Book Review

Megan Tompkins-Stange, *Policy Patrons: Philanthropy, Education Reform, and the Politics of Influence*

Reviewed by **John Tyler**, Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation, 4801 Rockhill Rd, Kansas City, MO 64110, USA, E-mail: jtyler@kauffman.org

DOI 10.1515/npf-2017-0001

Among the many discussions generated by the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States has been the topic of how policy decisions will be informed and made. Subsets of those discussions continue debates about whether private foundations could or should be able to contribute and, if so how and to what extent, including about education policy. Implicit to those debates is the role of philanthropy in our republican democracy. A timely book published prior to the election entered this fray with an analysis of approaches that four foundations have taken to education policy.

In *POLICY PATRONS: PHILANTHROPY, EDUCATION REFORM, AND THE POLITICS OF INFLUENCE*, Prof. Megan Tompkins-Stange purports to delve into the inner sanctum of four large U.S. foundations – Gates, Broad, Ford, and Kellogg – and then compare the first two with the latter two in how they engage or fail to engage democracy in their respective missions to improve our nation’s education systems and outcomes. Although presenting interesting insights, the book has too many flaws to give in to the natural temptation to equate its timely topical focus with meaningful critique, much less to extrapolate to policy debates more broadly.

The book characterizes the approaches of the Gates and Broad Foundations as being “top-down” in using wealth and power to impose adoption of their preferred positions. The book does not discuss whether or how research informed those positions or if countervailing or alternative approaches had been debated and even funded along the way. Instead, the reader is guided to presume that the positions were vacuous exercises of arbitrary power.

Further, the book discounts that that these foundations often were supporting already active public charities and others whose missions and approaches were aligned. Constituents already actively occupied the space. The foundations did not necessarily invent them from whole cloth.

More importantly, the book seems to dismiss the relevance of how people at the foundations and their grantees engaged our nation’s republican democracy in one of its most basic senses: assembled constituents engaging, informing and petitioning duly elected and appointed representatives of the People throughout

levels of government. The book implies that it is somehow anti-democratic to inform and engage the very people, positions, and processes that constitute our political system.

The book suggests that it may not be the nature of the engagement but the fact of the engagement itself that is the problem, in that foundation personnel may have had access to engage whereas others do not. This is not the forum to thoroughly debate this point, except to point out that there were and are plenty of counter-players out there who engaged similarly as evidenced by reversals regarding and rejections of Common Core standards because of efforts of forces apparently more influential than these philanthropies.

The book juxtaposes that “top down” approach with the “grassroots” strategies of the Ford and Kellogg Foundations as being neutrally rooted in empowering communities to engage and decide education policy for themselves. Although I suspect unintended, the book somewhat paternalistically describes this approach as guiding those who need to be organized but don’t know how to do so, whether they should do so, or positions on which to do so. With no apparent sense of the irony, the book praises this approach for how it organizes, educates, and empowers communities as constituents assembled ultimately to engage, inform and petition duly elected and appointed representatives of the People.

I can’t help but wonder if the book would be as supportive of “grassroots” approaches if the targeted communities instead sought to organize around things like charter schools, pay for performance, or school choice. Along these lines, it might have helped if the book discussed whether these “grassroots” foundations supported only the approaches to education policy that they favored and believed best for the community or if their activities were more broadly based. That is, whether they also funded alternative approaches within communities so there could be robust debate and consideration about what the whole community desired, as opposed to a presumptively legitimate subset of it.

If funding was for diverse points of view, the book’s conclusions might be more enticing. If not, its apparent inconsistency suggests either less than full objectivity or a lack of appreciation for plurality of views as core to a high-functioning democracy.

Deep within, the book eventually acknowledges that the binary approaches otherwise depicted oversimplify reality and that all four foundations used variations of both approaches, even in education policy but also other efforts. Despite that acknowledgement, the book’s portrayals, conclusions, and even its structure unduly disparage the democratic participation that actually occurred in so-called “top down” approaches while simultaneously overstating the democratic sensibilities of “grassroots” approaches.

The book has been criticized in two respects that I view as too harsh. First is for not presenting conclusions about whether foundations should be allowed to engage in policy discussions of education or other issues of importance to our communities and nation. Despite taking pains to describe undertaking the research without an agenda and with openness to any conclusion, the book has a clear point of view that the grassroots approach is best and most clearly consistent with democracy. But the book does not overtly state that other approaches should be banned or discredited. Rather than a criticism, it seems that the openness to at least tolerating multiple approaches contributes credibility rather than diminishes it.

Second, the book has been criticized for using “informants” promised anonymity. I find that critique too dismissive of lessons to be learned from anonymous sources. The critique is on target in that what matters is the degree to which one internalizes and acts on anonymous information. As long as readers do not presume that the book’s information or conclusions as so informed are definitive, complete or thorough, the book presents entertaining and even useful insights into the workings of these foundations in one particular program area over a particular course of time.

Reading more into the book overstates its significance for foundation engagement in education policy or more broadly, regardless of who would have won the election.