by making knowledge and ideas conveniently available to them. He is best remembered for providing the financial incentives to build almost two thousand free public libraries across the United States.

Philanthropy and democracy were also closely linked in the thought of Jane Addams. She and Carnegie were both convinced that ordinary working men and women had to be helped and encouraged to become citizens in the fullest sense. Hull House became a center for developing ideas about labor organization as well as about learning English.

Carnegie saw that it was necessary to challenge local communities to become responsible for their libraries: he granted them money to build the library building only if they committed the community to buy the books and pay the staff. He was not a religious man, at least in the organizational sense, but he understood as well as any sociologist the importance of religious congregations in building community and holding it together. Addams knew the importance of place and of continuity: Hull House gave both focus and permanence to her ideas. Both Carnegie and Addams understood the importance of working with others -- both capitalized on the interest of intellectuals and business leaders in adding credibility to their undertakings.

But Carnegie and Addams arrive late in the narrative of American philanthropy. Before independence one should look at the writings and religious activism of Cotton Mather, for example, whose Bonifacius: Essays on Doing-Good was widely read and influential for decades. Benjamin Franklin, another public teacher, was perhaps also America's first fund raiser, the first person to think systematically about raising money from the public for philanthropic and other purposes. Franklin's Autobiography and his even better known Poor Richard's Almanac reveal the deep interaction of self-interest and concern for others that permeates philanthropy in America -- and perhaps elsewhere.

The appearance of men of great wealth begins with Stephen Girard, who paved streets of Philadelphia, risked his life in the plague, founded a school for poor boys (and regrettably gave it a racial bias), and even provided financial support that enabled the United States to resist Great Britain in what we call the War of 1812. There isn't another like him until after the Civil War (1861-65). Before and during the Civil War the eminent figure of Dorothea Dix becomes one of the most respected voices of humanitarian assistance -- especially in behalf of the insane.

George Peabody made his fortune in England and then returned to the United States to become a famous philanthropist. Peabody was among the first to concern himself with the education of the American Negro. The Peabody Fund, established in 1867 and sometimes distinguished as the first American foundation, was

devoted to southern education. Peabody influenced John D. Rockefeller, Sr., and Julius Rosenwald, and other philanthropists grappling with the profound social problems following from the Civil War and the abolition of slavery.

John D. Rockefeller, Sr. was Andrew Carnegie's peer; perhaps his and Carnegie's are the two names most often associated with great wealth pursuing philanthropy on a large scale. Unlike Carnegie, Rockefeller Senior left a family legacy that now reaches into the fifth generation. Seldom if ever in American history has a single family shown greater philanthropic commitment. Unlike Carnegie, who was a philanthropic entrepreneur and innovator, Rockefeller and his son, John, Jr., made full use of advisers and consultants. They developed the idea of the foundation in its modern form: a large endowment invested so that the income could be used "in perpetuity" to serve general purposes: the well-being of mankind. The philanthropic values of a single individual guided by strong religious beliefs have become institutionalized not only in foundations but in the philanthropic giving of the corporations that generated his wealth and that of his descendants.

Jane Addams represents the other main stream of American philanthropy, that of voluntary service. A journalist, an editor and writer named Dorothy Day who was long the voice of the Catholic Worker, stands in the same tradition as Jane Addams and with an equally strong sense of the politics of philanthropy. Dorothy Day also believed in a personal commitment to live among the people she attempted to speak for. She practiced what she preached.

No single "charismatic" figure is more prominent in American history of the 20th century than the civil rights leader and martyr Martin Luther King, Jr. Starting from a black congregation King mobilized a broad spectrum of Christian and Jewish activists with secular reformers behind a Gandhian political strategy and achieved a profound and lasting change in American life and culture -- without violence.

Ralph Nader will not appear in most narratives of American philanthropy. His career is normally seen as political rather than philanthropic action. Yet he appealed to the same strong moral roots as American philanthropy in challenging

the abuses and side effects of the marketplace. He confronted the great and "powerful" corporations in the media and in the courts, and forced them, through pressure groups and political action, to change their methods of manufacture and to control their byproducts in behalf of consumers and citizens. Few individuals have had a more direct and extensive impact on American life in the twentieth century. By now, Nader's defeats are as extensive as his victories, but citizen action will never be the same as a result of his organizational genius and tireless persistence.

John Gardner rivals Nader in influence, working from within rather than from outside the political and economic system. He led efforts to reform politics, to bring new power and influence to marginal groups in the inner cities, and he and a man named Brian O'Connell founded the national organization called Independent Sector.

It would be well at this point to mention one of the leaders of modern American feminism, Gloria Steinem. Steinem became the symbol of the liberated, educated, modern woman, founded a popular and successful magazine and then created a philanthropic foundation with the profits.

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The conceptual idea of the United States as a "three-sector society" is owed to several people: John D. Rockefeller III is perhaps best credited with making possible the "Commission on Private Philanthropy and Public Needs," which studied American philanthropy more comprehensively and thoroughly than ever before. The Commission has become known as the Filer Commission, reflecting its chairman, John H. Filer, a well-known and highly-respected business leader personally committed to the idea of "corporate public involvement."

