Next Generation Philanthropy Scholars
Rockefeller Archive Center
October 16-18, 2014

Session I -- Common Concerns, Common Questions

In welcoming the group, James Allen Smith, the vice president of the Rockefeller Archive Center, explained that while the Archive Center has often brought scholars together who share interests in specific fields of foundation activity such as agriculture, public health or the arts, this meeting is different. It aims to assemble a group with common interests in foundations and philanthropic organizations as institutions. The RAC has brought together researchers who have a common interest in philanthropic practices and the roles these institutions have played in the U.S. and around the world.

Since 2008 when the RAC became an independent operating foundation, the Archive Center has added a more explicit research function, worked to build a sense of intellectual community among its researchers, taken on research projects for foundations, and played a more active role in linking scholars to foundation practitioners. To do all this, it has built a new staff, mostly post-doctoral fellows. At the five-year mark, we are now bringing this group of scholars together to ask how we might strengthen scholarship about philanthropy, whether there are steps we might take to increase public understanding of philanthropy, and whether there is interest in continuing to build mechanisms to link scholars and practitioners. Ben Soskis and Maribel Morey have been invaluable in helping us to shape an agenda for the meeting.

The conference participants and RAC research staff then introduced themselves and described their research interests, often focusing on what had first drawn them to undertake research at the RAC. Although primarily trained as historians, some are social scientists or have expertise in disciplines other than history. The discussion also focused on the meeting agenda as participants raised issues that they hoped we would be discussing over the ensuing two days.

Among the issues raised, several participants expressed concern about the lack of support for philanthropic research in their universities and the academy more generally. They hoped that we would discuss the research infrastructure both within the academy and outside it. Most were eager to see this gathering as the first step toward creating a new scholarly network. As the diverse research projects were described, individual participants also began to see common research themes emerging: the ways in which foundations serve as generators of policy ideas, their work in supporting policy advocacy; their many field-building activities, and their tactics in injecting new ideas in fields such as international relations and human rights.

Several members of the gathering talked about the history of the philanthropic research infrastructure that began to be built in the 1970s and 1980s and its current fragility. All of the participants offered insights into the value of foundation and nonprofit records, whether it was revelations from studying funding patterns, from the interactions between foundation officers and individual grantees, or from insights into the work of particular NGO's. Several also dwelled on the importance of institutional memory and the importance of reminding current staff members in foundations and civil society organizations of what has been tried in the past, what has succeeded or failed.

Session II: Present History

The second session explored the role of history and historians in addressing contemporary philanthropic and civil society issues. What are the potential challenges, risks, and benefits of our efforts?

History typically uses qualitative rather than quantitative instruments to measure impact; this can prove valuable to foundation practitioners. But the way historians practice history is not always in sync with practitioners' methods and approaches.

The RAC is unique in carrying out several initiatives to bridge this gap, notably working with donor institutions on history projects like the Rockefeller Foundation centennial website. The moderator stated his own interest in creating a web publication where historians could weigh in on issues of contemporary philanthropy – conversations which are usually dominated by the language of business management and not history.

One participant concurred, expressing his unease with applying market language to philanthropy, positing that philanthropy succeeds best precisely because the marketplace fails. Others pointed out that social science concepts could prove useful. They reinforced the value of putting scholars and practitioners together in the same room. This led James Smith to outline the work the RAC has done to bring together scholars and practitioners in its work with the Rockefeller and Ford foundations.

Participants from the RAC then described one of the most notable projects the Archive Center has carried out: a conference on the history and current practice of scholar rescue. A week-long conference brought together historians of rescue initiatives (refugee scholars from fascist Europe in the 1930s and 1940s, scholars from Eastern Europe during the Cold War, and Latin American scholars in the 1960s and 1970s), with leaders of U.S. and British rescue organizations as well as scholars recently rescued from Iraq, Syria, Burma and elsewhere. The discussions allowed practitioners to assess the changing contexts in which they were working, to ponder the tools they had used to save scholars, and to consider new strategies. After listening to the story of one recently rescued scholar, a historian remarked, "I'm hearing the people I write about come to life." Last fall the Institute of International Education and the RAC released a summary report that offers nine recommendations for improving contemporary rescue work.

