

## Donor foundations and colonial inheritance

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**Abstract:** Philanthropic agencies play a crucial role in contemporary social justice work, but their location within colonial notions of Christian charity and principles of modernity within humanitarian narratives may have shaped what can be achieved through their institutions. This paper examines the traces of mythic inheritances and colonial, particularly missionary-based trajectories on the limitations and possibilities of philanthropy and donor foundations.

**Keywords:** colonialization; feminist; human rights; missionaries; philanthropy

According to a report released by the Treasury Guidelines Working Group, which is coordinated by the U.S.-based Council on Foundations, “International charitable work fills critical gaps in the global socio-economic infrastructure” (Treasury Guidelines Working Group, [TGWG] 2005). The depth and breadth of this statement can only be imagined, and even so, it is difficult to fathom. We, in the west, hear of and are grateful for the mammoth feats of international charity or philanthropy when natural disaster strikes, such as the tsunami that devastated South East Asia several years ago. However, very few understand *how* philanthropy on the international scale works, much less how it came to be. It is difficult to trace the genealogy of contemporary philanthropic institutions. The task of “carrying out charitable work in distant lands” is a project whose genesis has been presented as either a mythic inheritance or a teleological marker of modernity (TGWG, 2005). This paper seeks to examine a third narrative that links the development of contemporary philanthropic institutions, namely donor foundations, within the genealogy of the colonial project of the “long century” (the period between 1780 and the early twentieth-century, Gott, 2002). Additionally, it is argued that because the impulse for humanitarianism and the imperialist project of “the long century” were “mutually constituting sides of a single dialectic”, the contemporary development organization (philanthropic foundation) and the current process of globalization represent contemporary, mutually constituted permutations of the colonial/missionary framework. By examining these two contemporary institutions/processes of cult-morality and secular-legality forces as inherited colonial frameworks, I wish to demonstrate the ease and the danger with which even “feminist” donor foundations’ efforts to raise money risks complicity in what Chandra Talpade Mohanty describes as “discursive colonization” (Mohanty, 2003, p. 49).

I will make my argument by first examining Gil Gott’s critical history of modern human rights and the “humanitarian impulse” that make intelligible the historical, social and political frameworks of the “precursor movements” of modern human rights (Gott, 2002, p. 19). Second, the material of a contemporary donor foundation that claims an internalized feminist ideology will be critiqued. By examining this material published by a donor foundation that seeks to transcend an acknowledged legacy of privilege and disparate access to resources, it will be shown that as Gott posits, the imperial and colonial footprints inherent in the cult-morality of the humanitarian impulse. I mobilize the idea of cult-morality as an alternative and preventative measure against falling into the Manichean trap of secular-religious dichotomy; and in doing so, seek to open up a new space of critique that questions the structures of affect inherent in “the cult” that, in my opinion, find their basis in seductive discourses that continue to have currency today (*anti-slavery, freedom, development, etc.,...*). At the same time, while the language used in this same material to build a donor base may prove successful in raising funds, the irresistible rhetoric for *human rights, community*

*building*, “*women’s global movement*” and *freedom* discursively colonize grantees as “third world women” and women of the global south.

Although the intention is not to map the development of U.S.-based foundations, it is helpful to understand the mainstream narrative, even though that narrative is generally unknown by most. Even when they are known, contemporary notions of philanthropy are vague and when they are not, they are conceived as a western impulse with both mythical and modern legal heritages. The *American Heritage Dictionary* defines philanthropy as (1) the effort/inclination to increase the well-being of humankind, as by charitable aid or donations; (2) love of humankind in general; (3) something, such as an activity or institution, intended to promote human welfare; *Faces of Philanthropy* examines this definition by looking at specific individuals who practice philanthropic activities. A mainstream narrative of the history of philanthropy attributes the development of “organized philanthropy” as a mythical inheritance whose link to the past is traced to the figure of the Greek Prometheus bestowing fire on humankind.

