

Black Lives Matter: The Perils of Liberal Philanthropy

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This carefully research article first published in 2016 shows that Black Lives Matter has been funded by philanthropists and corporate foundations including Soros' Open Society Initiative and the Ford Foundation which has links to the CIA.

The underlying objective is ultimately to control Black Power.

How can activists take an effective and meaningful stance against neoliberalism and racism when their NGO is funded by the financial establishment.

"Manufactured Dissent". The philanthropists are "funding dissent" with a view to controlling dissent.

The Rockefellers, Ford et al have funded the "anti-globalization movement" from the very outset of the World Social Forum (WSF).

The WSF is said to have transformed progressive movements, leading to what is described as the emergence of the "Global Left". Nonsense.

Wall Street foundations support the protest movement against Wall Street? How convenient.

We are dealing with a network of corporate funding of so-called "progressive" organizations. This networking of funding dissent is a powerful instrument.

Real progressive movements have been shattered, largely as a result of the funding of dissent.

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A campaign is ongoing across America. Black Lives Matter (which is playing a key role in combating racism and the police state) is funded by the same financial interests which are behind the deadly lockdown: WEF, Gates Foundation, Rockefeller et al.

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The closure of the US economy supported by Big Money has been conducive to mass unemployment and despair. A meaningful "mass movement" against racism and social inequality cannot under any circumstances be funded by Big Money foundations.

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To put it bluntly: You cannot organize a mass movement against the Empire and then ask

the Empire to pay for your travel expenses.

Michel Chossudovsky, June 2, 2020

The Movement for Black Lives has started turning to foundations for funding. But the history of the Black Power movement offers a cautionary tale about the warping effects of liberal philanthropy's soft power.

In 2016, the Ford Foundation, the nation's second-largest philanthropic foundation, announced a [major new initiative to support the Movement for Black Lives](#) — the network of fledgling organizations that coalesced as #blacklivesmatter to protest the police killing of black people across the US.

Offering over \$40 million in “capacity”-strengthening funding to M4BL organizations over six years, the foundation's support came at a new stage for Black Lives Matter. Moving beyond protest to institutionalize its social vision, the Movement for Black Lives had crafted an ambitious [policy platform](#) to take on state violence writ large. Ford's announcement followed its work with (and \$1.5 million donation to) Borealis Philanthropy, which in 2015 established the [Black-led Movement Fund](#) to attract and consolidate major gifts from other liberal funders, most notably George Soros's Open Society Foundations, and support the movement even longer term.

But there was a catch: foundation officers [framed](#) their support of M4BL as a response to the murder of police officers in Dallas and Baton Rouge during a period of otherwise nonviolent protests against the police killings of two black men, Philando Castile and Alton Sterling. Highlighting the “larger democratic principles at play,” Ford officials explained that the

“officers died while protecting the right to freedom of expression and peaceful protest, and are inexorably linked to Philando Castile and Alton Sterling.” These moments of violence, they warned, had “the potential to either deepen empathy and understanding among Americans or divide us even more sharply along lines of race, ethnicity, and gender . . . Now is the time to stand by and amplify movements rooted in love, compassion, and dignity for all people.”

The statement was striking: couching its funding commitment as a reaction to instances of black, not state, violence; as an affirmation of its ongoing faith in the role of the police in American liberal democracy; and as a color-blind statement that “all lives matter.” Each formulation contradicted Black Lives' baseline assumption of endemic, racialized state violence undergirding American society and political economy. The Ford Foundation's comments suggest that dominant liberal philanthropies are engaging today's black freedom struggle from a very different place than their grantees — not from a position of black liberation and radical struggle, but from one of pacification and liberal reform. This subordination of black freedom to the stability of the nation puts the foundation in direct ideological conflict with the Movement for Black Lives — just as it did [fifty years ago](#), in another moment of black insurgency. For all that is rightly heralded as new about [Black Lives Matter](#) — its impressive use of social media as a mobilizing tool, its disruption of dominant narratives about race and justice, the presence of queer women among its leading strategists and organizers — the movement shares much with the Black Power movement of

the 1960s. Both were and are dominated by young people responding to racial oppression, unmoved by the liberal measures promoted by established black leaders. Both interpreted and interpret their oppression through a wide, oppositional lens that demands no less than [social and structural transformation](#). And elements in both movements made and are making the calculation that in an environment of iron-fisted “law and order,” the velvet glove of liberal philanthropy can provide a helping hand. Given these similarities, the Ford Foundation’s funding of Black Power serves as a cautionary tale to black freedom organizations today. Black Power activists believed they were entering their relationship with foundations with their eyes wide open. They were smart, strategically minded activists. Yet they didn’t fully appreciate the distance between their social vision and the Ford Foundation’s — or the warping effects of liberal philanthropy’s soft power.

