

White Money vs. White Privilege: Philanthropy and Civil Rights From Selma to Ferguson

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The successes of the civil rights movement are rightly remembered as major achievements of grassroots organizing—with crucial assists by Lyndon B. Johnson and a muscular White House.

But there's another part of that history that you won't see on the big screen: How philanthropists supported the civil rights push at key moments. Fast forward to today—for all the media attention on racial justice in the wake of police killings in Ferguson, MO, and New York City, there's been little mention of how foundation money has helped frame the response to those events and articulate a policy agenda going forward.

This is another example of the quiet influence of philanthropy in U.S. society. But it also speaks to the curious dynamics of dissent in America: Again and again, capitalist fortunes have been tapped to fund progressive change. And while few seldom note an obvious point—that nearly all these fortunes were amassed by white men—it's an intriguing angle to ponder in regard to philanthropic support of civil rights work. While organizers of color can claim the lion's share of credit for ushering in change, white money has played a key supporting role in challenging white privilege over the past sixty years.

In turn, this story speaks to another reality that gets little attention: How the upper class in America has long been more ideologically diverse than most people realize and how a sizable sliver of the wealthy have often sided with progressive movements—a sliver that's now larger than ever before, for reasons I outlined in my book, [*Fortunes of Change: The Rise of the Liberal Rich and the Remaking of America*](#).

I'll say more about intra-class warfare at the country club in a minute, but first let's look at the role of rich white people in the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s.

Among the movement's biggest funders were Stephen and Audrey Currier, forgotten figures today, but perhaps the richest and most glamorous liberals of their time. (They both died in a

plane crash in 1967.) Stephen was the stepson of Edward Warburg of the Kuhn, Loeb banking family, while Audrey was the granddaughter of Andrew Mellon and an heiress to one of the largest fortunes in the United States. The couple established the Taconic Foundation, which gave generously to civil rights causes. Stephen Currier organized a famous New York fundraising event in 1963 that brought in \$800,000 from other wealthy donors and foundations.

The Curriers were important funders of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee and Freedom Summer, the 1964 push to increase voter registration. Other wealthy liberals, such as Philip Stern of the Stern Family Fund, also channeled serious money to civil rights organizations in the 1960s. Stern was a big investor in the the Voter Education Project, a collaborative fund set up in 1962 that channeled money from Stern and several other foundations, including Taconic, to civil rights groups battling for the right to vote in southern states.

But even earlier, philanthropy played a key role in putting race on the national agenda and achieving initial civil rights victories. Carnegie money bankrolled the famous study on race relations in the U.S. by Swedish social scientist Gunnar Myrdal, published in 1944 under the title [*An American Dilemma*](#). In turn, as an NCRP [paper](#) last year by Sean Dobson pointed out, that study played a "pivotal role in establishing the groundwork for the Supreme Court's decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* by identifying the problems of racial inequity as structured by white privilege to keep African Americans in disadvantaged positions and denying them the opportunities needed to achieve the American dream."

Philanthropists also supported the long and expensive litigation battle that culminated in the *Brown* victory. The Field Foundation, established by a department store heir, supported the NAACP Legal Defense Fund which spearheaded the case, and went on to become the LDF's single biggest backer. Field was also a primary backer of the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee, which trained many civil rights organizers, starting in the 1950s, including top SNCC leaders like John Lewis. (When Lewis left SNCC, his first job was at the Field Foundation.)

The New World Foundation—started by the heir to an industrial machinery fortune—was another key backer of civil rights organizations. Like Field, NWF was an early backer of the LDF and, according to Dobson's paper, helped start the LDF's internship program that would become a breeding ground for talented young civil rights attorneys, including Marian Wright Edelman.

All told, Sean Dobson estimates that four top foundation funders gave \$4 million—or \$31 million in current dollars—to support civil rights groups, with most of that money allocated after 1961 as the movement fought its climactic battles against Jim Crow.

All these funders were midsized family foundations created from commercial fortunes. One interesting feature of this story, Dobson notes, is that "most of the investments in civil rights advocacy became possible only after a male 'head of household' died and control of foundation passed to his more progressive widow or children."

In the case of the Stern family, which was based in New Orleans, the patriarch actually supported segregation—while his son would spend family money to help dismantle it.