In an address, President and CEO of The Pew Charitable Trusts Rebecca Rimel (2001) offers a contextualized summary of the evolving role of “organized philanthropy,” she calls contemporary foundation institutions as “organized philanthropy” to differentiate it from the philanthropy of the past in which individuals acted as beneficiaries or patrons. By invoking this metaphor, contemporary philanthropic institutions are able to yoke themselves to a universalized heritage rooted in the “love of mankind” for which the genealogy of said inheritance is pure and divine. Rimel offers the myth of Prometheus as the mythical heritage of Europe and generally mankind.... North American lore to evidence the persistence of the humanitarian impulse as timeless and true. Other narratives mark philanthropy’s entrance into society as a result of the telos of modernity. According to this narrative, the heritage of contemporary foundations is the result of the massive wealth accumulated as a result of the industrial revolution, and a few exceptional and visionary individuals who translated their good fortune into a “gospel of wealth” as their “philanthropic credo”. Joel Gardner, president of a firm specializing in “foundation and corporate history” cites that mainstream understandings of the genesis of today’s foundations are the result of “the immense private wealth” accumulated in the post-Civil War era (Gardner, 1992, pp.601-605). Far from highlighting the humanitarian impulses implicated in foundation work that I will discuss later, Gardner outlines the legal contexts which shaped the economics of foundations today as entities that not only serve as a mechanism to “preserve accumulated wealth”, but that also “often dictate local and national (sometimes even international) agendas” (Gardner, 1992, 601-605). These two narratives, while compelling enough, provide a crude understanding of what is now viewed as “organized philanthropy” and leaves the success of the rhetoric used to solicit financial and social support unquestioned (Rimel, 2001).

Organized philanthropy takes on diverse forms. However, for the purposes of this paper, the focus is specifically on the kind of foundation that describes its work as “social change philanthropy” to demonstrate how even with critical awareness of global inequality and oppression, it is difficult to avoid the inheritances of colonial and neocolonial frameworks. I will critically examine one such foundation, the Global Fund for Women (GFW). GFW is a San Francisco U.S.-based donor foundation that describes their work as “social change philanthropy”. GFW defines social change philanthropy as an inherently feminist approach to philanthropy, which “addresses the root causes of social and economic inequality” (GFW, 2005, p. 35). According to their website, GFW’s definition of social change philanthropy is “grounded in respect for the equality and dignity of all people” (GFW, 2008). Additionally, embedded in the definition of social change philanthropy, according to GFW, is an approach that requires the creation of “a more equal and respectful connection between those who give and those who receive” (GFW, 2008). In the contemporary socio-political context, one cannot argue the irresistibility of this language and the visceral desire that this rhetoric beckons since it forms the basis of contemporary notions of liberal democracy, individual freedom and

(*western*) justice. From a western perspective, which I claim, very few things can unsettle my attachment to these ideas as vital. However, in order to develop an alternative narrative to the histories of philanthropy, it is necessary to unsettle the uncontested and irresistible language used by GFW, and other donor foundations, in their efforts to grow *global movements*. Establishing philanthropy's connection to colonial frameworks is critical prior to examining the discourse/language mobilized by GFW.

In his essay entitled "Imperial Humanitarianism: history of an arrested dialectic", Gil Gott seeks to establish the historical legacy for modern human rights movements *vis a vis* the "humanitarian impulse", and in doing so, makes a third narrative of the colonial inheritance of philanthropy viable (Gott, 2002). Gott asserts that in order to critically examine what he calls "the modern human rights project" it is necessary to examine the development of "transnational humanitarianism" of the late eighteenth century and early twentieth century as it developed within "broader socio-historical frameworks". Gott interrogates the linkages of these frameworks as the coeval relationship between the imperialist endeavor and the humanitarian impulse by examining the social and political context of the Berlin West African Conference in 1884-85. This conference also took place alongside the growing anti-slavery movement of the nineteenth century. Gott highlights the burgeoning anti-slavery movement of that time as "the most prominent form of humanitarianism". Additionally, Gott buttresses his argument that "nineteenth-century humanitarian and imperial projects were indeed intertwined and mutually constitutive" by tracing the humanitarian movement for "freedom" from slavery (a colonial institution) and the imperial vying for the "right" to *civilize* Africa (specifically the Congo). He notes that these entangled frameworks were mobilized in tandem via secular (international regimes of law) and religious (missionary efforts) (Gott, 2002, p. 20). Gott offers a sound theoretical basis for the connection between the humanitarian/imperial projects as socially and politically historicized moments that I wish to argue reach into the present via contemporary regimes of secular-legality and cult-morality present in the structures of today's philanthropic development foundations. By tracing this genealogy, I wish to argue that contemporary philanthropic foundations have deep roots in the historicized legacies of the "humanitarian impulse" of the mid-18<sup>th</sup> and late 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, thus have inherited the "dual mandate" of both civilizer and liberator. Likewise, I will argue that hidden within discourses of human rights and freedom, philanthropic institutions can and do act as the contemporary cult-morality (replacing religious) framework of the neocolonial project of globalization (replacing imperialism).