Several participants turned the discussion to the definition of philanthropy. Such a definition should include more than the thirty largest foundations, and foundations of all political leanings. One participant reminded everyone to "be humble" as to what scholars can contribute. The participants asked whether and how history can make practical recommendations, and whether it can be something akin to a policy science. One participant brought up problematizing the question of success and failure. The audience for the research makes all the difference: one participant, who was asked to speak at the Gates Foundation, had difficulty explaining to practitioners what worked and what didn't. Historians tend to problematize, not evaluate in stark terms of success and failure. Time is also a hurdle: historians talk about the *longue durée*, but practitioners would like to solve problems more quickly and tend to view things in the short term.

The timing of scholarly publications is also a factor in reaching an audience beyond the academy. One participant proposed the middle ground of an informal web publication which would address the public while "the scholarly stew is still cooking." Another encouraged historicizing current challenges, such as the Ebola outbreak. One participant, who frequently works with NGO's, pointed out that those organizations are best able to mobilize people when there is an imminent crisis to address. When historians propose a turn to history, the response is often "we don't have time."

Turning back to the multiplicity of publics and interests, a few participants posed questions about which public the group seeks to address. To define the audience for philanthropic scholarship, James Smith presented the RAC itself as a model: it interacts first with the four hundred scholars who conduct research here each year. Next, it works with donor institutions, cultivating relationship with staff, boards, and sometimes grantees. Jack Meyers, president of the Archive Center, underscored that a lot of the audience does not visit the RAC but is reached by its website or by reading the publications that emerge from research at the Archive Center. Furthermore, parts of the practitioner audience are not always receptive to problematized responses from scholars. However, some big donor foundations are becoming more interested in this approach, as evidenced by RAC Postdoctoral fellow Laura Miller's recent talk to the Rockefeller Foundation staff on Lincoln Center, Jane Jacobs and debates about urban planning and design.

The session ended with a discussion of a proposed blog where historians and humanists could participate in conversations about contemporary philanthropy. The participants that presented this idea described the web products as 1500-word pieces for a general audience, written by the community of scholars. Other disciplines have such blogs (legal history, early American historians, political science, and so on). Most conference participants seemed receptive, even though web publishing has its own hurdles. For example, one cannot assume people will come to read because they think the topic is important. One participant encouraged the group to think about early-career foundation staff members as an audience as well. With a strong network of scholars to contribute, the site could produce timely articles on current events, drawing scholars, practitioners, and a wider audience.

Session III: Boundaries

This session explored diverse conceptions of boundaries. At the material level, scholarly structures such as the RAC's grants-in-aid favor the understanding of certain philanthropies and organizations over others. Research is also bounded by access to records. Disciplinary boundaries are frequently crossed in philanthropic archives, as the historian of philanthropy encounters developments in other fields such as international economics and international politics. Foundations themselves have changing boundaries of action. A transnational perspective redraws the boundaries of what we consider to be American philanthropy. Finally, one participant pointed out that the philanthropic institutions have regulatory constraints and charters which define their capacity for political engagement and advocacy.

Turning to disciplinary boundaries, participants agreed that within a university setting it is difficult to venture beyond the department. One participant explained that scholars are encouraged to be interdisciplinary but cannot get tenure unless they publish in their own discipline.

The boundaries between sectors came up several times in the discussion. One participant listed bounded economies (cultural economy, health economy, education economy) in which foundations work. Today, it seems that boundaries between the third sector and the business sector are diminishing. RAC Senior Historian Barb Shubinski pointed out that foundations have always looked like businesses, mirroring the business forms of each era. At mid-century they looked like large organizations; today, they look like venture capitalists. One participant wondered if we assume that "nonprofit" means "good." The environmental sustainability sector, as someone pointed out, is benevolent but also can contribute to a bottom line. Does the intersection of the nonprofit and private sectors represent an identity crisis or an attempt to connect with partners? Corporate social responsibility, born in the 1980s, is the idea that businesses are responsible for social and environmental good as well as for profits.

