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Performing Philanthropy from Andrew Carnegie to Bill Gates

ALISA ZHULINA

Let us be as careful with the money we would spend for the benefit of others, as if we were laying it aside for our own family's future use.

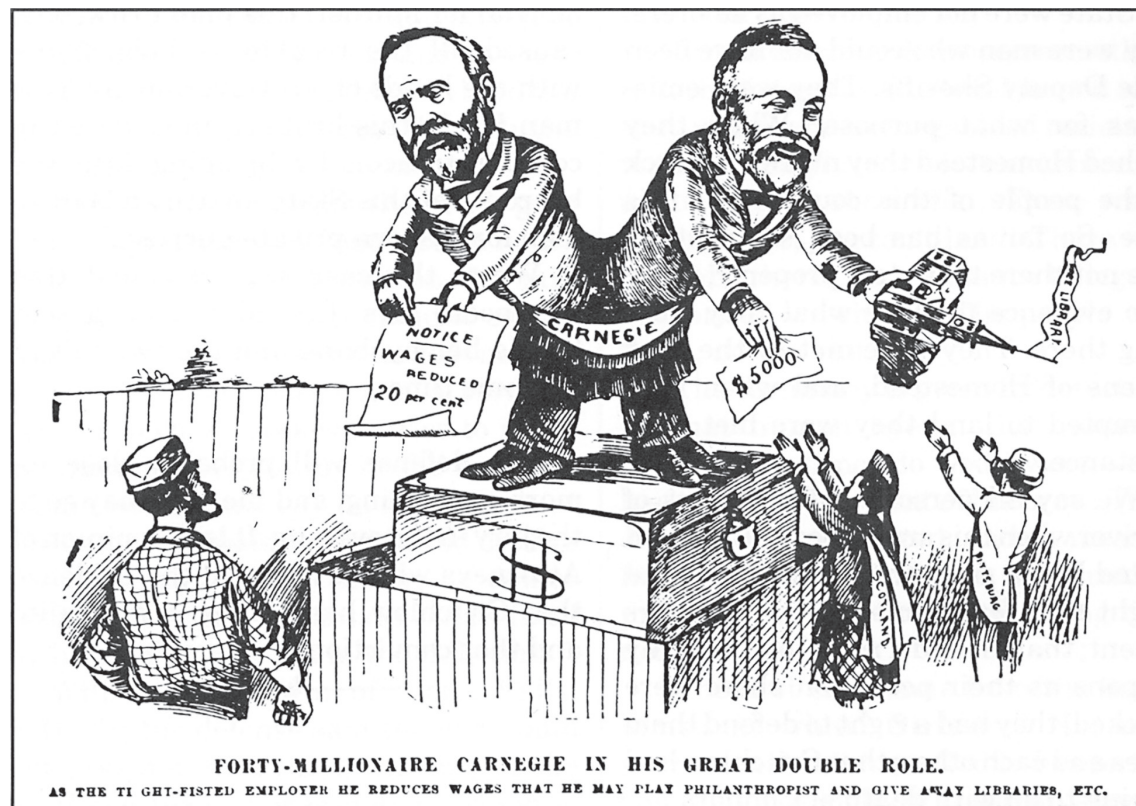
John D. Rockefeller (1909: 188)

INTRODUCTION

As the inequality and poverty gap continues to widen worldwide, philanthropy continues to grow in scale. In 2010, Warren Buffet and Bill and Melinda Gates founded the Giving Pledge, promising to give most of their wealth to charity during their lifetimes. As of 2018, their website boasts 175 members and foregrounds the 'commitment by the world's wealthiest individuals and families to dedicate the majority of their wealth to giving back' (The Giving Pledge 2018). Bill Gates emphasizes his and

