Book Reviews

Little-Studied Institutions

The Big Foundations. WALDEMAR A. NIELSEN. Columbia University Press, New York, 1972. xiv, 476 pp. $10.95. A Twentieth Century Fund Study.

There are estimated to be 25,000 foundations in the United States, with total assets of about $20 billion. Here is a major class of American institutions, distributing over $1.5 billion a year; yet we have had hardly a dozen published reports evaluating their activities. There have been some occasional criticisms, some muckraking, some intelligent challenges, but nothing like the body of criticism that has accumulated concerning universities, hospitals, government, and corporations. One should welcome, then, any responsible contribution to our understanding of foundations.

Onto this nearly empty stage marches Waldemar Nielsen, author, consultant, and former executive of the Ford Foundation, arguing that the country's wealthiest general-purpose foundations are, on the whole, "sick, malfunctioning" institutions. These are strong words, and it is not surprising that they have received wide publicity in the news media and in editorials. After several readings of the book, however, I have concluded that it fails as a scholarly study, and is pernicious because it contains much personal bias and hostile criticism masquerading as social science. This is especially dangerous because the book falls into a vacuum where the slightest breeze becomes a whirlwind, where there is little scholarship and much rhetoric, and where there are none of the peer review checks to which we are accustomed in social research.

The Big Foundations takes in the 33 with assets of over $100 million, which together control more than half the total assets of American foundations. It can be viewed as two books in one, each of about the same length. The first contains descriptions, "a gallery of portraits" as the author says, of the 33 foundations, and there is a good deal of general information here, though not much to help the grant seeker. The second discusses their role as institutions in the United States, and criticizes their lack of innovation and lack of responsiveness to the major social problems confronting the nation. But these two segments are not really linked, and the argument in the second half, which is a personal document written from the author's concern with social action, could just as well stand alone.

The book begins with a good short review—not new, but succinct—of the recent and current political context of foundations and a similarly terse but solid, essentially statistical description of large foundations in this country. Nielsen then swings into his gallery of portraits, and I say "swings" advisedly because the author has a clean, engaging, candid, breezy style that carries the reader along happily. These profiles deal with the origins of each foundation and with the personalities of the donors and key associates and of successive presidents, directors, and other administrative officers up to and including the present. Nielsen's point of view is strongly personality-oriented; throughout, the "great man" theory of institutional performance is dominant. He is not analytical on the topic of organizational constraints or of outside forces influencing the quality of the institution. Instead he sees charismatic qualities and personality quirks, and he virtually explains the differences he sees among the big foundations in terms of the personal characteristics of the donors and subsequent chief executive officers.

These portraits are not neutral, for Nielsen has his personal ax to grind, namely, social activism, and his evaluative opinions appear frequently. Indeed, his evaluations are presented forthrightly in the chapter titles: "Carnegie: emergence from elitism"; "The formidable Rockefeller fleet"; "Coming of age in the Ford Foundation"; "Danforth and Kellog: fine but flawed"; "Surdna, Bush, Pew, and Irvine: underachievers and delinquents"; "The ducal Du Ponts"; "Lilly, Hartford, and Duke: birds in gilded cages"; "Sloan, Kettering, and Mott: GM's philanthropic offspring"; "The middling Mellons"; "Astor, Woodruff, Kresge, Waterman, and Kaiser: philanthropy family style"; "Fleischmann and Commonwealth: two intriguing aberrations—Land: a gleam of hope."

The second half of the book deals with public reporting, trustees and staff, regulation, government and foundation interfaces, and the role of the large foundations in race relations. One good, data-based analysis shows successive stages of evolutionary change reached by the big foundations, with progression from establishment by the donor through seven characteristics such as staff development, investment diversification, and innovative programming.

Nielsen has two general criticisms of the large foundations. One is that some of them serve private interests through self-dealing, interlocking boards with corporations, and other mechanisms. He notes that the consequences of the Treasury Act of 1969 overtook the life of his study, and many foundation observers believe that that law has gone a long way to solve these problems. What the author tells here is now well known to government regulatory agencies, foundation leaders, and journalists. His second and main line of criticism is that the large foundations are not dynamic, creative, or reformist, and that "not one-tenth, probably not one-twentieth, of their grants have any measurable impact on the major social problems confronting the nation at the present time."

Nielsen challenges the claim of certain foundations that they are socially responsive and innovative and, in fact, this challenge is not entirely unwarranted. Foundation speakers often extol their subjects with phrases like "leverage," "cutting edge," "frontiers," "social responsiveness," and "innovations," and this unctuous, self-serving belly scratching gets us nowhere except deeper into ignorance about what we are doing. Where such high-flown claims are made, it is just to challenge their makers to show that

they are in fact living up to their claims. To puncture a few gas-filled balloons is good, healthy fun.

