

Moral Entrepreneurship Through Philanthropy: A Criminological Investigation of a Philanthropic Phenomenon

Research Plan

The *Cité de la Musique* of Geneva,¹ opening in 2022, is entirely financed by private funds (Bernet, 2018). If it constitutes an "unexpected gift" for Geneva's music conservatory (Bonier, 2017), does it constitute a poisoned gift for the Canton of Geneva, ultimately bearing the new institution's operating costs? On the other side of the globe, in 2013, Arnold Venture² is funding the development of the Public Safety Assessment (PSA), a standardized test assessing the dangerousness of people awaiting trial – an evolution similar to the one illustrated in Philipp K. Dick's "The Minority Report" (1956). Although distinct, these cases illustrate, respectively in Geneva and in the United States, philanthropic activities potentially changing the artistic, moral, normative, or even legal landscape of a given civil society (Bishop & Green, 2010; Horvath & Powell, 2016; The Economist, 2018). This research seeks to define whether, as a particular social actor, the philanthropist is able to create or influence the development and transformation of social or legal norms in the society in which he himself evolves.

Considering philanthropists as actors who can have an impact on society is not new. This has even been highlighted by some of them. Andrew Carnegie, a wealthy industrialist at the end of the 19th century, invited his peers in his Gospel of Wealth (Carnegie, 1901) to redistribute their wealth during their lifetime in order to improve society. More recently, Warren Buffet and Bill Gates have brought Carnegie's idea back into the spotlight with their Giving Pledge. It consists in making the richest people on the planet promise to give more than 50% of their wealth "to help address society's most pressing problems" (The Giving Pledge, 2010).

Many authors demonstrate the influence philanthropy has on civil society (Horvath & Powell, 2016; Reich, 2018; Vézina, 2014). Through the growing legitimacy of philanthropic incursions within public policies (Salamon, 2014; Seghers, 2009) – some philanthropists would even consider themselves in the best position to provide public goods and services performing better than ones offered by the state (Ostrander, 2007; Ostrower, 1995). The latter, through its public speech and tax benefits, seems to reinforce this vision (Cordelli, 2016). On the other hand, some scholars consider philanthropy in a Schumpeterian vision of entrepreneurship. Indeed, they understand philanthropic action as healthy and natural, vital to the proper economic and social functioning of society. As such, it is perceived as boosting the economy and social

¹ A cultural complex dedicated to the musical arts.

² American philanthropic entity based in Texas, formerly known as the Laura and John Arnold Foundation.

diversity by creating opportunities, in turn encouraging innovation and a timely rebalancing of markets through the redistribution wealth (Acs, 2013; von Schnurbein, 2010).

This research understands the figure of the philanthropist as embodying a particular social actor, close to what Becker (1963) conceptualizes as a moral entrepreneur. The latter is understood as a socially and economically rich protagonist wishing, in an altruistic drive, to improve society. He does so by putting forth particular social and cultural values that he considers beneficial to society as a whole. These moral entrepreneurs are thus more likely to create or support the diffusion of new social norms based on their own values. For example, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation is working to “ensure that malaria has a prominent place on the global agenda and garners the political support and resources needed for eventual eradication” (Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, 1999). In other words, their philanthropic action is likely to influence the political agenda of governments, following their own definition of priorities (Horvath & Powell, 2016). Therefore, philanthropists appear as taking hold of particular social situations that they erect as public problems, against which interventions are required (Blumer, 1971; Gusfield, 1984). Consequently, philanthropists participate in the creation, modification or dissemination of specific normative frameworks. From an instrumentalist perspective, a norm emerges in response to a need (Opp, 2001). As such the creation or emergence of new norms constitutes a reaction to a *situation-problème*³ (Hulsman & De Celis, 1982; Serrano, 2018), itself defined by a legitimate social actor (Becker, 1963; Blumer, 1971; Gusfield, 1984).

This notion of moral entrepreneur is even more relevant as philanthropy becomes more professional while sometimes claiming itself as “entrepreneurial” (Gordon, Harvey, Shaw, & Maclean, 2016). In this way, the methods, practices and vocabulary used by philanthropists appear as directly imported from the fields of finance and entrepreneurship (Acs & Phillips, 2002; Adloff, 2015; Vézina, 2014). This is nicely illustrated in a quote provided by the Edmond de Rothschild Foundation: “We progress by treating each new project as a prototype with specific objectives, key performance indicators and performance measures. We apply an entrepreneurial mentality to kindness.”⁴ (n.d., freely translated by the author). The transition of American foundations to Limited Liability Companies (LLC) also confirms the entrepreneurial shift happening within the philanthropic phenomenon by allegedly providing more room to act in response to social challenges (Brakman Reiser, 2018).

³ *Situation-problème* (in French): a word to describe a situation perceived as problematic by someone (Hulsman & De Celis, 1982).

