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## Book Review: In Defence of Philanthropy

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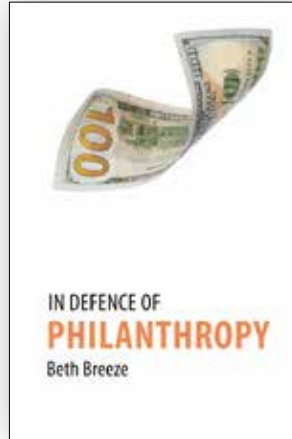
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# In Defence of Philanthropy

Book Review by Nabih Haddad, Ph.D., Harvard University

The role of private philanthropy is interlinked with larger questions regarding wealth inequality, asymmetrical power distribution, and the role of privatization in policy construction (Bernstein, 2014; Callahan, 2017; Giridharadas, 2018; Hess & Henig, 2015; Lester & Reckhow, 2013; Powell & Bromley, 2020; Reich, 2018; Tompkins-Stange, 2016; Villanueva, 2018). That said, even today, many philanthropists are met with much gratitude and praise for their generosity. Others, however, have suggested that philanthropy is a plutocratic exercise that shapes social agendas while simultaneously absolving philanthropists from misdeeds and shortcomings beyond the purview of financial distribution (Reich, 2018). In short, as philanthropy becomes bolder, its support and criticism swell in tandem. More importantly, philanthropists' motivations have become of interest among popular outlets, accompanied by books focused on the motives and goals of private giving (Callahan, 2017; Giridharadas, 2018). Of course, many people in the field of philanthropy fall in between, with some seeing the value of philanthropy while delimiting its overall effectiveness (Anheier & Hammack, 2010; Brest & Harvey, 2018; Hess & Henig, 2015; Moody & Breeze, 2016; Powell & Bromley, 2020). These two positions reveal broader implications about the roles of private philanthropy in civil society as sponsors for seeding new social justice initiatives and as influential entities that should be scrutinized — all of which are consolidated in the focus of Beth Breeze's *In Defence of Philanthropy*.

To be sure, philanthropy has long been a site for criticism — it is seen as a practice of plutocratic




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*In Defence of Philanthropy*

Beth Breeze

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influence, as ineffective in promoting actual social change, and as doing more harm than good. All are arguments that many scholars, thought leaders, journalists, and varying stakeholders make today, as outlined

by Breeze. In many ways, these debates have shifted over the years with the rising focus on deep inequality, with many questioning the influence of private wealth in public affairs while offering models that decentralize the field and that implement a social justice frame to philanthropic engagement. Do we celebrate and defend private donors and their foundations and the organizations, programs, and initiatives that rely on their investments? Or, in contrast, do we question why such surpluses exist and the asymmetrical role private donors and their entities exert in a democratic society? Breeze is a scholar and practitioner of philanthropy whose career in fundraising and work as the director of the Centre for Philanthropy at the University of Kent spans decades. As such, she understands philanthropy as a solicitor and as a scholar who knows well the debates within the field. In *In Defence of Philanthropy*, she gauges the argumentative tenor of philanthropy, offers readers salient points in these debates, and makes clear her take on the issues.

As the title suggests, Breeze defends philanthropy, writing this book to respond to growing criticisms that, she argues, might scare donors from future giving — an act that many sorely require still. For Breeze, “Generalized attacks

on philanthropy, and the insistence that donors should be critique[d] and never cheered, undermine these drivers of philanthropic giving” (p. 9). Accordingly, Breeze’s thrust is that “hyper-criticism of philanthropy underestimates the complexity of its target and carries the significant risk of curtailing the philanthropic impulse” (p. 3). In this way, the book reads as both an analysis of philanthropy and, more importantly, a primer on the critics of philanthropy. Breeze argues that “What is needed is a more nuanced understanding of what philanthropy is, what role it plays in contemporary society and why it is therefore worth defending and even — not always, but more often than detractors would allow — worth celebrating” (p. 3). She cites the works of popular writers and scholars such as Anand Giridharadas’ *Winners Take All: The Elite Charade of Changing the World* (2018), Rob Reich’s *Just Giving: Why Philanthropy is Failing Democracy and How it Can do Better* (2018), David Callahan’s *The Givers: Wealth, Power, and Philanthropy in a New Gilded Age* (2017), to name a few.

Irrespective of where readers might stand on the issue, *In Defence of Philanthropy*, provides a welcomed addition to the scholarly discussion around philanthropy in society. Breeze’s analysis examines philanthropy in the U.K. and the United States, which she acknowledges are uniquely different. Moreover, she recognizes unique differences among the criticisms, placing them into three broad categories: academic, insider, and populist critiques. The academic critique explores the *how* of philanthropy, from broad theoretical questions about its structure, its relationship with a democratic society, and its role in the agenda-setting process. The critique of the *insiders* hinges on the strategies philanthropic organizations and donors take, including giving in a better way and to the right causes. Lastly, as the name suggests, the *populist* critique centers on the motives of philanthropy, scrutinizing philanthropic investors’ rationales and goals, which often are acts in which one hand washes the other of malevolent motives. Breeze deftly addresses each criticism in turn, divvying up the critical largesse of the book across each aspect by laying out the criticism, following with

a rebuttal (based on a mixture of her research, personal anecdotes, examples, and analysis), and providing a defense of each critique.

The focus on the academic uses theoretical and analytical perspectives, addressing questions of democratic accountability for those powerful entities making decisions and, with little accountability, using their tax-advantaged status as an exercise of power (Reich, 2018). For the academic aspect, Breeze identifies scholarship (such as those mentioned above, among others) that challenges philanthropy but also explores the potential and value of private philanthropy in civil society from philosophical and sociological perspectives. As Breeze explains, these criticisms assert that “philanthropy is *not* democratic, *not* concerned about power dynamics and not focused on equality” (p. 55). As such, academic critics tend to identify philanthropy as using its tax-advantaged position to shape political and organizational dynamics, complicating the role of philanthropy in a democratic society, including its function and form. For Breeze, this negative trade-off bypasses their positive contributions to the nonprofit sector.