In these discussions, one participant reminded us that foundations should be thought of as part of a larger institutional network and political culture. Today, the state works more in fields which foundations once dominated. In all of the participants' work there is a strikingly consistent institutional frame that cuts across fields. It is challenging to construct a century-long narrative from it all. One participant wondered if we might not need to construct a narrative: perhaps a few takeaways were sufficient. One participant saw narrative as a way to connect with the public. There are long continuities that we can identify, as well as shifts to what is truly new. We should examine where philanthropies have crossed boundaries in order to get something done.

Session IV: Impact

Studying impact could involve case studies, historical narrative, and memory. How does the scholar think about social good? After all, "impact" is not a term that historians use. A useful approach is to study what one participant calls "mechanistic impact" -- that is to say, the actual mechanisms that philanthropy influences. Adopting an organizational perspective can prove useful.

When discussing impact historically, context matters greatly. From the early twentieth century to the Great Society, foundations have created institutions and seeded fields: a narrative can be constructed from these events. One participant said that foundations filled a vacuum, for example, playing the role of minister of culture or minister of research. Today, those fields are crowded. Because of the historian's longer view, they have a clear role in understanding and describing change over this time. Historians can grasp the nuance of impact; it can historicize the very concept of impact.

Today, new foundations have more targeted missions than they did in the past. One participant proposed that a more specific agenda implies greater ease in assessing impact. This led the participants to try to identify philanthropic goals. For example, another participant asked if public policy was the end goal. If so, the foundations worked with people in power. One participant asserted that "good for society" is not always the principal aim. A participant offered his experience as an historian of philanthropy since the 1970s who had worked specifically in the role foundations have played in the medical field. Foundation staff members today come out of different disciplines than they did in the past, which reflects a change in field structure.

"Impact" as a concept does not always have a clear value judgment attached to it. The Ford Foundation's activism in the 1960s sparked a backlash. The terms of the social and political debate changed because of foundation action.

New methodologies and tools from digital humanities can help us explore the question of impact in a scholarly way. For example, we can now perform network analysis on citations and map social networks. If foundations begin with the idea that there is an ill to be cured, scholars can study their methods and outcomes -- from philanthropic intentions to how society remembers what followed.

Session V: New Questions, Continuing the Discussion

The discussion opened with a series of questions: Why is this a field of study? What disciplines come into play? What disciplinary boundaries must be crossed or expanded? What methods and intellectual frameworks are needed? Who is the "public" for this work? What publishing formats must researchers be thinking about in expanding the reach of their work? How should we think about the term "impact"?

One participant began by saying that our subject is not exclusively foundations. It is important to remind ourselves that philanthropic institutions -- and their archives -- are important because of the ideas that flow through them, the organizational connections that can be observed, the people that interact with them. Foundation archives have already helped us re-think historical narratives in various fields.

Another participant maintained that from her perspective as a scholar of international relations, foundations should be viewed just as other NGOs are viewed, namely as another set of non-state actors. She often views foundations through the individuals who work in them. She also underscored certain conceptual differences between political scientists and historians. The charity/philanthropy distinction did not resonate with her. One participant asked how we might bring in other actors -- grantees, smaller organizations, institutions working in different regions. He suggested that we begin to ask how philanthropy looks from the ground up. Another said that in her work she had observed the interactions among smaller and larger foundations, national and local organizations, often wondering what voices were left out.

One participant agreed that one of the values of studying philanthropy was in pushing analysis beyond the nation-state. He did not think it a mere coincidence that the growth in visitors to the RAC tracked the growth in interest in trans-national history. But he cautioned that we should not limit ourselves to a story from the high vantage point of foundations, and reminded us that in his research on agriculture there was much material to draw on in Mexican archives. Another agreed that an archive like the RAC could inadvertently skew the historical narrative. Several others remarked on the difficulty of studying those who do not receive foundation grants; many organizations are simply left out of the story.

Having worked in a foundation, one participant wondered how historians could best talk to foundations. It is about bringing in grantees but it is also about opening up a conversation about context, historical continuities, and definitions of success and failure. It also means bringing people into the conversation with specific expertise in, for example, health or science. Two participants both spoke about the archival challenges of collecting records from small organizations, many of which do little to retain their records or even to think about their historical value. Another spoke of the limitations of Foundation Center records, which allow us to see general patterns of giving but say little about foundation decision making and the rationale for work.