⁴ <http://www.edmondderothschildfoundations.org>

Similarly to entrepreneurship, philanthropy is not just about individual motivations.⁵ Rather, it must be reintegrated into its social and institutional context (Barman, 2017). In the light of this, it can be understood as a philanthropic phenomenon, here described as a system composed of interactions between different parties. In addition to philanthropists, it includes intermediaries⁶ and recipients. Indeed, if the moral entrepreneur is the initiator of his endeavors, these may be influenced by intermediaries or recipients. They may appropriate, and therefore modify the problem put forth by the philanthropist and/or the response given to it. Inscribing philanthropic action within a multipolar system therefore allows to nuance the image of an omnipotent philanthropist (Edwards, 2008; Vézina, 2014) and highlights the – under-researched – actions of intermediaries and recipients.

Despite some research acknowledging the existence of various actors in the philanthropic phenomenon (Ducharme, 2012), scholars have generally focused on North America. A recent surge in European philanthropic studies has fortunately started filling this gap.⁷ For example, Switzerland has seen the opening of Philanthropy research centers in Basel in 2008 and Geneva in 2017. The existence of these new institutions has in turn led to the publication of studies on the role private foundations play in local social and economic development (Von Schnurbein & Fritz, 2014). However, these seem to mainly take into account an economic or legal approach, centered above all on the organization and optimization of philanthropic activity. Again, these methodologies leave aside other actors essential to the philanthropic phenomenon described above.

Objectives

At first, it can be seen as odd to mobilize a criminological approach to investigate philanthropy. Indeed, criminology focuses mostly on deviance and its social reaction (Killias, Aebi, & Kuhn, 2012). However, Becker (1963) makes an interesting recommendation:

It is an interesting fact that most scientific research and speculation on deviance concerns itself with the people who break rules rather than with those who make and enforce them. If we are to achieve a full understanding of deviant behavior, we must get these two possible foci of inquiry into balance. (p. 163)

Following Becker's advice, criminology should therefore also encompass the study of normative framework originations, themselves producers of potential new forms of deviance. As such, this project seeks to understand norm creation mechanisms through the criminological study of one type of moral entrepreneur. To this end, various disciplines need

⁵ See for example Silber's study on anger as a driver for philanthropic donations (Silber, 2012).

⁶ Experts, politicians, magistrates, media, scientific consultants (Lefèvre & Charbonneau, 2011).

⁷ See the European Research Network on Philanthropy (ERNOP) founded in 2008.

to be mobilized (e.g. sociology, law, political science, economics) in order to better investigate normative mechanisms happening within the philanthropic phenomenon and their impact on a given society.

Concretely, the purpose of this research is to provide an analysis and a better understanding of the philanthropic phenomenon through the prism of moral entrepreneurship. The first step envisioned is to understand whether the philanthropist can indeed be considered a moral entrepreneur. If so, this project seeks to identify the mechanisms involved in the development and/or application of social and legal norms in his community. To this end, the following questions are asked: Why do philanthropists act? Do they act in partnership with intermediaries and recipients? How is philanthropic action deployed (preventive, interventionist, repressive)? How is it received and perceived by recipients? What are the effects of philanthropic action on recipients and, by extension, on civil society?

Because of the criminological perspective taken in this research, specific objectives resulting from these initial questions will also be clarified: Do philanthropists, by creating/supporting social and legal norms, also create new forms of deviance? Does philanthropic action take place in response to a perceived deviance/problem?

Methodology

Considering the multiple actors of philanthropic phenomenon limits the field of research to a defined geographical region. Therefore, this study focuses on the canton of Geneva⁸. In addition to having a long philanthropic tradition (David, Heiniger, & Bühlmann, 2016), this location has a high density and has seen a recent growth in its number of philanthropic foundations – 24.4 foundations per 10,000 inhabitants in 2018; (Eckhardt, Jakob, & Von Schnurbein, 2019).

As this study aims to extract a theory from empirical data, an inductive method is here favored. As discussed above, the field of philanthropy involves multiple actors. In turn, the chosen research field is understood as composed of different groups of actors interacting with each other. As new norms may emerge from these interactions (Becker, 1963; Blumer, 1986; Durkheim, 1893; Moscovici & Doise, 1992), the philanthropic phenomenon is explored from an interactionist perspective. To this end, a dual investigation inspired by the Network Ethnographical studies is privileged (Berthod, Grothe-Hammer, & Sydow, 2016). Based on semi-structured interviews, the first part provides an insight into the meanings given by the actors to their actions and interactions (Beaud & Weber, 2010; De Sardan, 1995). Through a Social Network Analysis (Borgatti, Mehra, Brass, & Labianca, 2009), the second part seeks to

⁸ Geneva is also the birthplace of the Red Cross.

map the philanthropic network of Geneva. This will provide information on the structural and institutional patterns underlying the interactions found in the philanthropic phenomenon. The integration of these two analyses enables a better understanding of the structure of a given philanthropic phenomenon. It also allows to highlight the extent to which interactions between its diverse groups influence its structural operationalization and vice versa (Nicolini, 2009).

