Book Review

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

Thomas Adam

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Philanthropy has been a part of American society ever since the earliest settlers landed on this continent over 400 years ago (Bremner, 1988). Early colonial leaders wished to create a new world based on the Christian ideals of all citizens honoring each other through community and charity. Although the colonialist used these principles to create their new settlements, philanthropic efforts had been erupting all over Europe before the development of the new world. It was not long after the discovery of America that philanthropy found its way across the Atlantic. In Thomas Adam's new book, *Buying Respectability: Philanthropy and Urban Society in Transnational Perspective, 1840s to 1930s*, the author discusses how philanthropy efforts have been transferred between Europe and North America allowing for the creation of

some of the most influential cultural institutions throughout history. Adam also discusses how Americans and Europeans have used philanthropy as a method of establishing individual positions within high society and in some cases as a means of breaking through the barriers of social elitism. Adam's book is filled with historical accounts on the creation of many philanthropic efforts that continue to operate today. Additionally, Adam's gives many examples of individuals who have used these efforts for personal gain.

Buying Respectability is divided into two parts, both focusing on the different aspects related to philanthropic efforts around the turn of the twentieth century. Part one introduces the reader to the concept of intercultural transfer that serves as the theoretical framework throughout the book. As cited by the

author, intercultural transfer is defined as ‘the movement of material objects, people, and ideas between two separate and clearly defined cultures and societies’ (p. 3). In this case, the intercultural transfers were major philanthropic projects such as museums, free-lending libraries and social housing projects. In Chapters 1 and 2, Adam goes into great detail about the history of these projects and how individuals working as agents of intercultural transfer brought about some of the most cherished cultural institutions that are still present today. Examples of these projects include the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, the Boston Public Library and the Royal Ontario Museum. According to Adam, the existence of these institutions can be traced back to the workings of intercultural transfer through various charitable organizations and individuals.

The second part of the book focuses on how individuals and groups during this time period used philanthropy as a means of gaining recognition and social status. Adam points out that philanthropy was especially meaningful for those who had acquired new wealth and needed a way to enter the elite society. At the beginning of Chapter 3, Adam writes, ‘the newly rich industrialists and capitalists had to find other ways outside the realm of economics to gain recognition from the established social elites, such as marrying up, traveling to Europe, building impressive mansions, and philanthropy’ (p. 90). The elitism of philanthropic associations was so prevalent at this time that competition between the new and old money actually resulted in the creation of new projects. New York landmarks, such as the Museum of Natural History and

Metropolitan Opera House are both examples of projects that were developed for this reason.

According to the author, the newest generation of wealthy individuals was not the only population to receive the social benefits of philanthropic efforts. Women as well as certain religious groups also used philanthropy as a means of establishing themselves within the realms of the social elite. Some examples from the book include how women were especially active in the social housing developments in Germany and how Jewish individuals used philanthropy to make major social gains in Protestant-dominated Toronto. Each example used by Adam was supported by historical references and accounts that highlighted the social impact those individuals made for themselves and the development of many great philanthropic projects around the world.

The method in which Adam formulated each chapter to coincide with its theme is one of the many strengths *Buying Respectability* has to offer. Adam presents extremely detailed accounts of historical families and individuals from both Europe and North America who were influential in the intercultural transfer of philanthropic efforts. The book is filled with an impressive amount of research that allows the reader to create a vivid mental picture into the various philanthropic trials and processes during the turn of the twentieth century. Another strength of *Buying Respectability* is the soft voice and entertainment value that significantly adds to the overall enjoyment of learning about the history of philanthropy during this time period. Adam’s writing style not

only educates but also invites the reader to become involved in the chapters through a narrative of thought-provoking stimulation and an open invitation to continue reading.

Philanthropy has become a major factor in the cultural well-being of the United States along with many other developed countries. In many cases, some of the most loved institutions that depict the community heritage of these countries are direct products of philanthropic efforts. *Buying Respectability* is an excellent resource that highlights how many philanthropic projects have been shared throughout history for the improvement of social structures around the world. The book

also depicts how many individuals have been able to contribute to these efforts for the sake of their communities as well as their own social positioning. This book is recommended to anyone who wishes to further their knowledge into the history of American and European philanthropy along with anyone interested in history related to societal development.

REFERENCE

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