Melinda's commitment to philanthropy in their foundation's annual letter: 'We think that's a basic responsibility of anyone with a lot of money. Once you've taken care of yourself and your children, the best use of extra wealth is to give it back to society' (Schwartz 2018). What constitutes 'giving back to society', however, has been a contentious issue ever since philanthropy first became an organized enterprise of managing surplus wealth. Judith Butler has recently shown how performativity can offer a way to think about economic effects. For example, "the economy" ... becomes singular and monolithic by virtue of the convergence of certain kinds of processes and practices that produce the "effect" of the knowable and unified economy' (2010: 147). Following this logic, philanthropy is

■ Unknown, 'Andrew Carnegie Plays a Double Role'. *HERB: Resources for Teachers*, accessed June 5, 2018, <https://herb.ashp.cuny.edu/items/show/636>.



not merely the 'desire to promote the welfare of others, expressed by the generous donation of money to good causes' (*Oxford Dictionary Online* 2018), but rather a host of processes, practices and conflicting ideologies that performatively give rise to the economic effect known as 'philanthropy'.

As Robert Bremner notes, before the late nineteenth century, philanthropy did not yet mean the funding of the arts, education and cultural institutions, but rather the 'advocacy of humanitarian causes such as improvement in prison conditions; abstinence or temperance in use of alcohol; abolition of slavery, flogging, and capital punishment; and recognition of the rights of labor, women, and nonwhite people' (1994: 121). The modern view of philanthropy 'took shape in the years between 1885 and 1915 as multimillionaires like Andrew Carnegie, John D. Rockefeller, and other rich men and women sought practical, socially useful ways of disposing of [their] surplus wealth' (159). In doing so, they began to employ philanthropy as a cultural weapon in promoting the values of unbridled capitalism.

In his essay 'Socialism for Millionaires', Bernard Shaw, the Irish playwright and one of the founders of the Fabian Society and of the London School of Economics, argued that the wealthy should 'never do anything for the public, any more than for an individual, that the public will do (because it must) for itself without [their] intervention' (Shaw 1901: 9). In part, Shaw's essay was a response to Andrew Carnegie's 1889 essay 'The Gospel of Wealth' that posited philanthropy as a way for the wealthy to take control of public policy. Shaw insisted that Carnegie and the likes of him had not yet figured out how to 'unload' surplus wealth 'without the waste, pauperization, and demoralization that are summed up in England under the word charity' and that the redistribution of resources should be left to the state (2). Instead, Shaw proposed that public benefactors give the people 'something they ought to want and don't'. Citing the example of John Ruskin, who founded the St George's Museum for the working men and women of Sheffield, England, Shaw expressed the hope that millionaires would focus their attention on 'the beautification of

cities, the endowment of a standard orchestra and theatre in every centre of our population', though he also expressed a reservation that such matters appealed 'only to a religious and artistic faculty which cannot be depended on in millionaires' (14). Ruskin, who was both an art critic and a philanthropist, figures as an exception to the rule. In general, Shaw viewed the trend of large-scale philanthropy with scepticism. The only thing that he seemed to have endorsed without reservation was 'bringing industrial education up to date' and the transmission of information: 'Experiment, propaganda, exploration, discovery, political and industrial information: take care of these, and the pictures and statues, the churches and hospitals, will take care of themselves' (14).

In other words, Shaw was more comfortable with millionaires remaining in their domain of business rather than venturing out to influence the arts, education or public policy through their donations. It is important to remember, however, that the founding of the London School of Economics was made possible by the generous bequest of Derby lawyer Henry Hutchinson to a group of trustees, headed by Sidney Webb, for the advancement of the ideas of the Fabian Society and of socialism. While welcoming this gift in practice, in theory Shaw foreshadowed the exclusionary mechanism of higher education and of cultural capital, noting that 'whilst it is easy to found colleges and scholarships, it is impossible to confine their benefits to those who are unable to pay for them' (10). These contradictions of modern philanthropy as well as the very question of whether or not to accept the philanthropic gifts of industrial capitalists would serve as an inspiration for Shaw's *Major Barbara* (1907), a play whose central questions remain as urgent today as they were at the turn of the twentieth century.