The discourse of development, whether intentional or not, discursively colonizes those of the third world and global south. One could argue the impossibility of working beyond hegemonic and epistemic structures; nevertheless, I seek to critically examine the agonistic position of foundations such as GFW as one that is unavoidable and problematic. It is important to note that I do not wish to indict irredeemably the *possibilities for a new world* that donor foundations seek to be a part of, however the intention is to elucidate the colonial frameworks that are inherited so that new frameworks can be entertained. GFW, like other social change philanthropy foundations, mobilizes discourses such as *human rights* and *freedom* in order to leverage wealth, status and attention towards the women's groups they fund. As a twenty year old foundation, GFW asserts its claim of "playing an essential role in building the infrastructure of a worldwide movement" for an "equitable and peaceful world" (GFW, 2008). In 2008, one of GFW's *global community-building* efforts makes a call to action directed at individuals (presumably U.S.-based) for grassroots fundraising house parties in honor of International Women's Day. According to the text of their online brochures, the Fund's work is "grounded in the belief that giving can be an act of social change" (GFW, 2008). With this statement, the language of the brochure invites a *donor* to join the ranks of activists for *social change*. Here, *social change* is presented at once as a monolithic goal and as a personal opportunity for class status, an undisputable project worthy of membership. In his essay entitled "Buying an Activist Identity", Ira Silver discusses how community organizers are able to confer "activist status" to wealthy donors in exchange for

financial support; another instance in which “the gift” is bound by strings of expectation and reciprocity (Silver, 1998). GFW, it states, believes that “connecting people with opportunities for giving” leads to building a “global community” (*visualize without borders or heterogeneities*) of advocates on behalf of the rights of women.

Inside the brochure, the global women’s movement has a face and a geography: the face is that of a non-U.S. ethnic or racialized ‘woman’. Each country profiled includes a snapshot of “the women” who constitute the global women’s movement subject. They are the *object* of the gift and the reason the house party is organized. The brochure beckons the reader to “bring the global women’s movement to your community”. The “global women’s movement”, indeed the “women” themselves, can be brought into the home, community via the house party. The use of the language creates the necessary structures of affect needed to establish a sense of intimacy between the “women” and the “donor” (who is presumably western and from the U.S.). GFW claims their “grantees” know and are aware that a grant from GFW and the “donor” represents “collective support” of individuals and institutions” who “believe” in their innate capacity to “address complex challenges (GFW, 2008).” GFW presents a long list of why a potential “donor” should become part of the “community”: war, poverty, gendered violence, globalization, patriarchy, illiteracy, government negligence and failure, environmental issues, intra-cultural gendered violence, human rights and expansion of legal areas for women’s issues are all the reasons GFW feels we should join. GFW privileges the gendered/sexualized axis of “women” grantee while ignoring the specificity of the social, historical, cultural or political contexts represented in the brochure. Outside of being a woman and not from the U.S., these women are just like any other woman and just need support and money to become “agents of their own change”. Money, it is inferred, can solve and address the issues that oppress their lives. While money is important, the rhetoric used in the brochure must not be overlooked.

