

Book review: *Buying Respectability: Philanthropy and Urban Society in Transnational Perspective, 1840s to 1930s*

Reviewed by Stuart Mendel

Buying Respectability: Philanthropy and Urban Society in Transnational Perspective, 1840s to 1930s by Thomas Adam is an intricately woven composition tracing practices elite individuals in Canada, Germany, Great Britain, and the United States followed to found cherished libraries, museums and civic and cultural institutions over a 90 year period. Arising from extensive research by Adam, a historian on the faculty first at the University of Toronto and now at the University of Texas at Arlington, the work was nurtured at two conferences of invited papers involving a diverse group of scholars from the U.S., Canada and Europe in the areas of philanthropy, the nonprofit sector, civil society and social history.

In the spirit of full disclosure, I attended one of the two international conferences convened by Adam in 2001 and 2005 as a nonparticipating observer. This “fly-on-the-wall” opportunity to watch and listen as Adam and others explored the implications of knowledge transfer by philanthropists greatly aided my understanding of the larger purpose of this book. That purpose is to appreciate and learn from the manner in which the “leisure class” transported ideas from the elite institutions of one or more countries to those of their own. That purpose is amplified in this volume by the nuts-and-bolts story

of how eighteenth and nineteenth century philanthropists used their experiences to inform the creation of institutions in nations with different traditions of institution building.

One way to gain the most from the textured, densely packed narrative is to read the book as a social history tracing the power of philanthropy exercised not as an outcome of contributed dollars and patronage, but more as a function of shared information and ideas across the borders of nations of the northern hemisphere. In this manner the text falls nicely into a genre of social histories that consider aspects of the nonprofit sector, philanthropy and civil society in the areas of urban history, social change over time, and the origins and influences of the nonprofit sector in the United States (for example, Crocker, 2003; Hammack, 2003; Hall, 1982). These works were essentially about people and the manner in which they both adapted to conditions around them and precipitated a change to those same conditions over time. Chapter 2 offers a well-written narrative illustrating these characteristics and the process of transfer carried out by the leading citizens in each of the countries. Successive chapters consider the roles women and religion played in the phenomenon of transfer in the various national settings.

Sense-making of the narrative depends greatly upon the perspective and purpose with which the reader approaches the material. Adams places considerable emphasis on the phenomenon of “transnational” and “inter cultural” transfer as the center of gravity for the narrative. He argues that the purveyors of transfer did not set out to proselytize or convert others to a certain way of thinking and acting, but to use the power of example to encourage change in subtle ways. By borrowing successful models from other countries,

they were able to offer something new yet familiar through their philanthropy to their own nations. At the same time, the institutions whose forms were copied benefited from the prestige of serving as a model and from any innovations the new organization adopted

Those interested in urban history, the use of philanthropy to create new institutional forms and create opportunities for larger audiences, and the ease with which ideas cross national boundaries to influence decision-making in other countries will find this volume informative and thought-provoking. Some of the ideas depicting the use of philanthropy as an agent of social reform during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries echo familiar themes that may resonate with policy makers today engaged in transformative public social policies such as universal healthcare. In many respects Adam's historical treatise offers a lens through which we might compare our current dilemmas to avoid unintended consequences. For example, how might one import the best ideas of health service provision from Canada and the United Kingdom without fundamentally upsetting the massive yet intricately woven system of health care in the United States?

Another salient feature of *Buying Respectability* is Adam's treatment of those key individuals engaged in the transfer of culture through the conspicuous consumption of philanthropy. He dusts off Thorstein Veblen's concept of the affluent "leisure class," a phrase that is not readily applied to the American nonprofit lexicon but can include economic and educated elites (p. 7). Adams also contributes to our recognition of the agency of philanthropy to plant the seeds of institutions that had been tested in different

national settings was the work in each country of “established elites of merchants and landowners...(and) an increasingly affluent and assertive group of industrialists and capitalists...who competed in the realm of social welfare for the lower classes...(p. 89).”

In this way of thinking, the “leisure class” members competed with one another for status and legitimacy, regardless of how they had come to their station as society’s leading citizens.

Although this book has much to admire, it is not an easy read. The book’s awkward organization consists of two major divisions with five chapters total. The chapter content in Part I seems less connected topically and choppy in presentation as compared to the chapters in Part II. Although this criticism may seem petty, the organization raised barriers to the flow of the narrative, and I often found myself rereading entire passages to understand the fit and flow of the narrative. Each chapter might have served as a stand alone piece of scholarship - a criticism that is not uncommon for history books intended to address broad sweeping themes. Somewhere in chapter three the thrust of the narrative departs from emphasis on the cross fertilization of ideas across nations toward one in which greater attention is paid to the sweeping themes of change in individual countries. It is at this point that I began to think a better choice for organizing the book would have been around the nonprofit sub-sectors, such as culture, health and human welfare, social service, education and the like.

Readers looking for a book that offers a moment of epiphany or sudden insight will be disappointed. Nevertheless, there is a pioneering quality to the narrative in casting a light

on the phenomenon of transnational transfer of institutions, influence and problem solving through the subtle agency of philanthropy. In many ways this narrative illustrates how we have come to understand the connective value of civil society as a global phenomenon as opposed to a national one. This perspective bears attention for students of philanthropy seeking to grasp the threads of connection between institutions of the old world and those of the new.

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Sources

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