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## The Power Elite

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## THE POWER ELITE

Nicole Sackley

**Inderjeet Parmar.** *Foundations of the American Century: The Ford, Carnegie, and Rockefeller Foundations in the Rise of American Power.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2012. ix + 356 pp. Notes and index. \$40.00.

In February 1941, influential *Time-Life* publisher Henry Luce prevailed upon his fellow Americans to “create the first great American century” by embracing what he imagined to be America’s destiny as the leader of nations. By the close of the Second World War, Luce’s vision of a *Pax Americana* had come to fruition: the United States dominated the globe in economic, cultural, and military terms. U.S. foreign policy revolved, and in many respects continues to revolve, around maintaining that dominance. The “American Century” might also be termed the philanthropists’ century. Beginning in the 1930s, the largest U.S. foundations—the Carnegie Corporation of New York (founded 1911), the Rockefeller Foundation (1913), and the Ford Foundation (1936)—initiated and expanded the reach of their international activities and ambitions. They opened field offices and sponsored a vast array of projects on nearly every continent, from Soviet expertise at Harvard to agricultural science in India. The Ford Foundation, the most ambitious and wealthiest of the “Big Three,” encapsulated the breadth of philanthropic internationalism when it declared that its mission was nothing short of the “advancement of human welfare.”

Over the past decade, scholars have begun to write the international history of the foundations. Influenced by the transnational turn in U.S. history as well as growing interdisciplinary interest in the role of non-state actors on the world stage, scholars such as Sunil Amrith, Volker Berghahn, Mary Brown Bullock, Anne-Emmanuelle Birn, Matthew Connelly, David Ekbladh, David Engerman, and John Krige have treated U.S. foundations as important international players. Some of these scholars have focused on foundations’ efforts in particular regions or nations. Others have shown how Carnegie, Rockefeller, and Ford helped to construct new global problems (underdevelopment, hunger, population control) as well as the transnational networks through which particular approaches to those problems emerged and came to dominate international practice. All of the new work has been grounded in close analysis of foundation records. What we have lacked is a full accounting of the evolution of the

U.S. foundations' ideologies and international grant-making in the context of a changing world order and of particular conditions in the field. We also need a study that looks closely at the relationship between foundations and the state over the course of the twentieth century.

In both respects, Inderjeet Parmar's new book addresses critical lacunae in our understanding of the foundations. One wishes it were more successful at filling them. *Foundations of the American Century* examines the efforts by the Ford, Carnegie, and Rockefeller foundations to shape and support U.S. foreign policy from the 1930s through the "war on terror." Parmar makes three claims about the foundations' relationship to U.S. foreign policy. First, the largest foundations were, and remain, central players in a hegemonic and homogenous East Coast foreign policy establishment. Second, the foundations played a critical role in moving elite U.S. public opinion away from isolationism and toward internationalism in the 1930s and 1940s. Finally, elite transnational knowledge networks were the foundations' key contribution to building a postwar "American imperium" (p. 2). Founded and fostered with foundation largesse, these networks served to incorporate and co-opt European and third-world elites into U.S. foreign policymakers' worldview.

Parmar is a political scientist, one who is particularly interested in the relationship between non-state actors and state power. The first chapter of *Foundations of the American Century* characterizes and compares "mainstream" scholarship on the foundations to Parmar's own theoretical framework. Parmar depicts a dominant scholarly narrative in which the foundations are characterized as wholly benign, objective, and selfless forces in the international arena—"above politics and ideology, beyond big business and the state, and part of a third sector above and independent of both" (p. 24). To Parmar, this is a "fiction" (p. 5) easily refuted by ample evidence that, in fact, the foundations belong to, and reliably serve, "the power elite of the United States" (p. 2). The social and economic connections of foundation leaders, as well as their grant-making activity, reveal them to be "steeped in market, corporate, and state institutions" (p. 2) and dedicated to "the ideology of Americanism as liberal internationalism" (p.5). Their principal *modus operandi* has been the "cultural and intellectual penetration" (p. 2) of global leaders and intellectuals through the construction of social fields that reproduce the ideologies, habits, and practices of the American power elite. While Parmar acknowledges his intellectual debts to C. Wright Mills, Manuel Castells, and Pierre Bourdieu, it is Antonio Gramsci and "neo-Gramscian" understandings of hegemony and intellectual production that anchor his analysis.

