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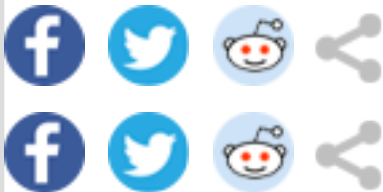
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# The problem with philanthropy

Wealthy donors and those to whom they give often operate on two different planes of reality that rarely collide.

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The son of billionaire Warren Buffett (above) has accused his philanthropist peers of 'conscience laundering' [AP]



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### STORY HIGHLIGHTS

Peter Buffett made a big splash last month with a fiercely worded New York Times op-ed about the failures of philanthropy - a sector he was thrust into after inheriting \$1bn from his father, Warren Buffett, in 2006. He accused his peers of "conscience laundering", justifying unethical accumulation of wealth through very public donations of dribs and drabs to the intractably poor. Plutocrats get great PR while structural inequality persists unabated.

It's actually not a new argument. In fact,

the INCITE! Women of Color Collective made a strikingly similar argument at far greater length in their 2009 anthology, *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded: Beyond the Nonprofit Industrial Complex*. They also take it one step further, exploring the ways in which much of philanthropic wealth was

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It's not a new argument. In fact, the [INCITE! Women of Color Collective](#) made a strikingly similar argument at far greater length in [their 2009 anthology](#), *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded: Beyond the Nonprofit Industrial Complex*. They also take it one step further, exploring the ways in which much of philanthropic wealth was accumulated on the backs of poor and often enslaved people - the descendents of whom are now seen as potential grantees. These grantees, in turn, are pacified by the focus on "funding worthiness", rather than the more radical work of community organising or *bona fide* revolution.

Thinking like this - whether espoused by grassroots activists or, refreshingly, by the powers that be, such as Buffett - is why many strategic people have in recent years turned away from philanthropy as a means of making change.

Take Jacqueline Novogratz, the founder and leader of [Acumen Fund](#), which invests what it calls "patient capital" in developing-world entrepreneurs who have business ideas that promise not just to make money, but to improve quality of life on a mass scale. Acumen operates on the assumption that being marketed to is a far more dignifying experience than being pitied.

And yet, despite compelling alternatives to philanthropy, there are still moments and movements that demand aid dollars. There is no market intervention, for example, for ending rape or responding to a natural disaster. The next question for big givers such as Buffett, and even small donors like the rest of us, is this: What is the most effective, humanising way to give?

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Buffett's piece stopped short of offering any concrete suggestions, instead calling for a "new operating system" for the sector. And yet, he offered a more actionable clue to how philanthropy might be improved in this brief observation: "Because of who my father is, I've been able to occupy some seats I never expected to sit in. Inside any important philanthropy meeting, you witness heads of state meeting with investment managers and corporate leaders. All are searching for answers with their right hand to problems that others in the room have created with their left."

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Philanthropy is driven not by dollars and cents, but by relationships. Buffett's peers have been sitting in conference rooms, searching for magic bullets to poverty - in the abstract, their thought partners often other people who have little personal experience of the problems poverty creates - while real, poor people continue to innovate, organise, and fight for their dignity, each and every day. They are, in a sense, operating on two different planes of reality that rarely collide.

This multi-dimensional reality is not just a problem for the super-rich. It shows up in softer contrasts in all of our social worlds, which tend to be segregated by class, race, and political affiliation. Many of us spend the majority of our days interacting with people who have had similar experiences and hold strikingly similar "moral frames" - as linguist George Lakoff puts it - as we do. We draw from the same wells of potential solutions, based on what we've read, where we've been, and what we've had to invent in the face of our own particular brand of struggle.


Perhaps the most effective improvement in philanthropy would be an acknowledgement of the limitations born from these kinds of segregated lives. They cloud the economically privileged's capacity to know what we don't know. They make us less empathic. They actually make us more stupid about the range of systemic solutions that exist and deserve funding.

Radical humility can be witnessed in a new generation of philanthropists, such as those involved in [Resource Generation](#) , an organisation that encourages wealth inheritors to acknowledge what they don't know and plan their giving accordingly. When Hurricane Katrina hit, for example, [a group of them](#)  raised money among their wealthy networks and then donated it to the Twenty-First Century Foundation - a grassroots organisation that already had strong connections in the Gulf Coast from years of living and collaborating there. That foundation was far better positioned to wisely and rapidly distribute the money.

It would be better if philanthropists lived lives less segregated from the rest of the

world, but that's easier said than done. Meanwhile, they need to depend on these kinds of bridging institutions. They need to habitually ask: "Who isn't in this room, and how does their absence limit our capacity to answer questions about poverty and violence?" They need to acknowledge whom and what they don't know.

In this regard, humility could potentially be the biggest gift that the rich could possibly give the poor.

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