
Book Review: L'émancipation des femmes à l'épreuve de la philanthropie

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L'émancipation des femmes à l'épreuve de la philanthropie, by Corinne Belliard. Harmatthan. Paris, France, 2009. 258 pp. ISBN: 978-2296091993

Mon ouvrage a contribué à illustrer le fait que les femmes ne peuvent accéder à une véritable émancipation qu'à partir de la conquête de leur droit et non en s'accoutrant des frusques que leur tendent les hommes.^[1] (Belliard, <https://histoire19.hypotheses.org/1435>)

Corinne Belliard is a historian and professor at Paris's *École des hautes études en sciences sociales*. In 2004, she defended her thesis on the women's liberation movement within the emerging feminist movement of the 19th century. In it, she covers the evolution of women's roles within two significant philanthropic organizations in the United Kingdom and France, from 1874 to 1914, of which this text is meant to be a synopsis for the general public.

General presentation

Here I provide an overview of the publication's structure and the author's main ideas, in the hopes of inspiring you to delve into its pages yourself.

The first section, "Who are the poor?," exposes the economic and social circumstances of the dynamics between the rich and the poor in the two countries. Belliard explores the dominant

schools of thought present at the start of two philanthropic organizations: the Charity Organisation Society (COS), founded in 1870 and the Office Central des Oeuvres de Bienfaisance (OCOB), founded in 1890.

The second, more substantial, section compares the dominant discourses around women and their influence on the gains achieved within these organizations. Belliard's approach is atypical, analyzing philanthropic archives and studying the intersection of social class and gender. The archives present the poor as a distinct social class in and of themselves, while dividing women, as a group, between both economic classes indistinguishably. Faced with this observation, she tries to understand if rich women considered belonging to the wealthy class as an opportunity for liberation – or if they were nevertheless doomed to be limited to philanthropic and domestic functions and roles as defined by men.

The economic and social conditions determined the space occupied by women in philanthropy

The study of the evolution of poverty in France and the UK helps us understand the transformation of the discourse around poverty. Originally presented as divine punishment, poverty is later described as a social condition brought on by systemic social inequality. Belliard reminds us of the pre-19th century economic transformations that led to a concentration of “the poor” in cities. This form of poverty also meant the presence of begging, vagrancy, and unemployment. The perception that the poor were dangerous led to the adoption of repressive public policies aimed at making a population –which must be shown how to survive in an economic context of endemic poverty – somehow employable. When stakeholders failed to offer complete job security for this workforce, education appeared as a social peacemaker and set the scene for philanthropic associations.

Distinguishing between charity and philanthropy

The presence of endemic poverty forced public authorities and the philanthropic sector to understand its specificities and causes. “In order to decide on the ‘right solution,’ we must individually examine the causes of poverty . . . Philanthropy does not treat poverty in the masses . . . but on a case by case basis”^[2] (Topalov, 1994, cited in Belliard, 2009, p.39).

In the 19th century, the philanthropic sector opted for a scientific approach to managing poverty, distinguishing itself from the religious approach through charitable action. Philanthropy, as played out by the two organizations studied by Belliard, COS and OCOB, appears to be an attempt to educate the poor. According to the dominant ideas in place at the time, such as the family model being the ideal, “the management of a philanthropic society can be compared to that of a family: men would provide the intelligence and direction, and women their good hearts and more just sense of righteousness”^[3] (Parker, 1853, cited by Belliard, 2009, p.58). Women in philanthropy, under the authority and guidance of their husbands, played a maternal or sororal role towards the poor.

Philanthropy: pathway to liberation or confinement to roles determined by men?

According to Belliard, the arrival of women on the philanthropic scene occurred under patriarchal approval, given their “special” attributes, then considered to be ingrained by nature. Intellectuals such as Auguste Comte or John Stuart Mill highlighted women's capacity to

manage “the public’s domestic sphere,” given their knowledge, and mastering, of the private domain. By invoking their special qualities regarding caregiving and morality, the philanthropic discourse contradicted feminist discourse and practices of the time, which sought to break away from the image of women as homemakers. As Belliard notes, the notion of special attributes only changed the role of women who belonged to the elite. The confinement of women to caregiving and the domestic realm contributes to the gender division of women and men.

This led to the tasks and functions of elite women being directed to specific areas of activity within philanthropy: childhood and early life, home management, health and hygiene, education, and aid to the poor. Through this, these female philanthropists indirectly contributed to women’s liberation, and especially to their own liberation within their social class.

Philanthropic initiatives led to a division amongst women. When women spoke out within these organizations, they did so with their hands tied, in the sense that they still needed approval from men to do so. The women who managed to stand out in these organizations did so by conforming to the dominant norms and to masculine ideas.

Belliard presents two women who managed to distinguish themselves by leaving their respective organizations. In France, Léonie Chaptel contributed to the development of social work and nursing education programs, while in the UK, Beatrice Webb published a harsh critique of philanthropic practices. By breaking away from the norm, these women unveiled the limits of philanthropic social assistance and managed to somewhat approach social problems from a new angle.

They were not the only ones who questioned the philanthropic practices of the time. Belliard relates, all too briefly, how some women on the sidelines of philanthropic organizations managed to make their way into the public sphere. These women did not miss out on the opportunity to shed light on the many blind spots of the dominant class’s discourse on social aid and the status of women. They began making progress, only to have their meagre gains compromised by the emerging context of war in 1914.

The last chapter of her book focuses on the process through which feminism would be placed on the backburner to make way for the patriotism sparked by the First World War. How could the conquest of women’s suffrage persist amidst a battle between pacifism and militarism? “The feminine character is enhanced by patriotic virtues: hatred of the enemy and compassion for their sons who are doomed to be sacrificed.” (p.225). According to Belliard, the context of the First World War became a trap. By once again invoking the special traits of each sex, women were pushed to the side to ensure the future of the collective, whereas men, due to their own special traits, exercised their courage in confronting the risks of combat.

If philanthropy is presented in the dominant discourse as a gateway for women to access the workforce and public arena, it also sheds light on the ways they have been trapped.

I would have wished for the author to present a clear definition of “liberation” to be able to measure her evaluation. Beyond occupying the public space and promoting their rights, we realize that it is also a question of becoming masters of their own destinies as free individuals and not as women stuck at the heart of gender-based social relations.

I particularly recommend this book for those interested in the dominant discourses that led to a

definition of philanthropy and aid, and in gauging its effects on women's emancipation. The book also highlights the political involvement of women who played key roles in philanthropy. Belliard's observations, not to exclude those gathered by Filleule and Roux (2009),^[4] illustrate the gender-based social relations at the heart of activist organizations.

Translation by Katherine Mac Donald.

^[1] Our translation: My book has helped illustrate the fact that women can only be truly liberated by the conquest of their rights and not by accepting the handouts offered by men.

^[2] Our translation: "*Pour décider du « secours efficace », il faut examiner individuellement les causes de la situation d'indigence...La philanthropie ne traite pas les pauvres en masse...mais au cas par cas.*"

^[3] Our translation: « *la gestion d'une société philanthropique pourrait se comparer à celle d'une famille : les hommes pourvoient l'intelligence et la direction, les femmes leur bon cœur et leur plus juste intuition du droit* »

^[4] Filleule, Olivier et Patricia Roux (2009). *Le sexe du militantisme*, Paris, Presses de Sciences Po.