

*The
Ford Foundation
at Work*
Philanthropic Choices, Methods, and Styles

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Richard Magat

PLENUM PRESS • NEW YORK AND LONDON

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Magat, Richard.

The Ford Foundation at work, philanthropic choices, methods, and styles.

Includes index.

1. Ford Foundation. I. Title.

HV97.F62M33

361.7'6'0973

78-24048

ISBN-13: 978-1-4613-2921-3

e-ISBN-13: 978-1-4613-2919-0

DOI: 1031007/978-1-4613-2919-0

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Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 1979

Plenum Press, New York

A Division of Plenum Publishing Corporation

227 West 17th Street, New York, N.Y. 10011

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Foreword

This report originated in a request to me from the Board of Trustees of the Ford Foundation in the summer of 1975. The trustees, aware that there would be a change of leadership at the Foundation before 1980, wanted to make a running start in the process of planning for the future. Their first step was to make a study of the great national and international needs that might lie ahead in the next decade and a half, and where and how the Foundation might address them. They sought advice both within the Foundation and outside it, and they engaged in long discussions of their own.

Although the exercise was directed toward planning for the future, the trustees also wished to review our past, not exhaustively but at least well enough to have a clear sense of what the Foundation had been up to in the quarter century of its existence as a national and international institution. In this connection, the chairman of our board, Alexander Heard, asked for "a canvass of the Ford Foundation's experiences, successes, and failures during the last twenty-five years . . . [focused] on the broad objectives sought, the means pursued to achieve them, and the results."

As policymakers for the Foundation, the trustees are ultimately responsible for the work of the staff, and they quite properly demand that we account for what we have done and explain what we would like to do. But I think it is fair to say that conversations between the Foundation's staff and its trustees are forthright.

So the report dealt with shortcomings, unrealized hopes, miscalculations, and downright blunders, as well as with what we regard as achievements. The writer of the report and those who assisted him also were free of constraints they might have felt if they were washing the Foundation's linen in public.

The review served its purpose well, and some trustees and staff members urged that we make it available publicly. We have decided to do so because it is as faithful a representation of what the Foundation thinks about itself as one can get in the circumstances. The changes made for this expanded public version consist mainly of eliminating institutional shorthand and spelling out references to matters that are familiar to insiders but that might be obscure to general readers. We also have omitted one or two comments that might unhelpfully reflect on the work of others.

This publication is meant as another step in a continuing effort to account for our work. We are required by law to record publicly what we have done. But it is a lot less clear to the public *how* we work, and therein, I believe, lies the chief value of this report.

The review shows how our objectives have been identified and also how varied kinds of action have been chosen. Along with careful and collegial designs, the reader will find choices that resulted from accident or personal inclination. These matters are illustrated by references drawn from our experience over nearly three decades. Obviously, the way we do our business reflects our own history and circumstances, and in publicly reviewing our methods and style of operation we do not imply that they are necessarily applicable to other grant-making institutions. The diversity among foundations is appropriate to the rich variety in the society that sanctions them.

Public accounting by established institutions is still dangerously limited in this country. As a result of the tempestuous events of the last ten or fifteen years, few of these institutions are now taken for granted. The hardest of them have been questioned, even assaulted. It is altogether fitting that private institutions such as foundations be open to public scrutiny. But it is just as important that the examination of their affairs be informed. In the case of

foundations, there has not been nearly enough informed analysis. For example, no full-scale history of the Ford Foundation exists, and we hope that perhaps this limited essay may stir some scholar or student to do that job. Although the task is more complex now than it would have been ten years ago, it is in some respects easier. The Foundation's archives have recently been assembled and opened to public use, under conditions that are unusually favorable. An oral history has been completed, from which more than two dozen interview transcripts are now available, and several more are to come in the next few years. Finally, the climate is more conducive to openness, in the society in general and in this institution in particular.

It remains only to thank Richard Magat for preparing this study. He has made our Office of Reports a model of responsibility and integrity, and I think readers of this study will understand why he is respected and trusted both inside and outside the Foundation.