That heirs tend to be more progressive is not surprising and helps explain how great fortunes end up controlled by social reformers. The entrepreneurs who accumulate fortunes tend to be hard-charging believers in free enterprise, while their heirs are raised in affluence and are often educated in elite cosmopolitan institutions. Instead of focusing on economic security, which they grow up taking for granted, they're more likely to embrace post-materialist values, such as concern for human rights and ecology. I've called this "Rockefeller syndrome." The further away a family gets from its wealth-creating patriarch, the more liberal its members are likely to be.

Progressive heirs are one key in explaining intra-class war among the rich, and today there are more of them around than ever—so many they even have their own organization, [Resource Generation](#). At the same time, though, many more of those who make great fortunes are quite liberal themselves. That partly reflects a shift in how wealth is created in an information economy. A lot of today's rich are highly educated people who grew up in liberal parts of the U.S. and have monetized their cognitive skills in tech and other knowledge-intensive industries. A great example are some of the donors who've backed the LGBT rights movement, most notably Tim Gill, who made his fortune in software.

Another factor in the rise of the liberal rich is that the ranks of the hyper-affluent have grown exponentially in recent decades, and so it's no surprise that there's more ideological heterogeneity at the very top of the economic ladder. Among America's hundreds of billionaires, only a few may choose to back progressive activists, but that can have a huge effect. Witness the impact that George Soros, Herb Sandler, and the late Peter Lewis have had with their giving.

Which brings us to today's civil rights struggles. Soros, in particular, has backed a wide variety of groups fighting for racial justice, and perhaps no funder has done more to challenge a criminal justice system that metes out unduly harsh treatment to people of color.

The foundation of (former) billionaire Chuck Feeney, Atlantic Philanthropies, has also focused seriously on race in recent years. Atlantic has been the biggest funder of efforts to roll back punitive disciplinary policies in public schools that are said to funnel kids of color into a "schools-to-prison pipeline." Atlantic has also been deeply involved in My Brother's Keeper, the White House initiative to improve the lives of young men and boys of color that launched early last year. That initiative has involved many other foundations, too, and among those in the mix have been legacy foundations like Ford and Kellogg that have traveled light years from the views of the patriarchs that created the initial wealth behind these institutions.

Ford, of course, has famously been a top funder of a host of civil rights groups, including many that it helped create. Among Ford's signature achievements was helping expand the battle for racial justice to include Latinos and Native Americans. These days, though, the Kellogg Foundation is the most outspoken legacy foundation when it comes to racial equity. It launched a major initiative in this area in 2010, [America Healing](#), and it's hosted several national conferences to address what Kellogg unstintingly calls "structural racism."

When protesters took to the streets last year—first over the killing of Michael Brown and then Eric Gardner—their organizing efforts weren't supported by outside money, at least not at a significant level. But those protesters haven't been the only advocates speaking up in recent months. A range of social justice and civil rights organizations that are supported by philanthropic dollars have also chimed in, creating one of the most robust discussions of race in recent decades.

Foundation money has helped bankroll many of the policy ideas that have been floated as ways to remedy excessive use of police force and the overall criminalization of young African-American men. Interestingly, some of that money has come from libertarian donors like the Koch brothers, who've long underwritten work on criminal justice reform and curbing police power. The Cato Institute has one of the most extensive [initiatives](#) criticizing police misconduct within the think tank world.

All these investments helped prime advocates to advance a more sophisticated and powerful analysis of racial equity and criminal justice in the wake of Ferguson than might otherwise have been the case.

As for the future of civil rights funding, here's a prediction: In coming years, some longtime funders in this space will shift to focus more on economic equity issues—not because they're giving up on racial justice, but because they're increasingly seeing shared prosperity and reduced inequality as essential to creating a fairer America for people of color.

That would make sense, because even as the United States has made huge strides in civil rights since the days of the Selma march, it's gone backwards in key respects when it comes to economic opportunity. It's worth recalling that Martin Luther King, Jr.'s last effort as an activist had nothing to do with segregation or Jim Crow. He was in Memphis to lend his support to a strike by garbage collectors.

Finally, I'd be remiss if I didn't close this piece by noting that some philanthropists have actively sought to roll back the achievements of the civil rights movement and subsequent efforts to achieve racial equity through legal changes. Conservative funders have long bankrolled efforts to weaken the Voting Rights Act and have backed extensive work over decades to eliminate affirmative action by supporting groups like the Center for Equal Opportunity.

Which, again, speaks to how the upper class is often as divided as the rest of America when it comes to the great issues of the day.