

# Super-philanthropy, repetition, difference, and decolonial possibilities and postcapitalist futures

Stephen Healy 

Western Sydney University, Australia

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## Abstract

Pablo Fuentenebro et al.'s 'Geographies of Super-Philanthropy: Disaggregating the Global Philanthropic Complex' describes the power of contemporary philanthropy. Their piece is highly insightful, and I appreciate their deep engagement with a topic central to how communities might address climate change and other pressing global challenges. While the comparison is wildly inappropriate, James Ferguson's (2015) description of tech sector wealth as a 'great gusher', like an oil field to be tapped for the benefit of humanity, comes to mind. The philanthropic 'gushers' discussed here represent the kind of power that could contribute to the global climate reparations envisioned by Olúfẹ́mi O. Táíwò (2022). To see this potential requires us to engage in both an appreciative and a critical reading of their argument about contemporary philanthrocapitalism, which rests upon both key differences between this form of philanthropy and what's come before, as well as their acknowledgement that it is also a repetition – that there is a resemblance between Bill Gates' charity and Carnegie Mellon's. Within this framework of difference and repetition, I explore the various reimaginings of philanthropy that emerged during the pandemic, when it seemed possible to pause the global order and envision something new.

## Keywords

Climate reparations, decolonizing philanthropy, para-philanthropy, philanthropy, postcapitalism

## Super-philanthropy, repetition, difference, and decolonial possibilities

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### Corresponding author:

Stephen Healy, Department of Geography and Urban Studies, School of Social Science, Western Sydney University, Locked Bag 1797, Penrith, NSW 2751, Australia.

Email: [stephen.healy@westernsydney.edu.au](mailto:stephen.healy@westernsydney.edu.au)

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I briefly summarize the difference and repetition in Fuentenebro et al.’s arguments, drawing modestly from Deleuze’s idea that dynamics of difference and repetition are ‘subordinated by identity’ (McMahon, 2005: 42). Fuentenebro et al. highlight key differences in contemporary philanthrocapitalism, showing its power while also arguing that it continues to legitimize and enable capitalist class relations. While convincing, these risks framing philanthrocapitalism – and capitalism itself – their ‘identities’ figured as transcendental concepts. Dougald Hine (2023) rightly positions Bill Gates as trying to ‘solve’ climate change through technology, remaking the world into a ‘fish tank’ governed by the smartest minds. But this understanding offers no true difference or alternative path, just a view of the train we’re on, headed toward ecological ruin or geoengineered control. We are not offered difference; we are not offered a way off. I conclude by revisiting the authors’ mention of mutual aid as philanthropy from below, using it as a springboard for a postcapitalist, post-philanthropic imaginary, drawing on Nathan Schneider and Bayo Akomolafe.

### Philanthrocapitalism, difference, and repetition

We can begin with two key pieces of evidence Fuentenebro et al. offer to distinguish modern philanthrocapitalism from earlier forms. First, its

currency – a 2018 survey of 260,000 philanthropic institutions in 38 countries revealed that nearly three-quarters are less than 25 years old. Second, its magnitude – the vast fortunes of high-net-worth individuals like Bill and Melinda Gates, who channel significant wealth into charities that operate like corporations, complete with reporting requirements to track return on investment. What sets contemporary philanthropy apart is not only its scale and reach but also its integration into the broader social fabric.

Central to their argument is the concept of ‘relationality’, which they borrow from geographers like Jamie Peck and Ruthie Gilmore to describe the charitable complex – a network of institutions that increasingly governs the philanthropic sector. For them, as for Peck and Gilmore, relationality is a spatial concept linked to territorialization: philanthropy shapes state and international governance, as seen in the Gates Foundation’s influence on the global pandemic response. Similar to Çalışkan and Callon’s (2010) ‘economization’, it involves creating and maintaining institutions that hold wealth beyond state taxation, waiting to invest in the right causes. While relationality helps define modern philanthrocapitalism, there are ways in which this difference reflects a continuation of the past:

In the United States alone, by October 2020 the total wealth of 644 billionaires had increased by 31.6% compared to pre-pandemic levels, or \$931 billion richer than before (Collins, 2020). Much of this growth came from the ‘new’ essential industries, such as tech and online retail, making their CEOs veritable ‘pandemic profiteers’ (Collins et al., 2020), not unlike the ‘robber barons’ of the Great Depression that American journalist Matthew Josephson (1934) aptly described nearly a century ago. (Fuentenebro et al., 2025)

This difference presents an adversary that undermines other forms of social organization, like a strong state that equitably distributes resources, while creating a depoliticized zone: the Gates Foundation’s work is viewed as beyond criticism, legitimizing the vast fortune Gates amassed through Microsoft – the inequity that enabled the

philanthropy in the first place. This paints philanthropy, old and new, as an insincere apology, an ideological ‘hall’ pass for vast fortunes built on inequality and exploitation, though the authors suggest a more troubling vision. Gates and his peers aren’t cynics using philanthropy as PR; they are true believers in the idea that their philanthropy, if run with corporate efficiency, can remake the world. Dougald Hine highlights Gates’ post-pandemic focus on solving climate change through ecomodernism – precision agriculture and climate engineering to not only combat climate change but also bring modern comfort to the global majority (Gates, 2021). Gates, like President Biden’s ‘grown-ups’, steers the conversation away from denialists like Trump but also from post-growth visions represented by Greta Thunberg and Extinction Rebellion.

