CIVIL SOCIETY AND DEMOCRACY

Session Title

The Relationship between Civil Society & Democracy

Abstract

The historians and political theorist in this panel explore the relationship between civil society and democracy both past and present, and throughout the globe. Focusing on voluntary societies and civil society in eighteenth-century Ireland, for example, Karen Sonnelitter argues that improvement was a concern of the state as well as private individuals and voluntary societies. She claims that, together, these movements aspired to purge Ireland of what they saw as destabilizing factors that weakened the nation. Philanthropists and Improvers reflected Enlightenment era optimism about the perfectibility of society and saw themselves as serving both the welfare of society and interests and aspirations of the nation. Examining how U.S. philanthropic foundations conceptualized and endeavored to promote Soviet democratization from 1986 to 1991, Kate Geoghegan traces the expansion and transformation of U.S. foundation activity in the USSR by comparing the efforts of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), George Soros, and the Carnegie Corporation of New York (CCNY). Elizabeth Harmon studies the beginning of the separations between the for-profit, nonprofit, and government sectors and how the form and function of American corporations have defied them. By combining the histories of nonprofit and for-profit corporate policy in this period, she sheds new light on the shifting relations between private profit and public good in American corporate policy. Writing on the justifiability of intergenerational transfers, Theodore Lechterman concludes that while taking the interest in generational sovereignty seriously does not require the abolition of charitable bequests and trusts, it does tell in favor of tighter regulations than most legal systems currently recognize.

Participants

Maribel Morey, moreym@clemson.edu; Clemson University (Session Organizer)


Title (Panel Paper)


Author
Abstract

Beginning in 1986, Mikhail Gorbachev’s liberalizing reforms rendered the formerly “closed,” centralized Soviet Union more accessible, pluralistic, and unstable. For U.S. foundations, these developments created unprecedented dangers and opportunities. On the one hand, the new Soviet openness seemed to offer an unparalleled chance to foster the growth of an emergent Soviet civil society and promote the USSR’s democratic evolution. However, rising centrifugal nationalism and political instability demanded new models for understanding the Soviet state-society relations and raised the specter of the violent disintegration of the multi-ethnic, nuclear empire.

This paper examines how U.S. philanthropic foundations conceptualized and endeavored to promote Soviet democratization from 1986 to 1991. It traces the expansion and transformation of U.S. foundation activity in the USSR by comparing the efforts of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), George Soros, and the Carnegie Corporation of New York (CCNY). It contends that Gorbachev’s reforms shifted the attention of U.S. foundations from improving the bilateral U.S.-Soviet relationship to promoting the USSR’s internal evolution into a more democratic state. However, it shows that U.S. foundations defined this objective differently and placed competing pressures on U.S. policymakers.

The neo-conservative NED viewed the collapse of communist rule and the imperial Soviet state as essential prerequisites for democratization. Drawing upon émigré networks, it funneled aid to anti-communist, nationalist, opposition groups, pressured the Bush administration to support Baltic and Ukrainian independence and lobbied against economic aid that might perpetuate the bankrupt Soviet system.

By contrast, the Carnegie Corporation-funded network and George Soros embraced the notion that gradual reform was possible within the parameters of the Soviet system. Soros viewed Gorbachev as committed to creating an “open society” and collaborated with the Soviet regime to establish a Moscow foundation funding the growth of civil society. Soros and key CCNY grantees also urged the Bush administration to provide economic aid to the USSR to encourage Gorbachev to pursue market-oriented reform and ameliorate the social suffering that those reforms were likely to incur. Large-scale aid, they argued, was essential to preserve popular support for market and democratic reform and to prevent unrest that could provoke the violent, destabilizing collapse of the USSR.

The efforts of the CCNY network, Soros, and the NED had significant, but mixed results. The Carnegie network played a key role in securing U.S. aid for Soviet defense conversion and helped avert the danger of nuclear proliferation. However, the efforts of Soros and the NED to promote Soviet democratization by bolstering an increasingly radical “third sector” had a destabilizing impact. The flow of U.S. aid to Soviet independent organizations, particularly from the NED to democratic opposition and national independence groups, bolstered Soviet conservative claims that the United States was trying to provoke the collapse of the USSR and helped discredit democracy as a subversive weapon of U.S. power. Moreover, it undermined and contradicted the official Bush policy of support for Gorbachev, creating a tension in the U.S. approach that would become entrenched.

Individual Submission

Panel Paper

Giving and Time
Giving and Time

Author
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Abstract
Intergenerational transfers are a core feature of the practice of philanthropy. A substantial portion of the resources committed to charitable causes come from gifts at death and gifts that continue to pay out after death. Indeed, the power of the foundation, as we know it today, can be attributed in no small part to the instrument of the charitable trust. (The trust splits ownership among multiple parties and extends the life of an enterprise beyond the mortal existence of its initiating agents.) Yet whether and in what way intergenerational philanthropy can be justified is philosophically controversial. Many have thought, for instance, that a right to make post-mortem demands only makes sense in the context of dubious metaphysical views about the interests of dead persons. Leading contemporary perspectives have seemingly found ways to sidestep this problem. Represented in sophisticated form by Cordelli and Reich (forthcoming), such views argue that intergenerational philanthropy is to be justified according to its consistency with the demands of distributive justice. Societies ought to recognize intergenerational charitable transfers because such transfers facilitate justice in certain important ways, namely in savings between generations. In this paper I argue that the distributivist paradigm ignores an important dimension of the political morality of these practices. Although intergenerational charitable transfers do involve saving resources for future generations, they also restrict the liberty of future generations to dispose of property as they will. Respecting the intentions of the past conflicts with the present generation’s ability to control their common affairs. What is troubling about the dead hand of the past, I contend, is its interference with the future generation’s sovereignty over its common affairs. Moreover, the identification of an independent interest in generational sovereignty sets this view apart from other critical perspectives, such as Simes (1955) and Madoff (2011). The paper concludes that while taking the interest in generational sovereignty seriously does not require the abolition of charitable bequests and trusts, it does tell in favor of tighter regulations than most legal systems currently recognize.