It is argued here that while the language of “global woman’s right’s movement” may be a compelling way to raise money and awareness, while seeking to create strategic space, it may also risk discursive colonization of third world women by western feminist donor foundations like the Fund. As a result, GFW contributes to the “third worlding” of certain “global women’s movements” which creates a sediment of discourses that produce the western feminist donor as the standard of “freedom” at the expense of universalizing and reifying “third world woman” (Mohanty, 2003, p. 52). According to their website, GFW is an “international network of women and men committed to a world of equality and social justice.” GFW justifies its claims that it is an advocate and defender of women’s human right’s by making grants to support women’s groups around the world. According to GFW website, grants to women’s groups range from “\$500 to a maximum annual grant award of \$20,000.” The website also states that since its inception in 1987, GFW has awarded over “\$58 million to more than 3,450 women’s groups in 166 countries” in the form of grants. The “project” of GFW is their *objective*: human rights, social justice, freedom. The Fund asserts that it supports a global women’s movement “that is rooted in commitment to justice and an appreciation of the value of women’s experience.” Experience, it is understood, is an uncontested given that gets to the *real* of the movement. GFW claims that by being committed to justice and appreciating women’s (uncontested) experiences, it is able to help women “across communities, cultures, religions, traditions and countries”. Because of this, the global community and GFW, is capable of transcending (at great risk) difference, geography, language and culture.

In her essay entitled “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses”, Chandra Talpade Mohanty examines the presuppositions which she argues are present in western feminist discourse on third world women, and I would add, to those of the global south. Mohanty argues that “woman” as a category of analysis collapses differences within and between gendered subjects in a way that constructs a coherent social group – “woman”. Mobilizing this presupposition, such as by GFW material for International Women’s Day and

the rhetoric of “global women’s movement” in their literature and website, reifies the category of woman, regardless of the intersectionalities that mark the subject called woman in any given time or location. Once defined as woman, the subject becomes uniformly susceptible to a homogenous notion of oppression, as inferred in the language used in the text of GFW’s materials, the “average third world [and woman of the global south] leads an essentially truncated life based on feminine gender...and being ‘third world’”. Thus, in order to apply for grant funds from the GFW, one must first be a “woman” (defined by gender and sexuality) and third world (struggling against oppression, such as those listed in the house party brochure.) In effect, this not only universalizes woman and reifies average third world women, but also assists in constituting western feminists as normative referent that is “educated, modern,...[in control]...over their own bodies and sexualities and ...[have the]... ‘freedom’ to make their own decisions (Mohanty, 2003, 52-53).” By mobilizing these same presuppositions, it can be said that GFW is unwittingly discursively colonizing the groups and organizations of women in their effort to produce a composite, singular third world woman and to garner the support and resources it needs in order to build it’s global women’s movement of advocates for women’s global rights.

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The goal of this paper was to support the position that philanthropic foundations, to one degree or another, continue the work of the colonial project’s dual mandate of “saving and civilizing”. In order to accomplish this, the link was established between the “humanitarian impulse” and the imperial project as set forth by Gott. Then, it was possible to show the great risks taken by GFW in their efforts to build “a global women’s movement”. These risks position GFW as a donor foundation whose rhetoric discursively colonizes third world women and women of the global south in order to advance a “global woman”. It would be useful to further this analysis by deconstructing the discourses that are so irresistible, such as human rights and freedom. An initial exploration about how within the humanitarian/human rights impulse there resides a discourse of freedom that both constrains lives and creates the possibility of new spaces that I would refer to as civil society. It would also be very interesting to examine how the discourse of freedom and its opposite (partner) unfreedom, work in tandem to hide the mutually constitutive relationship argued by Gott; but continue to do so in the contemporary relationship of globalization and philanthropy. It would be worthwhile to continue to critically engage the role of non-governmental organizations (the recipients of donor foundation’s humanitarian efforts) in creating the regimes of citizenship necessary to inhabit contested neocolonial spaces, not as a claim of global communion for human right’s coalition, but as a potential site for creating new frameworks of both donation foundations and subaltern movements.

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## Author Notes

Lisa Maria Castellanos was born culturally Mexican, raised socially as Mexican-American and forged politically as a Chicana. She is a Mestiza with both North and Meso American indigenous ancestry. After 15 years of being involved in immigrant rights and anti-racist movements, she returned to the University of California at Santa Clara and completed undergraduate studies in Feminist Studies, with an emphasis on Social Movements and legal studies.

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