This article argues that in order to understand the ideology of contemporary philanthropy and to find ways to resist it, it is necessary to study its origins in industrial capitalism as well as the concomitant critique levelled at it by nineteenth-century theatre. Whatever social benefits philanthropy might carry, it is also vulnerable to being used performatively to sway the public to embrace capitalist values.

Philanthropists might also seek to control the content of the performing arts, in other words the very channels through which the practice of philanthropy can be critiqued. If, as Judith Butler notes, economic theory is 'one of the processes that performatively bring about the market, or what we might call the "the market presumption"', then the discourse of philanthropy is yet another process by which the values and assumptions of the so-called free market are performatively reproduced (2010: 148).

Several theorists have sounded the alarm that contemporary philanthropy has not received the critical attention that it merits. As Michael Massing notes, philanthropy is 'one of the principal ways in which the superrich not only "give back" but also exert influence', thus becoming political 'activism' in its own right (2016). Writing specifically about the American context, Olivier Zunz reminds us of philanthropy's contentious history:

Philanthropists have invested their resources in the greater American fight over the definition of the common good. They have taken sides in all the partisan encounters that have divided our society and have strategically intervened in essential debates on citizenship, opportunity, and rights. (2012: 5)

What appears at first glance to be a laudable generosity belies an ideological agenda that justifies and promotes neoliberalism, which David Harvey defines as 'a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can be best advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade' (2007: 2). For example, in *Dark Money: The Hidden History of the Billionaires Behind the Rise of the Radical Right*, Jane Mayer shows how the Koch family has 'weaponiz[ed] philanthropy' in 'the war of ideas' (2016: 31). The Koch brothers have bankrolled the Tea Party, lobbied against restrictions on carbon emissions and funded think tanks that deny climate change, all the while presenting their libertarian activism 'as philanthropy, leaving almost no money trail that the public could trace' (6). While the Koch brothers' sponsorship of conservative and libertarian agendas by

means of strategic think tanks might strike one as being categorically different from their gifts to the Lincoln Center, the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the New York-Presbyterian Hospital, legally and discursively these channels for disposing of wealth are all labelled as philanthropy, thereby performatively creating the effect of 'giving back to society'. Under the umbrella of contemporary philanthropy, think tanks promoting climate change scepticism, such as the Heartland Institute, funded by Charles G. Koch, have as much a right to exist as the David H. Koch Theater. The liberal public might even accept the existence of the former as a necessary evil in order to reap the benefits of the latter. Philanthropy can thus perform the role of 'conscience money' by smoothing over the detrimental economic effects triggered by the financial elites (Shaw 1901: 14). Indeed, in his recent book, *The Beneficiary*, Bruce Robbins suggests that Wall Street financiers who regularly give to charity 'may be doing much more harm by their financial activities than they could possibly undo by their philanthropy' (2017: 24).

Warren Buffet explicitly references Andrew Carnegie's 1889 essay 'The Gospel of Wealth' as the inspiration behind the Giving Pledge (Feloni 2016). This reference is significant for a few reasons. First, it suggests that the contemporary phenomenon of mass-scale, institutionalized philanthropy owes much to the rise of nineteenth-century industrial capitalism. In fact, industrial capitalism needed philanthropy not only to justify its economic injustices, but also to present itself as the only viable economic and political system. Second, Andrew Carnegie was one of the first 'philanthrocapitalists', to borrow Michael Massing's turn of phrase, who saw the potential of philanthropy to shape public opinion through the arts, entertainment and mass media (Massing 2016). Bernard Shaw took the practice of philanthropy in general and Carnegie's ideological role in particular to trial in *Major Barbara*. Although philanthropy masquerades as a benevolent gift for the common good, its goal is often nothing less than the aggressive control of public policy and the prevention of an equitable redistribution of wealth.