Breeze’s take on insiders comes from her work in the philanthropic sector; specifically, those at nonprofits, grant making entities, advising donors, and others, who push back on how gifts and broader decisions are made. She aligns those criticisms with notions of scientific philanthropy, strategic philanthropy, philanthrocapitalism, and effective altruism, tackling each concept in turn. Regarding insiders, Breeze highlights how this group should apply more rigor in its analysis of philanthropic investments to ensure that the greatest needs are addressed with the greatest impact. This group tends to privilege quantitative data, evaluation, and analysis in philanthropic grantmaking. She notes that collectively, “Judging all philanthropic decisions on a lives-saved-per-dollar basis fails to appreciate that, among other things, the philanthropy space is where we practice empathy, demonstrate solidarity, and the share the kind of society we want to live in” (p. 97). For Breeze, failing to nuance can lead to a reductionist view of how and why individuals give.

The last set of criticism comes from the populists, a camp spanning the ideological spectrum, who take an extremely critical view regarding donors' motives. The populist critique, as Breeze describes, promotes an us versus them dynamic. According to Breeze, "This results in the 'othering' of rich elites, whose giving is assumed to be qualitatively different to giving by non-elites, and also results in holding philanthropists more culpable for problematic social and economic structures than the non-philanthropic rich ..." (p. 108). Breeze engages with the works of Giridharadas (2018), whose popular book makes claims that philanthropy is an "elite charade," which Breeze argues assumes that the philanthropic enterprise is nothing more than "a faux virtue, a shame act, an illusion and a con that needs calling out" (p. 112). She points to philanthropists and organizations like Pierre Omidyar, founder of eBay, the Ford Foundation, and the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, who have collectively funded initiatives in the socio-political system. For Breeze, these growing criticisms will impact philanthropic activity in the long run.

That said, she highlights some criticism she believes further merit discussion, offering suggestions for philanthropy to address some of the criticism. Indeed, she does state that philanthropy can be more transparent, which is a salient point that emerged in the critical scholarship she reviewed as well as in the criticism of the populists. We do see trends of scholars who are exploring philanthropy that does promote transparency in the sector, focusing on their policy activities in education. In particular, according to Breeze, philanthropy comes in a huge variety of forms, of which policy-oriented philanthropy is only one — arguably niche — among many interests. This is a point highlighted in the growing scholarship in K-12 and higher education. This area of research disentangles policy-oriented philanthropy from more traditional forms using archival data — 990 tax forms — which demonstrated that philanthropic foundations, such as Gates, Lumina, Broad, and Walton, have been increasingly affecting the shaping of policy agendas in both K-12 and higher education. Specifically, K-12 foundations

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like Gates and Broad have been increasingly targeting federal and state policy efforts and funding more advocacy groups aligning with their education-focused agendas, which are connected to teacher accountability initiatives and charter school movements (Mehta & Teles, 2011; Reckhow & Tompkins-Stange, 2018; Lester & Reckhow, 2013). Likewise, philanthropic foundations have been influential in amplifying the need for student success reform and performance-based funding models in higher education (Haddad, 2021; Haddad, N. & Reckhow, 2018). Indeed, this area of research demonstrates the networked form of policy activity in educational spaces, proposals that some in the fields support and push back against (Parry et al., 2013). (However, it must be noted, that Breeze asserts that "The role that money plays in politics and the subsequent outsized influence of the rich on wider society is another key example of American exceptionalism" [p. 154].)

Regardless of where readers stand on the issues, Breeze engages deeply with each criticism and lays out her views of their shortcomings and value. Indeed, *In Defence of Philanthropy* provides a nice overview of the literature for researchers, faculty, and students who want to explore both the growing criticisms and the defense of philanthropy, regardless of where they stand. Breeze details several ways the philanthropic sector can address the criticisms and make improvements, such as more ethical philanthropy, including drawing on social justice, racial justice, and environmental justice notions in granting

portfolios, examining and paying attention to power dynamics, expanding transparency and collaborations, being more effective in giving by leveraging expertise, using evaluations, representation on giving, more trust-based philanthropy, and unrestricted philanthropic funding, to name a few. In many ways, her suggestions jibe well with many of the critics.

Breeze's *In Defence of Philanthropy* is a welcomed addition to the growing scholarly works around the role of philanthropy in society. The role of private wealth in a democratic society has become a reoccurring topic in academia and in popular media, with both supporters and critics outlining the value. Many suggest we are entering a new gilded age. Books such as Edgar Villanueva's *Decolonizing Wealth: Indigenous Wisdom to Heal Divides and Restore Balance* (2018) levy important, valid criticisms of philanthropic intervention in civil society. As such, *In Defence of Philanthropy* provides a nuanced view that engages with the criticisms and offers rebuttals that flow along the trajectory of a more perfect approach to philanthropic endeavors. Although many scholars and journalists acknowledge that philanthropists have provided much-needed support to society, from libraries, school systems, university offerings, and medical research, they also have immense power to shape the public policy terrain. A widely cited example is Carnegie's 1905 support for the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, which provided a mechanism for faculty members to have pensions and life insurance. This legacy is still with us today. Indeed, philanthropy is associated with one of the larger debates on wealth inequality and private power (Bernstein, 2014). As Breeze highlights, "Philanthropists are often caught in the crossfire of these wider debates, which results in the curious situation where big donations spark a debate about the merits of capitalism whereas buying a private jet or super-yacht does not" (p. 136).

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