Managing the “American Dilemma”



In 1966, the Ford Foundation’s new president, McGeorge Bundy, announced that the organization would forge a different path for American philanthropy, turning the foundation’s primary domestic focus to issues of what it called “Negro equality.” The rash of urban uprisings the previous year — coinciding with the Voting Rights Act, which many liberals thought signaled the end of racial inequality — had sent the foundation into full crisis mode.

The famed organization had played an instrumental role in conceiving of and piloting key programs of Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society, and it understood better than most liberal institutions the depth of black alienation in the United States. Bundy warned that with the rise of Black Power the United States was imperiled by a “true social revolution at home,” requiring a response at the “[level of effort . . . we now make as a nation in Vietnam](#).” Taking on this national threat, he argued, would require embracing liberal reform — exemplified by the Ford Foundation — to “[right these ancient wrongs, and . . . by peaceful means](#).” In keeping with previous liberal elites, Bundy sought to manage the periodic threat to the nation caused by the American “[dilemma](#)” of racial inequality. So what did Bundy’s foundation do to manage black insurgency on behalf of the nation? He and his officers settled on a counterintuitive policy: black assimilation through racial separatism. A latter-day version of “separate but equal,” this approach advocated continuing the isolation of urban ghettos until these neighborhoods could be revitalized. Then, the argument went, the residents would be on firmer ground to spring into the mainstream of American society, fully assimilated.

But Bundy and his officers had a problem. Thanks to the political achievements of the black

freedom movement, they couldn't simply impose their will. They had to find a non-disruptive way to represent the African-American public in the nation. Their solution was to foster the creation of a new black leadership class that could broker for the black poor from within the American establishment — a kind of elite pluralism that would at once demonstrate the nation was living up to its egalitarian ideals and dampen black insurgency. This program intersected with the black activism of the time in many ways, including its advocacy of racial separatism, black economic development, cultural revitalization, and strong black leadership. Even more disarming for its Black Power grantees, the Ford Foundation used the language of colonialism to describe African-Americans' position and suggested that its grants program for black Americans was one of decolonization. Supporters and critics alike saw Bundy as a daring iconoclast for consorting with black radicals and regarded his foundation as a "change agent." But neither fully understood the kind of postcolonial order Bundy had in mind.

Holding the Strings

From 1966 until the mid-1970s, Bundy's foundation led the way on social development, partnering with other elite liberals and black activists on a number of initiatives that are today considered among Black Power's major legacies. The foundation helped plan and underwrite black community control school demonstrations in New York City, [including the infamous one in Brooklyn's Ocean Hill-Brownsville](#), and funded the [Black Power incarnation of the Congress of Racial Equality](#). It pioneered the [community development corporation](#), a model that continues to predominate in public-private efforts to spur economic growth in inner-city neighborhoods. And it bankrolled all-black and [even radically Afrocentric performing arts organizations](#) for the cultural uplift of ghetto residents. Yet despite their high profile, these initiatives did little to mitigate the plight of poor urban communities. Working from the postwar liberal premise that economic and political power were unlimited in the US — bottomless resources that, with minor fixes, could be shared without conflict among all members of society — the foundation looked to black behavioral pathology, rather than structural racism, as the primary source of racial inequality. The foundation's nationalism and racial ideology thus prevented it from gaining a clear-sighted understanding of the problem, let alone its solution. And it enforced that myopic understanding with pecuniary discipline. When grantees betrayed the foundation's social vision or agenda, they got cut off. The most overtly liberationist Black Power beneficiaries, like those in Cleveland CORE and New York's community control movement, saw their funding slashed or curtailed when their demands and actions for self-determination created more, rather than less, social conflict.


Increasingly, the foundation became more partial to the cultural wing of Black Power, which was often involved in less contentious endeavors. But even in these cases, more radical projects, like that of the leftist theater director Douglas Turner Ward and his [Negro Ensemble Company](#), faced a funding hammer that relentlessly chipped away at their aims for social transformation.

Out of the rubble of this experimentation, the Ford Foundation found the right vehicle for its assimilationist goals. While it institutionalized black arts and black studies within the nation's cultural and educational establishment, Bundy's foundation also promoted a program of black leadership development (fostered through initiatives like making community development corporations the incubators of black "public entrepreneurs") and an ambitious college scholarship program (which played a significant role in expanding the black professional class). These efforts — not liberationist ventures that butted up against the foundation's conciliatory ethos — were the concrete and lasting accomplishments of the

Ford Foundation's efforts. In fact, [this model of elite affirmative action](#) paved a path of least resistance against the claims of Black Power, one that would be followed by the federal government ([starting with the Nixon administration](#)), corporate America, and public and private institutions across the United States. By that point, the foundation had long since abandoned any remnant of an ambitious social-development agenda. Despite ongoing ghettoization, the nation-threatening conflict and disorder of the riots had faded away — and so had the urgency of dealing with the fundamental problems facing inner-city communities. The foundation's goal was clear: fostering individual minority leadership to ensure that, in spite of ongoing racial inequality, African Americans could be represented appropriately in the nation's public life. It had thus found its answer to the problem of racial inequality, and the nation had been saved once again from the fundamental contradiction between the liberal creed and social reality.