ANDREW CARNEGIE'S GOSPEL OF WEALTH

The steel magnate, Andrew Carnegie, first published his essay, 'Wealth', in the *North American Review*, in June of 1889, and later as 'The Gospel of Wealth' in the British *Pall Mall Magazine*. In it, Carnegie argued that the rich had a duty to administer their wealth through charities during their lifetimes, famously proclaiming by the end: 'The man who dies thus rich dies disgraced' (2017: 15). Philanthropy, for Carnegie, did not mean a no-strings-attached act of generosity, however. Far from it. 'The Gospel of Wealth' begins with the claim that the 'problem of our age is the proper administration of wealth, so that the ties of brotherhood may still bind together the rich and the poor in harmonious relationship' (1).

Carnegie published his treatise on philanthropy during a time of political unrest on both sides of the Atlantic. Marx and Engels had published *The Communist Manifesto* in 1848, the short-lived Paris Commune experimented with a radical socialist government from 18 March to 28 May 1871 and Samuel Gompers founded the American Federation of Labor in 1886. Capitalism did not yet have the last word. Revolution was in the air, and with it socialist ideas, including the redistribution of wealth. Today, given the supposed triumph of capitalism and the collapse of Soviet socialism, it is easy to forget that capitalism was once a contested phenomenon. The Austrian-born American economist, Joseph Schumpeter, along with Karl Marx, for example, was convinced that capitalism would self-destruct (Schumpeter 2008: 143).

Philanthropy, for Carnegie, was first and foremost an alternative to the socialist equitable redistribution of wealth. Thus, he argued that a temporary inequality gap was both necessary and just. It was necessary because the 'great irregularity' of incomes was more desirable 'than universal squalor' (Carnegie 2017: 1). Capitalism had raised the standard of living, made commodities that were once luxuries available to many and was responsible for the 'wonderful material development, which brings improved conditions in its train' (3). But capitalism runs on the accumulation of capital, which 'must either go

forward or fall behind: to stand still is impossible' (4). Thus, according to Carnegie, the inequality gap was just since a few motivated and talented persons would always accrue the largest piece of the economic pie. Yet communism was not the right solution, as it went against basic human nature. In this assertion, Carnegie echoes Adam Smith's famous line that humans supposedly have a natural 'propensity to truck, barter, and exchange one thing for another' (Smith 2003: 21). In other words, 'The Gospel of Wealth' represents communism as nothing less than a revolution that attempts to alter human nature:

It necessitates the changing of human nature itself – a work of eons, even if it were good to change it, which we cannot know. It is not practicable in our day or in our age. Even if desirable theoretically, it belongs to another and long-succeeding sociological stratum. (Carnegie 2017: 5)

What was practical then was the efficient administration of wealth under the direct control of the wealthy:

There remains, then, only one mode of using great fortunes; but in this we have the true antidote for the temporary unequal distribution of wealth, the reconciliation of the rich and the poor – a reign of harmony – another ideal, differing, indeed, from that of the Communist in requiring only the further evolution of existing conditions, not the total overthrow of our civilization. It is founded upon the present most intense individualism, and the race is prepared to put it in practice by degrees whenever it pleases. (9–10)

In this 'utopian' vision, philanthropy performatively brings about 'the reconciliation of the rich and the poor' by working with the existent material conditions and the imperfect human nature of egotism. What underpins all this is the desire of the wealthy to wrest political control from the state, or as Andrew Undershaft, the arms dealer, succinctly puts it in *Major Barbara*:

I am your government: I, and Lazarus.... You will make war when it suits us, and keep peace when it doesn't. You will find out that trade requires certain measures when we have decided on those measures. When I want anything to keep my dividends up, you will discover that my want is a national need. (Shaw 2002: 264)

This underlying desire to become more powerful than the government is the reason why Carnegie opposed the giving away of wealth

after one's death and promoted instead the administration of charities throughout one's lifetime. The first is undesirable because the will of the wealthy might not be respected and because of 'the growing disposition to tax more and more heavily large estates left at death' (Carnegie 2017:8). In other words, capital that floats into the hands of the state is considered a wasted opportunity to exert influence in the public domain. Moreover, a tax break is what often motivates the beginning of a career in philanthropy in the first place. For example, tax avoidance was 'the original impetus for the Koch brothers' extraordinary philanthropy' (Mayer 2016:51). If they were going to lose most of their wealth to federal and state taxes anyway, performing philanthropy becomes a desirable alternative that allows them to promote policies that further their business interests. Philanthropy thus both performatively brings their desired reality into being and performs an 'act' of generosity. In this manner, philanthropy also reveals the simultaneously contentious and symbiotic relationship between government and big business.