But one must object when Nielsen enlarges his challenge to include foundations like Commonwealth and Hartford which have not made such claims and which are pursuing the greater good in ways they believe to be just as suitable as those Nielsen espouses. I wish that the author had only said somewhere, simply and forthrightly, "If I had the money I would have spent it differently." In choosing to review the activities of these large foundations with respect to race relations, he is posing his own question, not somebody else's. Many foundations believe just as strongly in the value to mankind of—say—the performing arts. And, in criticizing the way in which big foundations have dealt with the race question Nielsen is advancing the social activist approach, without evidential basis, as being more constructive than other modes of contribution to resolution of the race issue, such as social science research.

In evaluating foundations there are different levels of information that must be distinguished. At one level there are questions about specific projects: what actually happened during the course of this project or study or grant? Comparing two or more projects is a second level: is a given project more successful than another of a similar kind? Third is interprogram comparison, that is, is foundation support more effective in radio astronomy, medical education, or race relations? Fourth, how do foundations compare with each other: can it be said that one foundation is better than another? The fifth and most elevated level of information demands a comparison of the foundation goals and activities with those of other institutions, public and private, pursuing the public good. The first three of these are intrafoundation evaluations, the latter two are interinstitutional. Nielsen's evaluation goes to the fourth and fifth levels. Throughout his portraits of the large foundations, he rates and ranks them according to his implicit criteria of innovation and responsiveness in regard to his personal list of social problems. And when he evaluates the foundations versus other social institutions, whether governmental, other kinds of philanthropies, or these foundations as they might be if they were fully to reach his personal ideal for them, the criteria still are not clear and explicit. We have not found a way to bring evaluative evidence to bear on the rating of foundations, and perhaps we may not. I suppose the closest that we can come now is some kind of pooled judgment of thoughtful people, and beyond this is the expression of the public will, working through our governing system. When one man expresses his personal judgments as evaluations, he has the responsibility of making his criteria as formally explicit and understandable as he can. The author has not done this.

Having stated frequently his belief that foundations have not done as well as they could have, or perhaps as well as other institutions have, the author comes to their defense in an enviable five pages arguing the case for institutional pluralism in a deteriorating society, in which no bets should be overlooked. But it was just here that I was most disappointed in the book, because of his failure to see the implications of his own argument for the thesis of his study. The case for foundations rests on the premise of pluralism, that is, the value of diverse institutions in society. The premise of pluralism itself rests on the further premise that we do not know once and for all the path to the promised land. Institutional pluralism thus has the same roots as individual freedom in our society. Nielsen's view seems to be that these big foundations can generate pluralism in our society by being centers of social innovation and activist reform, but the very argument that he makes for foundations as a class must be made for diversity among foundations, and for precisely the same reason, namely, that none of us, including Nielsen, knows the single way to the greater good. His narrow view that foundations should be dedicated to active social change provides no room for foundations with other purposes, some to endow child development centers, some for religious training, some for archeological digs, some for strengthening the ballet as a great art form, some for advancing social science, some to create botanical gardens, and so on, through a very rich diversity of human concerns, though perhaps not Nielsen's.

A final point to note has to do with the author's recommendations on how to improve the operations and performance of the big foundations. His recommendations are familiar: diversification of boards of trustees in social and economic characteristics, better staffing, more interchange between the public constituency and foundation administrators, and similar matters. These should apply, I would say, to foundations whatever their area of activity, social activism or not. But it is here that the absence of scholarship is most evident, because Nielsen's personification of the destinies of the big foundations really tells us little about how foundations conduct their affairs, and thus he does not succeed in showing us how his proposed changes would be significant improvements.

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Behavior Problems, U.S.S.R.

Deviance in Soviet Society. Crime, Delinquency, and Alcoholism. WALTER D. CONNOR. Columbia University Press, New York, 1972. x, 328 pp. $12.50.

Are there alternative ways of organizing modern society and contemporary social life so that the characteristic prevalence of various social problems is lessened? Answers to such a question must largely be sought by examining the variation that exists among societies, particularly, perhaps, the "natural experiments" constituted by the modern socialist nations. Connor's study of deviance in Soviet society is one such examination, a valuable one for which American behavioral scientists should be grateful. His conclusion, to anticipate, is that "a different social system and a different mode of economic organization promise no 'total cure' for the problems of crime, alcoholism, and delinquency." On the contrary, he argues, these are major social problems in the Soviet Union.

Beyond the fact that it provides us with important, previously inaccessible information, the value of this book lies in the breadth of its objectives. Connor has not limited his concern to an attempt to appraise the prevalence of three kinds of deviance—an objective which cannot be rigorously accomplished anyway since, as with mental illness, no national Soviet statistics are available for review. He considers also such topics as the recent history of criminology in the Soviet Union, the explanations to which Soviet scholars have recourse in their at-