Individual Submission
Panel Paper
Philanthropy and Improvement: Voluntary Societies and Civil Society in Eighteenth-Century Ireland

Title (Panel Paper)
Philanthropy and Improvement: Voluntary Societies and Civil Society in Eighteenth-Century Ireland

Author
Abstract

In January of 1715 the Archbishop of Dublin, William King wrote to a colleague expressing his concern that since the Reformation had led to the sale of “all houses for the care of the poor” thousands in the city were now exposed annually to the threat of starvation. King was in his politics and theology no friend to the Catholic Church, but he acknowledged that in many ways the loss of these traditional modes of relief posed a problem. He estimated that at the time approximately 1/3 of the population of Dublin was in need. Archbishop King was not alone amongst Irish Protestants in recognizing that the country faced a potentially serious threat from the growing problem of poverty. King’s concern encapsulates rather nicely some questions which this paper seeks to address. How were social problems such as poverty addressed in the Post-Reformation era? What sorts of institutions and individuals step in to fill the void left by the collapse of more traditional modes of poor relief?

The philanthropic impulse to engage in charitable work and to encourage economic “improvement” was sharpened in eighteenth century Ireland as Irish Protestants became increasingly aware of the threat that social problems, such as poverty, disease, and criminality, posed to their rule. One response to this threat was the establishment of a number of voluntary societies which sought to address the problems plaguing Ireland. This paper examines the origins and impulses which led to the founding of voluntary charitable societies that were designed to address these issues. The corporatization and institutionalization of philanthropy that occurred in this period resulted in many profound changes in the way charity work was carried out. This paper demonstrates how these eighteenth-century movements differed from earlier efforts in organization, methods and aims. It illustrates the connection between religiously motivated charities, Enlightenment inspired scientific societies, the Irish government, and the role they played in the development of civil society. The eighteenth-century Irish state took an unusually active stance in supporting and funding charities and reform organizations that were designed to improve the nation and its people. The eighteenth-century culture of improvement was to an extraordinary extent made possible by government funding. This paper argues that improvement was a concern of the state as well as private individuals and voluntary societies. It claims that, together, these movements aspired to purge Ireland of what they saw as destabilizing factors that weakened the nation. Philanthropists and Improvers reflected Enlightenment era optimism about the perfectibility of society and saw themselves as serving both the welfare of society and interests and aspirations of the nation.

Individual Submission

"A New Species of Corporation": What the Rise of Philanthropic Foundations Can Tell us about the Development of American Corporate Policy

Title (Panel Paper)

"A New Species of Corporation": What the Rise of Philanthropic Foundations Can Tell us about the Development of American Corporate Policy

Author

Elizabeth Harmon, Harmone@umich.edu; University of Michigan (Presenter)
Abstract

Since the colonial period, the first American corporations operated with a legal mandate to produce a benefit to society. Corporations were often organized for benevolent purposes or for public works. Missionary societies and bridge-building companies fell into these categories, and universities were even harder to classify.

Despite this precedent for combining private profit and public good in the corporate form, since the mid-twentieth century, the design of corporate entities has become increasingly singular. We have been organizing economic and social welfare activity into three sectors: for-profit companies, nonprofit organizations, and government. We have divvied up the way we think we should address social problems by giving each sector its own share. What has changed more recently is simply that we have started believing that we can disassociate private profit and the public good across sectors.

In order to analyze the origins of these sectors and how the form and function of American corporations have defied them, my paper examines the beginning of these separations. It explores the controversial emergence of philanthropic foundations in the early twentieth century in relation to larger national debates about American corporate policy. By combining the histories of nonprofit and for-profit corporate policy in this period, this paper will shed new light on the shifting relationship between private profit and public good in American corporate policy.

Large-scale for-profit and nonprofit corporations emerged in late nineteenth century, and they changed the way that Americans thought about how wealth should be deployed to address social problems. In the first decades of the twentieth century, foundation leaders observed the creation of “a new species of corporation.”1 By 1911 Sage Foundation Director Leonard Ayres described what we now call philanthropic foundations as “national benefactions that [were] in a class by themselves.”2 He distinguished them by four criteria: they had endowments greater than one million dollars; they were nonsectarian; they were national or global; and their charters permitted the organizations to adapt their missions over time.

While early leaders in American philanthropy trumpeted the novelty of the foundation model, foundations did not emerge as a “new corporate form” with all of the privileges Ayres enumerated. Permitting foundations to operate in perpetuity, with massive endowments, and with self-perpetuating board structures was quite controversial, in fact. As foundations sought state and federal charters, government officials alternately increased and decreased the corporate privileges allotted to foundations. This paper will show how, during this process, larger debates about corporate policy included in the Standard Oil antitrust case, debates about the federal income tax, and the concept of shareholder primacy, all influenced and were influenced by the emergence of the nation’s first foundations.