

Brian Rice
Dr. Luesink
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Thesis Prospectus: The Philanthropy of Robber Barons

Throughout human history, acts of kindness and generosity have been recorded and reflected upon by historians to understand the impact that certain people had on a given society in terms of educational progression, contribution to the arts and sciences, or simply to tourism and national wealth production. Within analyzed accounts of corporate American history beginning in the late 19th century, examples of corporate philanthropy have produced tools for citizens to improve the welfare of American society in various aspects such as education, finances, and infrastructural growth. In places like New York City alone, examples of philanthropy from corporate leaders like Andrew Carnegie and John D. Rockefeller are on grand display through projects that were centered upon urban renewal like the famous Rockefeller Center and the multitude of Carnegie libraries throughout the city's five boroughs. Although displays of corporate philanthropy through infrastructure provided American citizens with resources that aided in urban development and aimed to provide societal and intellectual benefits for citizens, what made corporate industry leaders so willing to give back to the American people? A wide variety of both digitized primary and secondary sources related to corporate industry leaders have focused on the origins and motivations of corporate philanthropy in an attempt to understand its purpose and usefulness for citizens over the course of American history. This project will attempt to analyze the philanthropy of Andrew Carnegie and John D. Rockefeller to form conclusions about their motivations and reasoning behind their acts of corporate philanthropy. It will also aim to help readers understand that acts of corporate

philanthropy were not always a product of personal generosity but instead could be argued as placations that sought to boost social capital, credibility, and to save public reputation amidst previous acts that helped bolster and maintain their extremely lucrative conglomerated corporations.

In order to make proper conclusions about the merit and effectiveness of corporate philanthropy by industry heads like Andrew Carnegie and John D. Rockefeller, an understanding of their public reputations must be accounted for. When historians analyze the character of corporate industry leaders from the Gilded Age, there are two generalized terms that account for the leader's rise to wealth, power, and influence. These two terms, "robber baron," and "captain of industry," are widely used to describe the juxtaposing reputations of the leader's merit, character, and reputations that vary depending on the historian or person who commented on the particular industry leader. The term robber baron and its negative connotation of the industry leaders of subject, have been popularized by historians such as Henry Demarest Lloyd, Matthew Josephson, and Charles and Mary Beard who have critically analyzed corporate industry officials through marxist and determinist perspectives. The works of the Beards and Josephson are widely recognized for their contributions to anti-corporation literature and the negative reputations of John D. Rockefeller and Andrew Carnegie throughout the scholarly field. These works depicted the industry leaders as white anglo-saxon men who accumulated unprecedented wealth, social-status, and power on the backs of the proletariat class.¹ In contrast to this interpretation, historians such as Allan Nevins, William Miller, and Thomas Cochran have offered contributions on the subject with revisionist perspectives. Taking into account economic, analytical, and new social approaches to analyze the industry leaders, a less critical conclusion of the robber barons

¹ Charles and Mary Beard and Matthew Josephson authored works framing industry leaders as unscrupulous wealth owners at the expense of mistreated working Americans. *The Rise of American Civilization* (1927) and *The Robber Barons* (1934) are among these notable works.

has become the increasingly more common consensus in recent history.² Upon review of the literature it is evident that historiographic trends and analysis of industry leaders like Rockefeller and Carnegie have become increasingly revisionist in later years and less critical of the institutions that the leaders amassed their wealth under. The difference in older corporate leader history and recent accounts leaves readers to question if there was literature published in between these time periods that forced or created a transition in public reception of corporate leaders from unscrupulous tycoons to a more acceptable and understandable group of businessmen as they are understood now in contemporary research. In essence, the secondary literature that qualifies two opposite interpretations of the corporate leaders details the complexity of accurately describing the men, their character, and the purpose for which they conducted their individual works of philanthropy. Rather than using these sources to paint a broad conclusion about the goodness or superficialness of Carnegie and Rockefeller's philanthropy, they should be analyzed in a chronological way to understand how the men were publically received and to critically think about how their organized philanthropy could have helped, hurt, or impacted their historical reputation into the contemporary era.

