Thesis: Abstract

On September 12, 2006, the Bill and Melinda Gates and Rockefeller Foundations – currently the two largest philanthropic foundations in the country – issued a joint statement announcing the establishment of the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA). AGRA, a multi-institutional effort to “put at least 15 countries on track for attaining and sustaining a uniquely African Green Revolution”\(^1\) kicked off this campaign with an initial $150 million grant to bolster the production of genetically enhanced high-yield variety seeds (HYVs). Though the Alliance is still in its early phases, it has since matched its seed program with those that sponsor the distribution of inorganic fertilizers and those that work to reduce the barriers to market entry for smallholder farmers.\(^2\)

This multipronged alliance is named and modeled after the famed Green Revolution that dramatically increased agricultural yield across Latin America and Asia in the post-World-War-II era. Originating in Mexico when Rockefeller-sponsored agronomist Norman Borlaug discovered his Nobel-Prize-winning “miracle” high-yield seeds, the Green Revolution spread around the world at a rapid pace. These seed varieties quickly became the cornerstone of the project, and when coupled with additional foreign inputs such as chemical fertilizers, increased grain yields substantially. Within a few years, India went from being a country on the brink of famine to one self-sufficient in food production.\(^3\) However, while many consider the Green Revolution an unqualified success, it did come with a number of devastating ecological and social ramifications,

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\(^2\) Ibid.  
wrecking Indian soils and driving farmers who couldn’t afford these new inputs off their land and into the cities. The aftermath of this upheaval is still being felt in India today. For any major institution like AGRA to model its efforts after this project demonstrates a short-sightedness that is highly problematic.

This comparison, then, points me towards a means of systematically and analytically predicting the potential implications – both the positive and the negative – of this new Green Revolution, especially given that so little scholarly research exists on the topic. Indeed, criticism of AGRA is largely limited to advocacy pieces and non-governmental organization briefings. Thus, it is necessary to ground a critique of AGRA in one of the Green Revolution after which it is modeled. Over the course of my research, I came to the realization that the most effective way to operationalize this comparison was not to pit side by side the various outcomes (real in the case of the first Green Revolution, potential in the case of the new one), but rather to compare them by analyzing the role of what I perceive to be the most instrumental actor in the funding, planning, and execution of both Green Revolutions: philanthropic foundations.

To analyze this dynamic, then, I had to explore the position of philanthropic foundations in American democracy. In this way, I used the comparison of the Green Revolutions as a vehicle through which I studied these institutions more broadly. I found that although foundations enjoy their substantial legal privileges and the goodwill the public bestows upon them as altruistic organizations, a closer look at their institutional structures reveals that they are predominantly undemocratic institutions. Often they are governed by boards unrepresentative of demographics their grants target, and accountable only to themselves. The tension between the role of the philanthropic foundation as a
redistributional actor and its lack of procedural legitimacy is still largely unexplored within the theoretical literature. Indeed, as is the case with the second Green Revolution, relevant literature was relatively sparse.

Liberal foundations, the focus of this thesis, are without a doubt the most influential and most controversial of what is an admittedly diverse sector. These foundations – including the Rockefeller, Ford, and Gates Foundations – are defined by the inherent limitations their capitalist biases impose upon their efforts to tackle the roots of society’s ills. Indeed, the philosophies dictating the operation of the three aforementioned foundations do mirror the key characteristics of the major corporations from which their philanthropists earned their respective fortunes: the Rockefeller Foundation with its affinity for industrialization, the Ford Foundation with its technocratic and efficient management, and the Gates Foundation with its conviction in the profit-generating potential of intellectual property rights – these are not coincidental.

It should come as little surprise, then, that even the most well-intentioned philanthropic activity on the part of these foundations is guided by institutionalized capitalist biases, which foundations exhibit through various means. In the interest of preserving and exporting American capitalism, liberal foundations engage in the construction and dissemination of narratives that frame deeply rooted political problems as ones that merely require neutral, technocratic fixes. This framework allows them to impose market-based solutions that ultimately crowd out inefficient producers and exacerbate existing inequalities. Finally, with the influence that great sums of wealth affords, these foundations have the capacity to drown out dissenting civil society voices,
implementing what Arnove labels “cultural hegemony.” As evidenced by my two case studies, liberal foundations paradoxically reinforce exploitative capitalist structures that allow those that already obtain capital to profit at the expense of marginalized populations.

On the one hand, I would be hesitant to generalize all of philanthropic activity, which is obviously comprised of a heterogeneous set of endeavors in fields ranging from education to global health, based solely on the case studies of the two Green Revolutions, the first in India, the second in Sub-Saharan Africa. On the other hand, the Rockefeller, Ford, and Gates Foundations, with their sizeable endowments and vested interest in the maintenance of the economic system that allowed for their existences, are the archetypal liberal foundations, and their respective Green Revolutions are among their most touted, if not the most touted, of their efforts. For the purposes of this paper, then, I will rely on these two case studies as evidence to support my claim that liberal philanthropic foundations have and continue to operate guided by an underlying philosophy that ultimately undermines or even inhibits their ability to effect the meaningful positive change they (at the very least rhetorically) hope to effect.

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5 Although the Green Revolution of the 20th century was global in nature, spreading most notably across Mexico, India, Pakistan, and the Philippines, I have chosen to focus on India exclusively. I have done so not only due to its massive increase in agricultural output thanks to Green Revolution technologies, but also due to the fact that it is in this context more than any other that I believe the Rockefeller and Ford Foundations’ influence and strategic interests were explicit factors in the implementation of the project.