

Foundations of the American Century: The Ford, Carnegie, and Rockefeller Foundations in the Rise of American Power by Inderjeet Parmar. Columbia University Press, 2012, 356 pages. ISBN: 9780231146289, Hardback, \$27.50

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With *Foundations of the American Century*, Inderjeet Parmar has provided a masterfully constructed analysis of the often pernicious role that the "Big 3" foundations - Ford, Carnegie and Rockefeller - have had on US foreign policy over the last hundred years or so. The findings of this book may surprise some since, as Parmar points out in his first sentence, "it is difficult to believe that philanthropy...could possibly be malignant." (p.1) Indeed, it is Parmar's aim to refute this myth, arguing that "despite claims to the contrary, the Big 3's large-scale aid programs for economic and political development failed to alleviate poverty, raise mass living standards, or better educate people." (p.3) Noting that only one monograph²²⁷ had previously been written about the influence of foundations on American foreign policy, Parmar sets out to elevate our understanding of the interactions between non-state philanthropic organisations and state foreign policymaking circles.

Building upon the Establishment thesis of Godfrey Hodgson and the corporatist school of thought, Parmar adopts a neo-Gramscian framework through which he assesses the Big 3's activities and influence.²²⁸ He persuasively argues that such a perspective reveals how "through struggle, compromise, and the building of enduring coalitions that cut across class, ethnic, and racial cleavages is formed the prevailing idea of 'reality,' the dominant concept that underlies a particular regime." (p.23) Integral to Parmar's thesis is the idea that a sense of "state spirit inspires leaders to take personally the concerns of the nation and state and to subordinate narrow economic and political interests to the broader, long-term interests of the state/nation as a whole." (p.23) The construction of this neo-Gramscian framework leads the author to reject traditional claims that foundations were and are "disinterested, apolitical, and non-ideological grant-making and investment initiatives that were independent of the American state." (p.25) Instead, these foundations sought to construct and perpetuate networks among elites, including academics, that would promote the globalising economic and developmental interests of the foundations – goals that, in the cases cited by Parmar, paralleled those of the United States. This can be seen in the brief biographies of the main leaders of the Big 3 – the John D. Rockefellers (senior and junior), Andrew Carnegie and Henry Ford – that explain their context and background. Parmar argues that these men and their (exclusively male) colleagues who laid the foundations were "part of a historic bloc of private and state elites cohered by a long-term globalist hegemonic project." (p.31)

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²²⁷ Edward H. Berman, *The Influence of the Carnegie, Ford, and Rockefeller Foundations on U.S. Foreign Policy* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1983).

²²⁸ Godfrey Hodgson, "The Establishment," *Foreign Policy* 10 (Spring, 1973), pp. 3-40. On the corporatist school, see Michael J. Hogan, "Corporatism: A Positive Appraisal," *Diplomatic History* 10.4 (October, 1986), pp. 363-372; Ellis W. Hawley, "The Discovery and Study of a 'Corporate Liberalism,'" *Business History Review* 12.3 (1978), pp. 309-320.

It is in the final two thirds of the book (chapters four to nine) that Parmar delves deeply into the archives to offer evidence for his assertions. Here we see that, in addition to the sophisticated theoretical framework set out in earlier sections, the author's argument is based upon excellent and wide-ranging research, making extensive use of the recently opened archives of the Big 3. Chapter four aside, which is devoted to the establishment of a Cold War American Studies network throughout Europe, each chapter examines a different case study in the developing world: Indonesia and the Asian Studies Network; Nigeria and the African Studies Network; Chile and Latin American Studies; and, finally, the post-Cold War era.

In each case, according to Parmar, the story is the same even if the characters sometimes change. In Indonesia, the Ford Foundation "constructed...an effective counter-hegemonic bloc of politically and militarily well-connected intellectuals who looked to the United States... for their country's economic modernization and progress." (p.148) In Nigeria, the Big 3 established networks designed to sustain their own hegemony, "undergirded by elitist, racial, and imperial assumptions." (p.178) Indeed, the author's argument is so resolutely researched and relentlessly put forward that one comes away either a convert – if they weren't already – or a disbeliever, in some cases accusing the author of writing a polemic.²²⁹

However, in the case of this reviewer, the book is – mostly – something of a triumph. It does have a few shortcomings, although most of these are minor. For instance, the Middle East, arguably one of the most significant political and economic arenas during the Cold War, is conspicuous by its absence. Iran in particular would have made a valuable case study given the activities of the Ford Foundation there in the 1950s and the influence of former staff, such as Harold Saunders, who went on to hold influential foreign policy positions within the Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon, Ford and Carter administrations.²³⁰ Occasionally, the book's passionate and strident tone – so often one of its greatest strengths – might be off-putting to some readers who do not already share Parmar's Marxist-Gramscian perspective.²³¹ On the other hand, Parmar might consider this to be an acceptable form of collateral damage. *Foundations of the American Century* could have been further improved had the author ventured to offer some solutions or alternatives to what he perceives to be the inherent failings of foundation philanthropy. If it is true that major philanthropic organisations do not always follow the best of intentions – or, at least, if they too often become subjugated to hegemonic interests – then this truly is a disconcerting scenario, desperately in need of remedy. However, these minor issues do not detract from what is a highly informative, thoroughly researched and extremely readable book. Rather, they point to the promising prospects for studies about the influence of American foundations on and their interaction with US foreign policy, for which Parmar has begun to pave the way.

²²⁹ For example, the historian Walter Russell Mead has criticised Parmar for being "too polemic." <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/137209/inderjeet-parmar/foundations-of-the-american-century-the-ford-carnegie-and-rockef>

²³⁰ Victor V. Nemchenok, "That So Fair a Thing Should be So Frail: The Ford Foundation and the Failure of Rural Development in Iran, 1953-1964," *The Middle East Journal* 63.2 (Spring, 2009), pp. 261-284.

²³¹ In his review, Joel L. Fleishman argued that Parmar's style "has turned what might have been a lively discussion into a screed." <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?storyCode=421031§ioncode=26>