The Limits of Liberal Philanthropy

The Ford Foundation's engagement with Black Power proved to be at best constricting and at worst destructive for most of its grantees. It spawned a new regime of [race management](#) that has served the nation's elites, not black freedom. It helped lay the seed for the "[progressive neoliberalism](#)," which celebrates elite multiculturalism and promotes "diversity" while ignoring or masking [structural inequalities](#). Nevertheless, there are good reasons why black activists took the money, then and now. For one thing, it's hard to turn down such magnificent sums.

For another, the Ford Foundation [is one of the few](#) foundations ([and by far the richest](#)) ready to fund black activism. One could even argue that progressive social movements can't afford to reject philanthropic funding because they have to compete in a [plutocratic political environment](#) shaped by the [ideological convictions of conservative billionaires](#) and [grandiose schemes of high-tech magnates](#). For example, criminal justice reformers have worked with George Soros, Ford's partner in the Black-led Movement Fund, who has helped bankroll their efforts. But foundation imperatives will likely clip the wings of radical dreamers today, just as they did in the 1960s and '70s. 

Again, the Ford Foundation is instructive. The foundation's current president, Darren Walker, is the embodiment of its decades-long strategy of elite racial liberalism. Walker, a [black, gay Southerner who was born in poverty](#), rode the "mobility elevator," as he put it, "[fast and hard, and as far as I wanted to go](#)," to become a lawyer, investment banker, and philanthropic leader, thanks in part to the Great Society's Head Start and Pell Grants program. He leads an organization whose senior staff and [trustees are remarkably diverse in terms of race, gender, and sexuality](#) (and who haven't had a white male president since Bundy resigned in 1979).

To his credit, Walker is working hard to make the foundation's elite multiculturalism finally bear fruit for more than a fortunate few. In 2015, he positioned the foundation outside of the philanthropic mainstream by refocusing all of its grant-making to address the causes and consequences of inequality, dedicating \$1 billion to the effort. In announcing this shift, he declared a "[new gospel of wealth](#)" in which he frankly acknowledged that the fortunes that create philanthropy are deeply implicated in inequality, and urged his fellow philanthropists to ask, "Why *are* we still necessary?" The foundation has since broken with its formerly ironclad financial orthodoxy by [investing a small percentage of its endowment for social impact](#), not just financial return.

Walker's foundation is also notably humble in this age of overbearing, top-down "strategic"

philanthropy by Silicon Valley “disruptors”; unlike many of his peers he [refutes](#) the philanthropist’s fantasy that “foundations are central protagonists in the story of social change, when, really, we are the supporting cast.” Following up on this credo, the foundation has offered long-term institutional support to “anchor” organizations, like M4BL, and then promised to step back, offering the grantees security and freedom from the “proposal economy” that sucks up the energy and so often redirects the program and mission of nonprofits. In the world of philanthropy these are not trivial interventions, and Walker’s leadership deserves some praise.

But McGeorge Bundy [also stretched](#) the limits of philanthropy’s innate conservatism by expanding the range of its social responsibility, dabbling in social investment and promising not to interfere in the work of the foundation’s Black Power grantees. And despite its brave talk about philanthropists’ connection to inequality, Walker’s “[gospel](#)” includes an “obligation to capitalism,” in which he dreams of “bridg[ing] the philosophies of [Adam] Smith, and [Andrew] Carnegie, and [Martin Luther] King,” by “bending the *demand curve* toward justice” — a heretical blending of market fundamentals with [the maxim King made famous](#). Needless to say, he doesn’t reckon with King’s later understanding of [the intertwining of American capitalism and racial inequality](#), an understanding at the core of M4BL’s platform.

Walker asks his fellow philanthropists to “leverage our privilege to disrupt the levers of inequality,” not to eliminate either the privilege or the levers. No matter how multicultural its leadership or reformist its agenda, the Ford Foundation and liberal philanthropy writ large remain within and committed to the systems that spawned their creation and that undergird the American political economy. As many Black Power activists learned fifty years ago, immersion into that liberal funding stream can inexorably redirect their quest for freedom.

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*Featured image: Future Ford Foundation president McGeorge Bundy visiting South Vietnam in 1965.
(Source: Francois Sully / Flickr)*

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