Parmar's use of Bourdieu and Gramsci is a welcome addition to the historical analysis of the foundations. Concepts like hegemony, knowledge networks, and social fields help to illuminate how and why foundation leaders and grantees acted and operated in the ways that they did. Yet in deploying

these concepts, Parmar assumes that the current literature has been wholly untouched by theoretical considerations or critical analysis. He repeatedly groups scholarly accounts with encomiums by foundations' insiders, and uses one article—published over twenty-five years ago by Barry Karl and Stanley Katz—as evidence for the lack of a critical perspective from “mainstream” scholars. Missing from Parmar's analysis, and, indeed, from his bibliography, are dozens of articles, monographs, and dissertations from the past decade that draw on foundation records to grapple with philanthropic power and influence. Juxtaposing his work with an intellectual straw man, Parmar also leaves little room for the possibility that historical experience might, at times, deviate from theoretical predictions and, in doing so, inform our understandings of how power, class, and ideology operate. The form and tone of the opening chapter suggest that history will be marshaled in the rest of the book, less to understand human experience and change over time than to indict the foundations for sustaining U.S. hegemony.

Parmar moves on in chapter two to demonstrate how foundation leaders form an essential component of the U.S. power elite. The first half of the chapter is given over to biographical sketches of Andrew Carnegie, John D. Rockefeller (senior and junior), and Henry Ford. Historians with a passing knowledge of these well-known figures will find nothing new here. The section is based almost entirely on secondary sources, which Parmar has a habit of quoting directly. To explain the social context in which the Carnegie and Rockefeller foundations were established, Parmar ignores newer scholarship emphasizing the imperial and transatlantic sources of American reform ideas and practices. Instead, Richard Hofstadter's “psychic crisis of the 1890s” does the explanatory work for why very wealthy men turned to philanthropy in the early decades of the twentieth century (p. 39). The rest of the chapter builds a collective socioeconomic portrait of the Rockefeller and Carnegie boards of trustees during the 1930s and 1940s. This material amply demonstrates that trustees inhabited the same small world of Ivy League schools, white-shoe law firms, and corporate directorships as U.S. foreign policymakers. (Indeed, there existed something of a revolving door between top foundation and official posts.) Yet this is hardly a new finding: Robert Arno and Edward Berman drew similar conclusions over thirty years ago. Historians now begin with the assumption that, at midcentury, foundation leaders and foreign policy elites shared a set of assumptions about the imperatives of liberal internationalism, market capitalism, and elite knowledge and stewardship.

One wishes that Parmar might have used his extensive reading in foundation records to demonstrate *how* social background and elite networks shaped the making of foundation policy and projects. One could imagine, for example, an exploration of the social networks of a foundation president like Carnegie's Frederick Keppel or an influential trustee like Ford's John Cowles. The rise of

the Ford Foundation and its creation of a vast bureaucracy of foundation officers in New York—Keppel dubbed them “philanthropoids”—also raise important questions. To what extent did these officers share the same backgrounds and priorities as foundation leaders? To what degree did their screening and day-to-day management of grants shape foundation policies? Were there frictions or debates *within* foundations or *between* foundations about the ends or means of philanthropic goals? Rather than explore such questions, Parmar extrapolates from biographical schematics from the first half of the twentieth century to conclude that little has changed in the last seventy years. Foundation leaders remain “hardwired” to a “firm, indeed, unshakeable attachment to American global leadership” and an “American system of values—free enterprise, individualism, limited government” (p. 58).

The rest of the book presents a series of case studies demonstrating how foundation leaders promulgated this worldview both within the United States and around the world. The most original of these, chapter three, explores the efforts of the Rockefeller and Carnegie foundations to promote U.S. globalism prior to World War II. Parmar is at his best when he describes foundation-sponsored projects to undermine domestic isolationist sentiment. Through careful primary research, he reveals how elite U.S. universities and think tanks drew upon the emerging fields of public opinion research and management to “re-educate” African Americans, labor leaders, college students, and small-town leaders. Parmar also has several useful pages on foundation support for British social science and foreign policy think tanks. Here, we see the foundations at work building the networks that help sustain the Anglo-American alliance.

Other sections describe the foundations’ early support for the realist paradigm that came to dominate both the academic field of International Relations and postwar U.S. national security policy. While this is an important corrective to the view that realist ideas emerged only in the wake of the Cold War, one wishes that Parmar had examined how this interwar transformation occurred. Parmar writes as if the foundations locked into a monolithic vision of globalism that remained virtually unchanged from 1930 onward. Yet, this was an era of disorienting geopolitical crises and passionate intellectual contests. Without some attention to how philanthropic leaders responded to the rise of Hitler or social scientific debates over the role of the state, one has little sense of how older ideas lost purchase and new ones took hold. There are places as well, where, in the interest of underlining a point, Parmar omits details that would have brought nuance to his arguments without undermining them. Noting that Yale political scientist Nicholas J. Spykman, the “godfather of containment,” was born in Holland and lived in Cairo and Java before taking his Ph.D. at Berkeley, for example, complicates the picture of a uniform East Coast establishment.