The discussion turned toward a more general conversation about the rationale for philanthropy and the shared interests of this group in studying philanthropy. One participant asked what the "shared logic" was of doing work about this sector. Another spoke of it in terms of our collective vision of the social good and the way we pursue that good. Another spoke of the disillusionment with democracy and the role of money in our policy making and electoral practices; she suggested that the exploration of non-state actors might help to expand our understanding of democracy.

The participants then raised wide-ranging questions about public engagement, public intellectuals, and how different disciplines spoke (or remained uncomfortable) addressing public issues. One participant argued that because academics have rigorous empirical training it is imperative that they engage. Another concurred, saying that scholars do have something valuable to say about the good society, the right society. A third reminded the group that most people commenting on public affairs do not have deep expertise. With the training most in this group possess, it is relatively easy to gain a modicum of expertise about the issues facing the philanthropic sector. There is a trade literature to draw upon in such publications as the *Chronicle of Philanthropy* and the *Nonprofit Quarterly*.

Two participants remarked on the "tenure anxiety" some in the room seemed to be expressing. One spoke of the confidence that comes with getting a first book out. The other felt that in asking "whither the public intellectual," the group was being too hard on itself. The members of the group have things to contribute to the public conversation; the problem is one of forms and formats. We need to establish a channel for smart, innovative scholars to contribute to journalistic and other outlets.

Session VI: Research Needs

The final session summarized some of the key points and looked toward next steps. The moderator observed that those who define themselves as historians of philanthropy are quite likely to find themselves as institutional orphans. He was particularly astounded, as were others, to learn that the American Historical Association's definition of research fields did not include philanthropy, civil society, the nonprofit sector or any variation of these terms within its list of important research topics. He noted that those working on philanthropic topics seemed comfortable crossing disciplinary boundaries. He asked the group whether the large but unofficial network of RAC researchers could (or should) be a more formal network. He also hoped that the group would consider ways of expanding the "public presence" of research on foundations, especially by thinking about a web-based publication.

Two participants spoke about existing academic networks, especially ARNOVA and ISTR, as promising organizations where panels might be organized. Both ARNOVA and ISTR have limitations, the former with its predominantly managerial focus and ISTR with its limited funding. But relationships with both organizations seemed worth exploring. Laura Miller added that the National Council on Public History was welcoming and especially interested in public engagement.

One participant reminded people of Cornell's summer "boot camp" on the history of capitalism, wondering if something similar might be done on the history of philanthropy. She suggested that working with a smaller community of scholars might be preferable to tackling larger organizations. Several others thought that it would be important to build a cadre of scholars at a university and to use universities as hosts for academic conferences. Another spoke of the need for a "roadshow element," inserting the history of philanthropy into larger historical narratives. After James Smith described the conference organized by the RAC and the Free University in Berlin, two participants thought that universities or research centers within the academy might have resources to devote to conferences, roundtables and other convenings. One participant also asked how teaching about philanthropy might be encouraged. Another explained how Yale's International Strategy Seminar had spawned a group of scholars interested in strategy. For academic jobs to emerge there should be places for the subject of philanthropy to be taught. Other models were mentioned such as the SSRC's support for graduate students, Mellon Foundation programs, dissertation fellowship support etc.

The conversation then turned to questions of language. Is the history of philanthropy the right designation? Do terms like civil society and third sector have wider appeal? There is growing demand at the undergraduate level from students who hope to work with NGO's. The discussion turned to potential sources of funding and the prospect of approaching foundations. Members of the group with foundation experience felt that resources were more likely to flow to a university-based academic center or department than to an independent organization like the Archive Center.

Discussion returned to the ideas for a web presence and the philanthropy blog that two participants have been working on. There were questions about the RAC website and how it might be used to sustain a network. Jack Meyers thought it would be possible to do so but that we would have to divert staff members to that task.

The conversation drew to a close with a cluster of new ideas: a monthly seminar for those residing in the New York area, perhaps relying on the relationship between the RAC and NYU; a better use of H-net; a yearly conference at the RAC or one of the near-by conference facilities where historians of philanthropy could present their work; and a more formal affiliation between the RAC and institutions training doctoral students.