American philanthropic foundations and the Weimar Republic. First hesitant steps toward a global civil society?

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The Great War was the last stage of a longer process that brought American philanthropic foundations, in particular “general purposes foundations,”¹ to play a central role in the political, cultural and socio-economic life of the United States. They became one of the backbones of what one scholar has characteristically called the “institutional matrix” at the roots of the “American century.”²

At the turn of the 20th century, the American cultural economic and technological expansion has been guided by an ideology of “liberal-developmentalism,” that is, the belief that unrestricted trade and investment, free enterprise, and free flow of cultural exchange would promote everywhere in the world the development experienced by the United States.³ The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and the Rockefeller Foundation were – during the interwar years – the only American foundations with an explicitly international orientation. Furthermore, both were committed – directly the Carnegie Endowment and more indirectly the Rockefeller Foundation – to the promotion of international peace. If the Carnegie Endowment was characterized by an – elitist, legalistic and conservative – effort to create an international community of scholars and an “international mind,”⁴ the Rockefeller Foundation’s strategy was based on a characteristic American belief that the three pillars of American development – economic liberalism, political pluralism, and scientific empirism – were the conditio sine qua non of a democratic and peaceful world’s evolution. The Weimar Republic was, quite obviously, at the center of these efforts, and became probably unintentionally the testing ground of the American foundations’ approaches. Retrospectively, it is fair to say that something went wrong. But what did go wrong? And to what degree things did really go wrong?

The paper aims to shed light on the American foundations’ strategies and efforts to promote peace in Europe, and to analyze how these strategies were received, used and misused, and modified according different aims by German scholars and politicians in the complex cultural as well as political Weimar arena.⁵ The Weimar Republic was a period rich of

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cultural and artistic vitality as it was torn between deep delusions and brief explosions of hope, and in its brief existence exemplified the paradoxes of modernism.

The failure of Weimar, and particularly of the first German parliamentary democracy, has been the leading question for generations of scholars and the starting point in reflections over a peculiar “German path” (the Sonderweg paradigm) that, even though largely dismissed today, have influenced the scholarly approaches to German history and culture. Recently, Weimar became the testing ground for the legitimacy of a direct, according to Putnam’s thesis, relationship between civil society and democracy. Berman, by stressing Hitler’s take over notwithstanding the vitality of Weimar’s civil society, has argued the neutrality of civil society and its depending on the surrounding institutional framework.

This approach resounds Hegel’s warning about the disruptive potentials of civil society when not protected and guided by the state, which mediates, therefore, between particular interests and universal will (in modern terms, the common good). In short, the state ensures that civil society remains civil. Similarly, Tocqueville has stressed – in an argument later central to the mid-twentieth century analysis of mass-society – the crucial role of associational life in containing the individualistic forces released by democracy that risk to pull society apart. One of the most influential analyses of the Weimar failure has stresses the collapse of the party system as a consequence of the emergence of “interest politics” and the collapse of the bourgeois liberal parties under the pressure of the particular social and economic interests of the different constituencies.

By relying extensively on primary sources (both archival materials and contemporary writings), the paper argues that the grants of American foundations had, when they were not use to support the particular recipients’ agendas, an effect on individual scholars and intellectual (and on their relationship to the United States) rather than on Weimar’s (civil) society as a whole (on the contrary, it might be possible to argue that these grants contributed, or at least did not lowered, the internal contrasts of Weimar society).

Bibliography