Moreover, in Carnegie's account, performance plays an important role in the self-representation of the philanthropist. Because it is important for the philanthrocapitalist to appear as 'the mere agent and trustee for his poorer brethren, bringing to their service his superior wisdom', Carnegie advises him (and it's always a 'he' in 'The Gospel of Wealth') to 'set an example of modest, unostentatious living'. Put simply, it is important to not show off one's wealth through conspicuous consumption or extravagant fashion. Because Carnegie understood that it would be difficult to determine 'what is modest, unostentatious living' and 'what is the best test of extravagance', he envisioned the public at large as the audience of the philanthrocapitalist, either approving or disapproving of his performance:

Whatever makes one conspicuous offends the canon. If any family be chiefly known for display, for extravagance in home, table, equipage, for enormous sums ostentatiously spent in any form upon itself – if these be chief distinctions, we have no difficulty in estimating its nature or culture.... The verdict rests with the best and most enlightened public sentiment. The community will surely judge, and its judgments will not often be wrong. (Carnegie 2017:12)

A productive comparison might be made here between those philanthrocapitalists who follow this model of unostentatious self-representation today, such as the Gates family, and those who make the display of wealth itself a performance and a brand that can make them even more money, like the Trump family. Unsurprisingly, the Trump Foundation was shut down in November 2017 for violating federal rules on 'self-dealing', that is, the illegal activity of transferring their charity's capital to themselves, their families and their businesses (Dilanian et al. 2017). In the case of the Gates family, the performance of modesty brings about the economic effect of 'giving back to society', whereas the Trump family's conspicuous consumption creates the effect of economic power and of wealth that might not be as vast in actuality as it is often advertised.

The second part of 'The Gospel of Wealth' is devoted to listing the best fields for philanthropy, and here too the ideological aim is to prevent the equitable redistribution of wealth, the main argument being that 'the best means of benefitting the community is to place within its reach the ladders upon which the aspiring can rise' (Carnegie 2017:14). Carnegie thus opposed the indiscriminate charity of helping all the poor, an act he called 'pauperizing a community'. He argued that the responsibility of providing food, refuge and clothing for the 'irreclaimably destitute' (28) fell on the city and state, and not on the philanthropist, who instead should focus on the so-called deserving members of the population by funding free libraries, universities, parks, museums, laboratories, concert halls, swimming baths and churches (20). Indeed, the story that Carnegie liked to tell about his own career was that, as a Scottish immigrant, he rose from a bobbin boy in a cotton factory to the superintendent of the Western Division of the Pennsylvania Railroad by being an insatiable reader who took advantage of the library that an Allegheny citizen made available to working men (38).

BERNARD SHAW'S TAINTED MONEY

In the Gilded Age of philanthropists, such as Andrew Carnegie, Peter Cooper, Leland Stanford and John D. Rockefeller, to name but a few, Bernard Shaw exposed what Andrew Undershaft

in *Major Barbara* calls ‘the tricks of the governing class’ (Shaw 2002: 261).¹ In particular, Shaw pointed out the hypocrisy of the philanthropists’ aim to help only the ‘deserving’ poor, asserting that all poor needed help, especially the ‘undeserving’ ones that Carnegie dismissed (Shaw 1901: 7–8). *Major Barbara* captures the transition from early nineteenth-century humanitarian philanthropy to the late nineteenth-century philanthropy as investment. The play begins with Andrew Undershaft’s daughter Barbara serving in the Salvation Army, an international charitable organization founded by the Methodist Reform Church minister William Booth and his wife Catherine in 1865, and ends with Barbara crossing to her philanthrocapitalist father’s side. Two central questions animate *Major Barbara*. Should the Salvation Army take money from tainted sources such as a whisky distiller and an arms dealer? And is Andrew Undershaft, the powerful European arms industrialist, who indiscriminately sells weapons to every side, the man to solve the problem of poverty?