To further understand these men and more about the authors that published differentiated literature during the Gilded Age, it is vital to analyze primary accounts that were circulating throughout the time period involving the corporate leaders that also contributed to the differing reputations of these men and how the public received them. Primary accounts written by muckraking journalists like Ida Tarbell against corporations like Standard Oil were read by both the common man and members of the American government to expose the issues surrounding conglomerate monopolies throughout the United States involving price-hiking, manipulation,

² Nevin's *John D. Rockefeller, The Heroic Age of American Enterprise* (1940), Cochran's *The Legend of the Robber Barons* (1950), and Miller's *American Historians and the Business Elite* (1949) contribute to more recent revisionist historical accounts of Carnegie and Rockefeller.

and labor abuses.³ Other satirical commentators like Finely Peter Dunne amongst other commentators and cartoonists were largely received by the public for publishing brute pieces of satire that attacked men like Carnegie who he thought did not do enough to help produce a better society but instead aimed to boast a better reputation after incidents like the Homestead Strike of 1892.⁴ Further contributions to the negative depictions of homestead were also made by Myron R Stowell in *The Homestead Lockout of 1892 in Historical Perspective*, published in 1893. In essence, this portion of the scholarly analysis of Andrew Carnegie and John D. Rockefeller greatly contributes to the historical narrative that qualifies both men as corporate barons that were in nature unjust, unfair, and unscrupulous to the workers that provided them with wealth, status, and power. Because of the prominence of literature that directed negative portrayals of corporate entrepreneurs it is clear to see that anti-corporate sentiments were especially prominent during the late 19th and early 20th century but it begs the question, “What did entrepreneurs like Carnegie and Rockefeller do to combat this problem?” In short, one response to the question could be that the industry men began to promote and practice institutionalized corporate philanthropy in efforts to reinvent their public image.

Following analysis of primary accounts that bolstered a negative connotation of the robber barons, primary accounts in newspaper articles and other outlets like autobiographies must be accounted for. As referenced previously, the focus of this project greatly depends on the literature that was produced in reaction, promotion, and publication of the good works, deeds, and philanthropy of industry leaders during the late 19th and early 20th century. In order to change the historical narrative of unscrupulous, monopolistic, and exploitative control of

³ Ida M. Tarbell published *The History of the Standard Oil Company* to contest against the unfair business practices of John D. Rockefeller in 1904.

⁴ Finley Peter Dunne published satirical newspaper articles using political cartoonist dialogue about Carnegie (i.e. *The Carnegie Libraries* (1892)).

different industries, the industry men themselves both wrote publications to add to their social capital as well as donated generous amounts of philanthropy in various ways. Important pieces of primary literature that add to a positive reception of industry men must be analyzed through the work of Andrew Carnegie. In order to reach the general public and form a positive reputation, Carnegie published assortments of essays, memoirs, and writings involving his views of society and the responsibilities of corporate leaders. Publications like *The Gospel of Wealth* in 1889 and *The Autobiography of Andrew Carnegie* in 1920 promoted Carnegie as a hardworking businessman that had positive motives for his business practices including helping the poor, building a more educated society, and the advancement of people from lower classes to higher social stratification. Carnegie amongst others published pieces like this in newspapers amongst other announcements of his philanthropic gifts of libraries to display to the public that he was a man of helpfulness and service. While these publications did not reference issues that were mishandled by his estate like the Homestead Riot, these publications promoted how Carnegie fought to pay his workers on a scalable system and how he strove to use his wealth to perfect society in a relatively Spencerian way. In unison, John D. Rockefeller also was a man who worked to reinvent his public image in response to negative primary accounts of his corporation from Tarbell and others. Rockefeller's foundation alone amassed over \$500 million dollars worth of philanthropic donations for education through the Rockefeller institute and Chicago University, the arts of art and dance, and even in research medicine. He details these positive acts and their effects on his own life and society in his personal autobiography.⁵

In essence, the primary accounts referencing the philanthropic work of Rockefeller and Carnegie will be analyzed to understand their character and motivations for philanthropy. While

⁵ Rockefeller, John D. 1909. *Random Reminiscences of Men and Events*. New York: Doubleday, Page & Company.

personal accounts written by both men highlight the motivations for philanthropy as duties and works of service for the betterment of society or even as works of religious duty, there are accounts to suggest that the publication of their philanthropy was used to placate a more historically positive reputation. Different accounts detail the works of corporate philanthropy of these men in juxtaposing ways. Some publications both primary and secondary define the Carnegie libraries as buildings of grand stature forced upon working people who were forced to maintain them while others define the libraries as vital to the transformation of education and knowledge throughout the United States. Comparatively so, the Rockefeller foundation is equally scrutinized as a foundation that was not built on service to others and to God, but merely as a service to combat the negative historical implications of antitrust laws and negative monopolistic connotations. In conclusion, this research prospectus will study the philanthropy of Carnegie and Rockefeller to understand their motivations, purpose, and reasoning behind their philanthropy. It will also help readers understand the complexity of corporate philanthropy and how the philanthropic foundations and donations contributed to an increasingly positive or revisionist outlook on corporate leaders that has survived into modern contemporary research on this subject.

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