Reading Fuentenebro et al. with Hine gives us a clearer sense of what’s at stake. It’s not just that billionaires have amassed unprecedented wealth and are using part of it to evade taxes and boost their image. Rather, it’s the economization of philanthropy that doubles down on modernity’s promise – that entrepreneurs should be in charge, reshaping the world in their image. This same magical thinking drives the belief that we can decouple economies from ecological consequences, as seen in the circular economy. In majority-world countries, similar dynamics play out with local billionaires or initiatives like self-help capitalism and good-works infrastructure.

Their argument concludes with a statement that the point of tracing a global philanthropic context has been to demonstrate how this system relies upon and normalizes ‘market-based allocation of social goods’ and the second has this has led to a ‘global capitalist culture that “lauds” generosity but fails to tax or acknowledge exploitation’. The point is to always keep this central insight in mind, lest we lose site of ‘material connection between money and power’. In their view, we must not be distracted by Mackenzie Scott’s widely regarded dispersal of \$6 billion in 2020, ‘no strings attached’ while also stating that we should have a broader definition of charity which should include ‘everyday acts of everyday people that might elsewhere be classified as mutual aid’.

Keeping the political economy in the foreground, they argue, allows for further research on how contemporary forms of philanthropy recapitulate the process of racialization while also subverting democratic governance.

While I completely sympathize with the need to account for the machinations of global philanthropy, I wonder if keeping the connection between money and power in the foreground requires so much concentration on our part that we dare not tarry for a moment on the possibilities of reconfiguring philanthropy in the ways that Scott suggests? Without denying that the philanthropic complex is indeed a kind of giving that is, as Akomolafe (2024) insists, is ‘always trying to bring a world into being’ what I would like to suggest, following Akomolafe’s lead, that the philanthropist may not be as in control of what world comes into being, that he has less control that he believes or even than we may think – and its precisely in this context that we might follow fugitive energies in a reimagination of philanthropy that makes room for difference.

Making room for these other possibilities, insisting that they might lead us somewhere rather than distract us from what matters is what I’d like to explore drawing on the work of Nate Schneider and Bayo Akomolafe. One thread that connects these two thinkers is the different ways they connect contemporary philanthropy to the earlier notion of charity or giving in the context of religious communities, particularly the Christian tradition as both a source of enabling distinction in Schneider’s case or as something that is embrangled in the colonial enterprise in Akomolafe’s analysis. Both authors call not for the end of philanthropy but seek its transformation, or as Akomolafe puts it, pursuing fugitive theories in which it can become different from itself.

In 2017, Nathan Schneider critiqued the philanthropic complex, noting how global charity agents set political agendas on a state-like scale but without accountability (Schneider 2017). Drawing on Catholic doctrine, Schneider distinguishes true charity, where there is no expectation of return or control over the gift, from obligatory giving. He argues that recipients, not donors, should decide how to use the gift. Schneider, involved in the

emerging platform-cooperativism movement, urged us to consider how worker cooperatives and participatory budgeting could direct philanthropic flows. He advocates for a philanthropy where surplus wealth is placed under cooperative, democratic control, potentially operating both with and outside the state.

Akomolafe, writing on the other side of the COVID-19 to develop a notion of para-philanthropy. Like Schneider he sees philanthropic institutions as something we cannot simply oppose, ‘an evil to be expunged’, he explores what it might mean to decolonize philanthropy. Like Fuentenebro et al. he sees philanthropy as ‘a form of biopolitical power’, whose exercise is connected to a ‘disciplinary regime that governs behaviour, marking *life* in a civilizing sweep – naming what counts as knowledge, naming what counts as action, naming what counts as agency, and naming what counts as accountability’ (9 of 36) And this civilizing mission extends not only to re-enforcing a world where ‘whiteness’ is what counts as fully human, held to a standard of neurotypicality. Here ‘whiteness’ is recast as a disposition which includes the progressive values of tolerance and inclusion. This formulation of coloniality is not so easily cast off, as gestures, both grand and small, that purport to decolonize philanthropy might end up re-enforcing it. As Akomolafe points out efforts to have greater equity and diversity in charitable boards that are far whiter than other institutions amount to little if the underlying project of philanthropy remains intact, what he terms ‘the violence of inclusion’. Even grand gestures may not be effective. Akomolafe points not to Scott’s largess but to Lankley Chase Foundation and then Albert Hunt Trust’s recent decisions to spend down its remaining assets and cease to exist as a way of atoning. For Akomolafe, this self-immolation is predicated on the idea that it is possible to wash one’s hands of it and head for the exit. When there is no exit.

As an alternative Akomolafe proposes the concept of a para-philanthropy, the prefix meaning to signal a bodily disposition that is not neurotypical, not white. ‘Para philanthropy notes that the Human colonial order, the terrain of whiteness, is

in crisis. White stability is hollowing out. It recognizes there’s a need for new materialities of care, beyond the *framework* of proper bodies. This framework is stressed; it is losing its buoyancy’ (23/36). What Akomolafe articulates is Para philanthropy, in a Deleuzian vein, as a minor politics of rupture, ‘world-generating resources need to be directed towards sites of rupture, towards carnival as research, to the work of post-democratic, post-human inquiry’.

Reading Schneider and Akomolafe’s interventions together we begin to get a sense of how to put Fuentenebro et al.’s precise accounting of the philanthropic context to work in relation to a different politics. Of course, these ideas – translating philanthropy into a cooperative form, democratizing its governance, redirecting resources towards sites of rupture – are not guaranteed to work. And, indeed, when viewed from the lens of the dominant biopolitical culture, their agency and possibility cannot be accounted for on modernity’s spreadsheet. Precisely these are fugitive possibilities, which also means we cannot say in advance what their import may be.

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#### **ORCID iD**

Stephen Healy  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2394-3488>

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