Although Barbara initially resists accepting money from Bodger, the whisky distillery owner, and from her father, an arms manufacturer, in his ‘Preface to *Major Barbara*: First Aid to Critics’, Shaw asserts that the Salvation Army ‘must take the money because it cannot exist without money, and there is no other money to be had’. All money in the capitalist economy is ‘tainted’ (2001). In addition to Andrew Carnegie, another inspiration for the Undershaft lineage was the Krupp family, a German armaments dynasty that became, at the end of the nineteenth century, the world’s largest industrial company and the largest private company in Germany. During the Third Reich, Alfred Krupp supported the Nazi regime and the use of forced labour. In a curious metatheatrical twist, the Krupp Foundation has also funded the research project from which this article is drawn, that is, the very words on this page.² Indeed, Shaw’s point about the tainted circulation of money holds water.

In answering the second question – whether or not the philanthrocapitalist Andrew Undershaft is the hero of the play – it is important to note that this dramatic character is one of the most seductive capitalists to grace the stage. His worldview is based on two premises. First,

poverty should not be glorified. According to Undershaft, poverty is ‘the worst of crimes’ and the way to save the poor souls who come to the Salvation Army is ‘not by words and dreams; but by thirty-eight shillings a week, a sound house in a handsome street, and a permanent job’ (Shaw 2002: 277). Second, the two most important things in the world are ‘money and gunpowder’. When Barbara’s suitor, a professor of Greek, Adolphus Cusins, asks Undershaft if there is ‘any place in [his] religion for honor, justice, truth, love, mercy and so forth’, Undershaft replies: ‘Yes: they are the graces and luxuries of a rich, strong, and safe life’. And when Cusins asks if one were to choose between them and money and gunpowder (a choice Cusins himself will have to make later in the play), Undershaft responds: ‘Choose money and gunpowder; for without enough of both you cannot afford the others’ (242).

Andrew Undershaft’s gospel of wealth is so persuasive, in fact, that it has led some critics, the most attentive scholars of Shaw no less, to admit to being at least partially persuaded by his argument. Many readers and spectators have taken Shaw’s contention in the preface that Undershaft is the ‘hero’ of *Major Barbara* at face value (Matheson 1986: 287). The fictional town of Perivale St Andrews is, in effect, a neoliberal capitalist utopia. All the social services from education to pension funds are privatized and controlled by the Undershaft Corporation. The business magnate’s ‘almost smokeless town of white walls ... beautifully situated and beautiful in itself’, where he has built libraries, schools, nursing homes and churches, and where he has provided his residents with ‘the insurance fund, the pension fund, the building society, [and] the various applications of co-operation’, makes Barbara accept the fact that the Salvation Army cannot match the power of Undershaft’s philanthropic empire (Shaw 2002: 267–9). At the end of the play, Barbara’s disillusionment changes to hope, as she realizes that it is in Undershaft’s empire that ‘salvation is really wanted’ and that her greatest works of conversion are still ahead of her (284).

The invisible hand of the market is the ultimate authority to which even Andrew Undershaft bows down. After all, Undershaft gives ‘arms

¹ For an analysis of the importance of the theme of the ‘tricks of the governing class’ across Shaw’s oeuvre, see Bernard F. Dukore (2012).