Marian Wright Edelman, the last in this personal and quite arbitrary series, is in the tradition of Jane Addams. She is an unusually eloquent voice in behalf of the well-being of children. She is effective as visionary, advocate, organizer, and fund raiser

-- that is, she has become the model of the modern multidimensional American philanthropist.

A fuller narrative of American philanthropy will also show personalities whose vision died with them; others whose vision was partial or flawed; still others who used philanthropy for narrow personal gain, even some whose uninteresting criminal ends Shaw and I have chosen to ignore.

Vision, shared values, organization, and resources, used hopefully for the public good rather than for factional purposes, often express themselves in the personality and work of individuals. Many of the men and women whose biographies parallel the development of the American philanthropic tradition are lost from sight and memory; others such as those I have mentioned serve as surrogates for a vast "benevolent empire" of good works.

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Where will George Soros find his place in this narrative? It is perhaps revealing that I feel free to speak of the man in his presence, especially after one of America's best-known magazines has caricatured him for a readership of hundreds of thousands. What outside observers like myself or other journalists and scholars might say about George Soros and his work is likely to be caricature, overdrawn whether in flattery, insult, or simple description. Such has been the fate of Andrew Carnegie; such will be the fate of George Soros.

I don't know George Soros personally, having met him only once at a small breakfast meeting at the United Nations several years ago. I have no comments to make about him as a person. This is offered as a preliminary conclusion from someone who, by virtue of age and sources of support, has nothing personal to gain from his philanthropy, and can claim at least that much objectivity.

I will also caution Mr. Soros to bear in mind the famous advice of Solon to Croesus: "Mark well the end." Or that of the baseball player Yogi Berra (better known to Americans than Herodotus): "It ain't over until it's over."  
My conclusion is that George Soros belongs on the list of people who have left their personal stamp on the American philanthropic tradition.

I know of no other single individual in the philanthropic tradition who set out to influence the development of democracy and civil society on such a large scale. Along with many of my peers I find the boldness of that undertaking breathtaking. The vision of "open society," drawn from the work of Soros' mentor Karl Popper, equals the best and most expansive thought of Andrew Carnegie, whom Soros perhaps most closely resembles as a philanthropic innovator and entrepreneur.

Soros and Carnegie and Addams are close in their understanding and commitment to democracy, and none of them fits easily into an ideological box. All three are pragmatic in their approach to social reality: they want to get things done, they find "truth" in the results of their efforts.

Carnegie brought wide ranges of social opinion to his ideas, despite the fact that some of his ideas and methods were offensive to other philanthropic leaders. Addams did likewise, although she chose at times to force herself into an extreme position because that seemed to her what was called for. She was always willing to risk her personal reputation for her cause.

For the most part, Carnegie and Addams became voices for a larger and more widely held view of philanthropy. It is not clear that George Soros has yet been able to bring enough American philanthropic resources with him into the struggle for open society in central and eastern Europe. There are even disturbing reports that he will diminish his commitment in order to pursue an American agenda, turning away from central and eastern Europe as some other foundations have chosen to do.

It would be a great loss to the history of philanthropy if the work of the Soros foundations faltered at this stage. It would also be a great loss to the scholarship of philanthropy if the work of George Soros and his foundations is not observed and recorded, criticized and evaluated, while it is still vigorous and not yet fossilized in bureaucracy. For now, they appear to be at the center of the action.

The "Soros foundations" have become the target of official attacks as well as personal slander aimed not only at Soros but at his colleagues and associates. Most of us take those attacks to be a clear sign of the success of the Soros strategy, indications that the opponents of civil society and democracy are most vulnerable to thought and action at the level of neighborhood, village, town, and city.

The critics of Soros include, of course, some of those academic intellectuals who have benefited most directly from his investment in the Central European University. Some of the comments I have heard faintly echo the sarcasm of Thorstein Veblen's brilliant book, The Higher Learning in America. Veblen attacked the allegedly insidious influence of John D. Rockefeller, founder of the University of Chicago where Veblen had managed to find employment. A distinguished historian at Columbia University once commented that it is in the nature of the academic to bite the hand that feeds it.

No philanthropist who makes major financial commitments to advance political and social ideals and values will escape criticism. Achievements will be hard to measure and every misstep is likely to be reported in exaggerated terms. There is an interesting bias against wealth in the United States, an obligation to scorn the wealthy patron to prove one's own integrity. George Soros is likely to be accused as the source of "tainted money" that could compromise the purity of scholarship.

The test of George Soros will be the toughness of his own commitment to the ideas he has urged upon the people of central and eastern Europe. Many of us who share his ideas now share his commitment and hope that all of us will stay the course. If there is anything that liberals and conservatives in the United States

might share, it is hope for the future of civil society, democracy, and philanthropy in this part of the world.