*New York, N.Y.
February, 1978*

MCGEORGE BUNDY
*President
Ford Foundation*

Preface

The material for this report is drawn principally from the voluminous records of the Ford Foundation and from staff members' recollections (including my own, which cover twenty years of association with the Foundation). The first-person plural has been retained because another voice would ring false, given the manner in which the review first took place—the staff addressing the trustees. Since this report is now addressed to the public, readers may take “we” to mean the Foundation as a whole. Yet, the institutional “we” hardly means that the interpretations represent unanimity in a staff that is not wanting in independent spirits and diverse viewpoints.

Although I had the principal responsibility for preparing the report, dozens of staff members assisted. I am particularly indebted to Thomas E. Cooney, Jr., Oona Sullivan, and Willard J. Hertz. For her research assistance at all stages, I also am most grateful to Nancy Silbert. As in other undertakings, I benefited from the skills and goodwill of all my colleagues in the Office of Reports, not least those of my secretary Beatrice Toliver. It also was extremely helpful to have thoughtful comments on the manuscript from outside readers: Ben Bagdikian, Stephen Hess, Patrick W. Kennedy, John G. Simon, and B. J. Stiles. Many thanks are also due Mary Cox, whose firm, perceptive editing cleansed the manuscript of ambiguities and infelicities. Although this book incorpo-

rates many valuable suggestions from all these and others, the responsibility for any errors that may remain is mine alone.

I join Mr. Bundy in the hope that this publication may stimulate scholars to study the Ford Foundation. The Foundation once took the initiative in the preparation of a formal history, but the results suggest that the initiative had better come from another source. In the 1950s, the Foundation commissioned the late William Greenleaf, a former student of Allan Nevins, to write not only a history of the Foundation, but also a separate account of the founders' personal philanthropies up to the establishment of the Foundation. The latter work was published, and it is a lively and absorbing piece of scholarship.¹ Professor Greenleaf completed the history of the Foundation itself through the fall of 1956, but the commission had a string attached to it: the work could not be published without authorization by the Foundation. By the time he completed his work, a new administration was in place at the Foundation, and he was asked to wait. The history never came off the shelf, and, in any event, Professor Greenleaf had understandably gone on to other interests.

The only book-length account of the Foundation, Dwight Macdonald's adaptation of his *New Yorker* articles, was published in 1953.² That work is satirical, entertaining, and informative, but it is no more adequate today as an account of this institution than would be a popular history of the United States that ended with the Constitutional Convention in 1787.³

Oddly enough, there have been book-length studies of institutions created by the Foundation: the Fund for the Advancement of Education, the Fund for the Republic, and the National Educational Television and Radio Center. A few books about foundation

¹William Greenleaf, *From These Beginnings: The Early Philanthropies of Henry and Edsel Ford, 1911-1936* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1964).

²Dwight Macdonald, *The Ford Foundation: The Men and the Millions* (New York: Reynal & Co., 1953).

³Two years ago, I was introduced to Macdonald at a social gathering, and I asked whether he had ever considered revisiting the Foundation and writing another book. He grinned and replied, with evident good nature, "I think I'll pass that one up."

philanthropy include fairly extensive discussions of the Ford Foundation. With one or two exceptions, they are more nearly popular journalism than informed analysis. In my view, much as I may disagree with some of his conclusions, Waldemar A. Nielsen's chapter on the Foundation in his book is the most balanced and authoritative account.⁴

Nor has there been a memoir of the Foundation, like Raymond B. Fosdick's valuable account of the General Education Board.⁵ At least one man, many of us believe, was superbly equipped to do an illuminating memoir—William W. McPeak, who was staff director of the study that helped chart the course for the expansion of the Ford Foundation into a national institution and who later, for more than a decade, was a vice-president of the Foundation. But he died at the age of fifty-five, years before the time when a man who had committed enormous energy and intelligence to the life of an institution would have taken the time to look back reflectively and record its evolution.

So a task remains undone. The undertaking is important not because the Ford Foundation is the largest of its kind, but because its work has mattered in a number of developments in the social and cultural history of the latter half of the century. The most this report can do is to afford a glimpse of how such an institution has done its work.

RICHARD MAGAT

⁴Waldemar A. Nielsen, *The Big Foundations* (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1972).

⁵Raymond B. Fosdick, *Adventures in Giving* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962).

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