² The Krupp Foundation Research Fellowship through the Minda de Gunzburg Center of European Studies (2013–14) has supported the research for this project.

to all men who offer an honest price for them, without respect of persons or principles' (274–5). 'Capital accumulation is amoral', Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello remind us in *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, meaning that capital is adept at finding new creeds to justify its movement – it is not tied to one specific ideology (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005: 35). So should the audience accept the supposed generosity of Andrew Undershaft? And, if amoral, can capital accumulation be channelled into genuine social betterment? Bernard Dukore considers the key question in *Major Barbara* to be 'whether money will make morality its servant or whether moral forces will put money to their use' and argues that the play 'culminates with the union of the forces of money and morality' (1980: 110). Thus, Dukore speculates that 'in a Fabian fashion, Cusins hopes to build upon Undershaft's social advance' and 'to turn the capitalism of Perivale St. Andrews – into a socialist democracy' (119). Although, in the Preface to *Major Barbara*, Shaw echoes Undershaft in his claim that 'poverty is a crime' and 'the greatest of our evils' (Shaw 2000: 18, 15), the playwright emphasizes the more radical and socialist point that the 'indispensable revolt against poverty ... must also be a revolt against riches' (2000: 30). Most important, Shaw warns his readers of the mask of benevolence and good will that the capitalist dons once he or she achieves social success and recognition, one that includes the performative use of philanthropy:

But the successful scoundrel is dealt with very differently, and very Christianly. He is not only forgiven: he is idolized, respected, made much of, all but worshipped. Society returns him good for evil in the most extravagant overmeasure. And with what result? He begins to idolize himself, to respect himself, to live up to the treatment he receives. He preaches sermons; he writes books of the most edifying advice to young men, and actually persuades himself that he got on by taking his own advice; he endows educational institutions; he supports charities; he dies finally in the odor of sanctity, leaving a will which is a monument of public spirit and bounty. And all this without any change in his character. The spots of the leopard and the stripes of the tiger are as brilliant as ever; but the conduct of the world towards him has changed; and his conduct has changed accordingly. You have only to reverse your attitude towards him – to lay hands on his property, revile him, assault him, and he will be

a brigand again in a moment, as ready to crush you as you are to crush him, and quite as full of pretentious moral reasons for doing it. (34–35)

Indeed, the ruthlessness of Carnegie emerged during the Homestead Steel Strike of 1892. Although in public Carnegie supported the idea of labour unions, he encouraged industrialist Henry Clary Frick, whom he had put in charge of his steel empire, to break the union and crush the revolt of the steel workers.

CONCLUSION

David Callahan, the founder and editor of Inside Philanthropy, a much needed website dedicated to promoting transparency and gathering information about philanthropies, has noted that the big foundations such as Ford, Carnegie, MacArthur and Hewlett have remained silent on the policies of the current presidency. Callahan explains that

the Gates Foundation, like most big foundations, is committed to the poise of neutral non-partisanship. These institutions have always sought to telegraph that they stand above the fray of politics – even as they have routinely sought to influence public policy outcomes. (Callahan 2018)

In his essay 'How to Cover the One Percent', Michael Massing calls for an unbiased organization that would expose 'the internal workings of Wall Street', especially the latter's use of philanthropy to influence politics, scientific research and artistic creation. He asks who would pay for such an endeavour and paradoxically proposes philanthropy: 'Is there perhaps a consortium of donors out there willing to fund an operation that would part the curtains on its own world?' (Massing 2016). The theatrical metaphor is striking in this context, given that nineteenth-century drama of ideas, including that of Bernard Shaw, attempted to do just that – unveil the economic sleight of hand of the financial elites. After all, theatre is one example of an institution that relies on generous funding and the capitalist mode of production, but that is able to critique the very system of which it is part. As Nicholas Ridout notes, 'it is precisely in theatre's failure, our discomfort with it, its embeddedness in capitalist leisure, its status as a bourgeois pastime that its political value is to be found'

(2006:4). Thus, philanthropy has political lessons to learn from theatre. If philanthropy, which was once one type of humanitarian activism, has been co-opted first by the industrial and then by the financial elites to further their own interests, this act of generosity can be transformed into a resource to fight economic inequality, promote environmental protection and support art that dares to speak truth to power. Yet, this will require moving away from the old and passive reliance on powerful donors towards new and engaged collective acts of generosity. It will require embracing the alternative that mass-scale, institutionalized philanthropy of the nineteenth century sought to discredit – the socialist equitable redistribution of wealth.

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