

Foundations and 'Structural Racism': Take Another Look

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Chronicle of Philanthropy

May 29, 2008

To the Editor:

Many Chronicle readers may have been alarmed to learn that our nation's largest foundations are supporting a radical left-wing agenda, one informed by the discourse of structural racism.

In his gratuitously politicized piece ("Philanthropy's Jeremiah Wright Problem," My View, May 15), William Schambra of the Hudson Institute quotes statements about structural racism from various nonprofit groups and journals.

Mr. Schambra asserts that the American public would be "startled" and "surprised" to learn that "grants from the nation's largest foundations sustain a similarly harsh view of a nation riven by an unrelenting and deeply oppressive racial divide. America, in this view, is steeped in 'structural racism.'"

To his credit, Mr. Schambra draws from various resources in an attempt to introduce the readers to structural racism.

But a clearer, more accurate picture of structural racism begs for a comprehensive definition that takes into account the milieu of the analysis. Moreover, Mr. Schambra uses the most seemingly provocative statements from the many reports he cites, but when read in context, the quotes are far less "startling" than Schambra would have readers believe.

Andrew Grant-Thomas and John A. Powell offer a simple framework that describes structural racism as emphasizing "the powerful impact of interinstitutional dynamics, institutional resource inequities, and historical legacies on racial inequalities today."

Similarly, a 2005 report by the Center for Social Inclusion, which Mr. Schambra quotes in his piece, offers affirmative action as an example to demonstrate the seemingly amorphous concept of structural racism: Affirmative action benefits white women and the broader society as a whole, not just communities of color.

In other words, the net benefit of affirmative action is greater than the sum of its parts. As the center's report notes, there is a need to increase public awareness about the often subtle ways in which race and gender persist as barriers to equality of achievement.

We can use a multitude of lenses to demonstrate how structural racism is manifested in today's society, such as Mr. Schambra's effort at linking it to philanthropy.

Readers are left with the impression that our large national foundations are aggressively funding some radical leftist agenda that the American public is utterly unfamiliar with and, if

enlightened, would be unsupportive of. Unfortunately, he fails to take into account key giving trends, resulting in an inaccurate, if not misleading, picture of the current state of philanthropy in the United States.

Let's look at the numbers. In a 2005 report, Independent Sector and the Foundation Center found that social-justice grant making in 1998 and 2002 comprised a meager 11 percent of overall foundation giving, and only a fraction of that was grants for issues identified by the structural-racism framework as barriers to equality.

The report defined social-justice philanthropy as foundation grants that address "structural change in order to increase opportunity of those who are the least well off politically, economically, and socially."

Because there is no category for grants that explicitly fund work framed by structural-racism principles, social-justice grant making offers a good proxy measure.

Is it true that our large foundations are so acutely aware of race and oppression in their grant making that they prioritize racially specific grants?

Again, the data suggest otherwise.

The 2008 edition of the Foundation Center's annual Foundation Giving Trends: Update on Funding Priorities notes that in 2006, funding for racial or ethnic minorities increased by only 5.5 percent, while overall grant making rose by 16.4 percent.

Compared with 2005, when this group accounted for 8.2 percent of total grant dollars authorized, the 2006 data show that this group garnered only 7.4 percent.

While an analysis of the long-term trends indicates an increase in overall giving for ethnic and racial minorities in the 2005-6 period when compared with the 2000-3 period, one is left to wonder how much of foundation grant making is really supporting work that would fall under the rubric of structural racism.

The structural-racism framework posits that analyses of racial inequality that ignore the historical decisions that led to institutional barriers to equality of achievement are insufficient in understanding race in the United States.

To that end, explicitly identifying deliberate policy decisions that persist as barriers to equality is an integral component of any work that truly seeks to affect change in American racial attitudes. Mr. Schambra's piece asks whether programs that are not racially specific are futile; an answer from within the structural-racism framework would suggest that they are.

In 2004, the Urban Institute in collaboration with Grantmakers for Effective Organizations produced the report Attitudes and Practices Concerning Effective Philanthropy, written by Francie Ostrower.

Their survey found that a "relatively low proportion of foundations in any region said that influencing public policy is very important."

While the numbers increase for those foundations that state that this work is "somewhat or very important," the report's findings remain salient: If foundations are truly funding work that addresses structural racism, wouldn't influencing public policy be a very important criterion in their grant making?

Lastly, readers of The Chronicle are ill-served by Mr. Schambra's attempt to divide philanthropy along political lines, suggesting that "progressive" funders and nonprofit groups are the ones engaged in public-policy work.

In fact, a decade of research by the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy shows how conservative foundations have been strategically advancing their agenda by providing sympathetic think tanks and advocacy organizations with flexible and multiyear grants, and supporting programs that specifically target public policy and promote conservative ideas. If "progressive" funders had been funding "progressive" nonprofits in a similar fashion, structural racism as a theoretical framework would likely not exist.

Mr. Schambra suggests that, "just as Senator Obama seized the Jeremiah Wright controversy as an opportunity to explain his broader view of race in America, so this might be the moment for some of our largest foundations to explain what they intend by giving money to organizations that advance the structural-racism critique of America."

In response, we ask: Why are the small percentage of structural-racism grants a cause for concern among Mr. Schambra and leaders of conservative foundations who have been so successful themselves at actually influencing government and policy decisions? Why should progressive foundations apologize for seeking to effectively address the needs of marginalized communities by funding organizations that seek to transform the institutions that perpetuate social inequities?

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