

## BOOK REVIEW

### POLICY PATRONS: PHILANTHROPY, EDUCATION REFORM, AND THE POLITICS OF INFLUENCE

Tompkins-Stange, M. E. (2016). *Policy Patrons: Philanthropy, Education Reform, and the Politics of Influence*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press. ISBN: 9781612509129.

**Reviewed by Sher Afgan Tareen**  
**Florida State University**

How do private foundations redress social problems in the United States? Unlike various other democracies around the world where the state looks after the public, the United States offers room for private organizations to play an active role in redressing social problems that impact the larger public. Historically, those organizations were charities that had institutional networks with religious organizations, such as Catholic charities and private schools that looked after new immigrants seeking work in large industrial cities. Private foundations established by billionaire philanthropists go a step further and actively shape public policies. Over the past few decades, their encroachment into the public arena has been most felt around initiatives to improve K–12 education, leading some to offer glowing profiles of the benefactors and others to raise concerns over the future of US democracy, with a disproportionate number of elites molding policies that affect adolescents, parents, and teachers to conform to their distinct ideologies.

In *Policy Patrons: Philanthropy, Education Reform, and the Politics of Influence*, Megan E. Tompkins-Stange nuances sensational narratives of elites undermining US democracy by shoving their ideas about how schools should operate onto the polity. She argues that the

---

Copyright © 2019 Sher Afgan Tareen  
<http://scholarworks.iu.edu/iupjournals/index.php/jmp>  
DOI: 10.2979/muslphilcivisoc.3.1.05

managerial practices of foundations, rather than the ideology of the patrons who establish them, determine how private funds impact public policy. Her method of analysis is comparative, using ethnographic data on two sets of newcomers to philanthropy and well-established foundations: the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation, on one hand, and the W. K. Kellogg Foundation and Ford Foundation, on the other. The Gates and Broad foundations draw on managerial skills taught at business schools, an approach known as venture philanthropy that gained popularity during the 1990s. They invest in particular organizations that they believe will yield greater returns based on the conviction that the flow of money ultimately impacts public policy. The Kellogg and Ford foundations exemplify scientific philanthropies that gained popularity during the early 20th century. They invest in research conducted by professors and graduate students as well as think tanks, based on the conviction that added knowledge will, over the span of time, influence policy makers to change legislation.

Tompkins-Stange examines the difference between venture and scientific philanthropy by focusing on the ways in which the four private foundations manage grantees, select partners, frame problems, and evaluate results. Gates and Broad conceive their grantees like contractors. They formulate the desired outcome and manage the grantees tediously to ensure it is met. Not all grantees complained about feeling micromanaged, with one thanking the Gates and Broad foundation program officers for doing their homework and due diligence as oppose to giving the money without listing the specific tasks expected. Informants who worked for the two foundations also defended their hesitancy against ceding control to grantees as a practice of professionalism that reduces the risk of being liable for lower quality initiatives. Kellogg and Ford, on the other hand, credit some of their best programs to local endeavors grantees devised without their intervention. A Kellogg foundation staff member described such programs as arising organically, with the private foundation facilitating a local community to build its political will and gain access to elected officials. While the newer foundations seek to build partnerships with elites in political circles, the latter recruit local community organizations who have a better understanding of the grantees. Schools, more so than any other institution, serve as a battlefield for these two contesting models of philanthropy.

When confronted with reforming K–12 schools, the Ford and Kellogg foundations are more similar to the newer foundations. They prefer formulating policy targets while remaining true to their legacy of

facilitating civic engagement. Juggling these two approaches is especially common when the problem is addressing the concerns of minorities in school systems while simultaneously convincing well-established educational actors, such as teacher unions, that it serves them to build an alliance with minorities as well, when otherwise they might prefer to maintain the status quo. In such a scenario, the Ford Foundation funded research and facilitated debate among members of the community yet also targeted policy makers and partnered with teacher unions, since they could use their collective bargaining agreement to effect dramatic and sustainable change.

Nevertheless, the Kellogg and Ford foundations differ fundamentally from the Gates and Broad foundations in how they conceptualize problems afflicting K–12 education. Akin to engineering, the newer foundations identify a single factor that they seek to resolve through a technical intervention. By funding that technique, they expect a return on their investment. The older foundations, however, frame K–12 education as a multifaceted issue. They consequently prefer building communities over changing policies. The debate over the efficacy of charter schools typifies the contesting ways in which the newcomers and the well-established private foundations formulate problems and evaluate outcomes.

Charter schools set themselves apart from public schools by introducing managerial practices that have helped corporations succeed. For instance, they develop a common curriculum and require students to take standardized tests so that the quality of education can be quantified, and the evaluations yield data on how charter schools perhaps are educating students better than public schools. With quantifiable results available for all to see, the onus falls on the federal government to spend more of its budget supporting such schools. As a result, the federal budget for education transforms into a large return on the investment made by the private foundation. Apart from private foundations, teachers attain financial incentives to fulfill their responsibilities in a school system modeled after a corporation. When students perform better on standardized tests, teachers receive bonuses. They, however, also risk feeling devalued as workers, charged with producing more passing grades on standardized tests as opposed to being part of a community bound around the tasks required from students in and around the classroom. The intellectual and emotional growth of racial minorities, however, relies on such embodied practices of learning, especially those who attend predominantly white public schools, which raises the following question: does private philanthropy contribute to racial inequity or potentially redress it by coercing policy makers to learn from

grantees who address the distinct concerns of minority students, teachers, and parents? Charter schools demonstrate the former by enacting the managerial practices of venture capitalism. Funded by the partnership between private foundations and city mayors, they symbolize inequity in urban settings, whose residents are already racially segregated. Nevertheless, charter schools represent an alternative to public schools, an innovation in the midst of stagnancy that characterizes the federal government's attitude toward social problems, especially K–12 education.

Charter schools encapsulate the ambivalence of the role of philanthropy in a democracy. Private foundations have the capacity to elevate the voices of minorities and therefore redress the privileging of the majority by the electoral system. Their funds have played a pivotal role in ushering reforms, especially civil rights reforms in the sixties. But private foundations also bolster billionaires who may not empower marginalized members of the polity at the expense of seeking return on their investment. Tompkins-Stange shares ample ethnographic data that suggests that these contradictions are not merely philosophical but rather regulate how private foundations seek to influence public policies. Future studies could build on her work by examining how the charities that private foundations eclipsed by professionalizing social welfare have evolved since the early 20th century. Such studies would give insight into how teachers redress the devaluation of their labor by reform initiatives that follow the managerial practices taught at business schools and transform K–12 schools into corporations.

*This review was originally published in the Journal of Education in Muslim Societies (JEMS).*

---

**Sher Afgan Tareen** is a PhD student in American Religious History at Florida State University. Tareen researches the relationship between higher education and postwar American religion, with a specific focus on the ways in which Muslim American women educators cultivate the Islamic virtue and feeling of modesty. He is currently writing his dissertation “Imagined Sisterhood: Postwar Reforms in Higher Education and Muslim Feelings of Modesty,” that examines how Muslim women educators in the suburbs of Northern Virginia redress concerns about navigating work in a nuclear family unit, with ethnographic fieldwork on key nodes of a network of learning in the suburban milieu of Herndon-Reston region including Ikram Foundation, the ADAMS Center Quran Study Group, and Al-Fatih Academy. He teaches courses on World Religions, Introduction to Religion in the Americas, and hopes to teach a course on Race, Ethnicity and Education.