The next four chapters move forward in time, illustrating how the foundations built transnational knowledge networks during the Cold War. Chapter four focuses on foundation grants to shape foreign intellectuals' vision of the "American way of life" through the Salzburg Seminar in American Studies, the Henry Kissinger-led Harvard Summer Seminar, the British Association for American Studies, and the Congress for Cultural Freedom. Parmar does particularly good work bringing to life the details of the Salzburg and Harvard programs and the voices of foreign intellectuals and leaders who participated in them. Here, in illuminating the emphasis on candid exchange and criticism, he nicely demonstrates the subtle but powerful mechanisms of intellectual hegemony.

Chapters five, six, and seven turn to the broad project of economic development. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the Big Three foundations supported elite U.S. university projects in area studies, area studies associations, and the training of social scientists (largely economists) in the third world. Parmar's ambition to document the global sweep of foundation activity in this field is admirable. But in attempting to recount so many stories, *Foundation of the American Century* spreads itself thin. The sections on U.S.-based Asian, African, and Latin American studies offer some useful new details, particularly on the construction of African Studies as a field, but historians of the social sciences have already covered much of this material.

When Parmar leaves the United States, his story becomes one of the export and imposition of American models abroad. Parmar is right to highlight the unequal nature of these intellectual "exchanges." U.S. philanthropies used their vast resources to pick and choose which development visions received support. Yet, in attempting to inscribe their visions onto other nations, U.S. foundations and the American academics they sponsored never encountered a simple *tabula rasa* in the field. Foreign leaders and intellectuals came to the development project with their own histories and agendas. Parmar's account would have been greatly strengthened had he delved into local histories in his three case studies of Indonesia, Nigeria, and Chile or explored the perspectives of third-world scholars who participated in foundation-sponsored projects. It would have been illuminating, too, to learn something about how foundation officers operated on the ground. Foundation officials are mentioned without clear explanation of who they were or how they built networks. Frank Miller, the Ford Foundation's representative in Jakarta in the 1960s, for example, is introduced as "Miller" and conflated in the book's index with Frances Pickens Miller, a leading figure in the interwar Council on Foreign Relations. Such a mistake would be minor if it were not emblematic of Parmar's relative disinterest in the contexts and contingencies under which the foundations operated.

There are hints in these chapters that the cultural ferment and economic crises of the late 1960s and early 1970s ruffled the smooth application of

philanthropic globalism. In a fascinating section, Parmar depicts shock and “soul searching” within the Ford Foundation after the military coup in Chile in 1973. Ford had sunk over a decade of investment into building a network of center-left economists; the coup ushered into power the “Chicago Boys,” Chilean economists trained at the University of Chicago in new neoliberal visions of economic policy. As the economists whom Ford supported became targets of political repression under the new regime, the foundation leadership scrambled to find them academic posts abroad. Parmar interprets this as an effort to preserve its elite network. One might also, however, see the Chilean example as a moment of transformation in the international economic order, one in which the Ford Foundation and other U.S. major philanthropies found themselves as the standard bearers of an older paradigm—state-led capitalist planning—under attack from left and right. There is little in *Foundations of the American Century* to acknowledge that, in the 1970s and 1980s, a new generation of corporate leaders, neoconservative politicians, intellectuals, and free market economists spurned the Big Three foundations as ideologically out of step with new free market orthodoxies.

Did the foundations recalibrate their politics for new political times? Or, have there been real, simmering ideological disputes within the U.S. foreign policy elite since the 1970s? In his final chapter, Parmar skips over the 1970s and 1980s to describe some post-Cold War and post-9/11 foundation initiatives, from democratic peace theory to a “World Social Forum” to discuss alternatives to current globalization patterns. Once again, Parmar reads foundation projects as efforts to co-opt genuine challenges to U.S. power around the globe. Indeed, he argues, little has changed since the 1940s. The foundations maintain the same methods—network building—in service to a stable goal of “capitalist globalization.” This emphasis on continuity comes at a cost. Telling the history of the powerful means recognizing not only broad continuities across time, but also tensions, fissures, and moments of possibility and change. Scholars must name power, but we must also describe it. It is no use to essentialize the powerful in ways we would never accept for the powerless.

Nicole Sackley is associate professor of History and American Studies at the University of Richmond. The author of several articles on the history of international development, she is currently completing a book entitled *Development Fields: American Social Scientists and the Practice of Modernization during the Cold War*.