

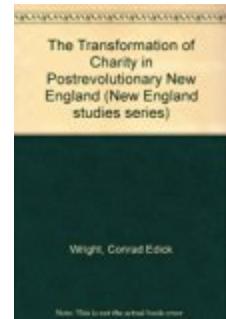
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Conrad Edick Wright. *The Transformation of Charity in Postrevolutionary New England*. Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press, 1992. x + 330 pp. \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-55553-123-2.

Reviewed by John D. Saillant (Western Michigan University)  
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The theme of “philanthropy and its discontents” is important for those interested in philanthropy as well as those interested in contemporary social thought. As Robert L. Payton notes in his *Philanthropy: Voluntary Action for the Public Good*, not only the usefulness but also even the existence of philanthropy has been challenged in the twentieth century. Some believe, Payton notes, that “philanthropy undercuts the will to work and vitiates the necessity for each person to stand on his or her own feet.” Some believe, Payne notes further, that “human nature at its core makes philanthropy illusory, as Freud believed religion to be; philanthropy is an example of what in Marxist terms is called ‘false consciousness,’ an ideological sleight-of-hand that tries to put a benevolent face on an exploitative system.” [Robert L. Payton, *Philanthropy: Voluntary Action for the Public Good* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1988), 89-101.] A recent book, *The Transformation of Charity in Postrevolutionary New England*, by Conrad E. Wright, of the Massachusetts Historical Society, makes it clear that concern and contention about philanthropy are not unique to our times. Wright demonstrates that in late-eighteenth-century and early-nineteenth-century America, philanthropy was the focus of intense discussion. Moreover, Wright argues, the development of the ideas and the institutions of philanthropy was bound up with the creation of a modern, postrevolutionary society in the United States. Indeed, the word “philanthropy,” little used by Americans before the Revolution became popular around 1780 (120-121). Before the Revolution, Americans generally avoided “philanthropy” in favor of such terms as “benevolence,” “charity,” “compassion,” and “kindness.” Understood according to its etymology as referring to “love of humankind,”

“philanthropy” seemed too abstract and ambitious to seventeenth-century and eighteenth-century Americans, who preferred more homely and personal terms such as “benevolence.” Some of the flavor of eighteenth-century thought about “benevolence” and “philanthropy” can be drawn from the dismissal of philanthropy by Timothy Dwight, one of the leading theologians of the early republic. In his *Theology*, lectures given at Yale College in the years after the Revolution, Dwight dismissed philanthropy as he defended instead “our duty to *provide for our own; especially for those of our own households.*” Dwight distinguished “benevolence” from “philanthropy.” “Benevolence” employed “in solid and useful acts of kindness” is “infinitely different from the cold philanthropy of modern philosophers,” Dwight insisted. “This philanthropy overlooks the objects which are around it, and within its reach,” Dwight continued, “and exhausts itself in pitying sufferers in foreign lands, and distant ages: sufferers, so distant, as to be incapable of receiving relief from any supposable beneficence.” [Timothy Dwight, *Theology: Explained and Defended in a Series of Sermons* (New Haven: T. Dwight & Son, 1839), III, 116-117.]

Wright’s useful and cogent book describes the way in which Americans left behind Dwight’s suspicion of the 1780’s of philanthropy as they advanced into a modern world in which the homely qualities of benevolence and charity seemed inadequate to the task of improving society. Before the Revolution, Americans generally understood charity as the ideal of human association—Jonathan Edwards called it the “sum of all virtues”—but as an ideal that could be achieved only in small societies. Although charity might in principle apply to all humankind, the charitable individual found himself or herself with only

a small circle of effective action. “The Christian who really lived his faith,” Wright explains, “had no shortage of ways to live his charity as well, only powers that were limited.... He could aspire to do great things, yet do none but small ones, and still live in charity. The gap between aspirations and achievements seemed the narrowest, and charity seemed to flourish the best, in the most intimate situations, among relatives, friends, and neighbors” (p. 29). Such thinking about charity reflected the small-scale societies characteristic of colonial America, in which people found their social context in a network of kin, co-religionists, patrons, servants, masters, and slaves. No stranger to questions about the nature of “true” charity, Americans also wondered whether charity must be utterly selfless or might allow some degree of self-concern. Most Calvinists, inspired by Edwards, insisted that only the regenerate could exercise true charity, while the charitable efforts of the unregenerate could not partake of true charity since they were motivated not by love, but by selfishness. Liberal Christians, who in the late eighteenth century represented the future, countered Edwardsianism by linking self-love and charity as simply different exercises of human affection. Thus, reasoned the liberals, anyone could be truly charitable, even though the effective scope of charity was small (pp. 42-47).

The Revolution, Wright argues, changed the heart of charity, at least in New England, leading people into new modes of thinking and organizing that would lay the foundation for modern philanthropy. The organization required by the Revolution—the colonial committees, the intercolonial communication, the efforts to boycott British goods, the militia, and the unity of purpose—served to convince Americans that effective action need not be limited to small-scale societies. As Americans began to feel themselves members of a large society, they began to believe that charity could extend beyond familiar circles. Wright links this new belief to the beginning of “the institutionalization of charity”: a fourfold increase in the number of “mutual benefit societies,” such as the Freemasons, in the twenty years after 1787 (pp. 52-53). Mutual benefit societies usually allowed each member to know every other member personally, but as Americans became more confident about social reach of organized charity they came to endorse organized philanthropy. Old reservations about the small scope of charity were forgotten as Americans examined the possibility of improving a new society. Wright quotes some Americans who convinced their compatriots of the feasibility and importance of organized philanthropy. “Much has been

effected by the exertions of benevolent and enterprising individuals,” wrote a Massachusetts lawyer in 1805, “but the exertions of individuals are unequal to the accomplishment of designs, which require great diversity of powers, or abundance of resources; which demand the combined energies of wealth, of science, and of labor.” Philanthropic organizations are necessary, argued a theologian in 1812, since solitary individuals “have not the leisure nor the opportunities to search out the circumstances of the poor” (p. 117). New Englanders came to understand that philanthropic organizations required neither that the philanthropist personally know all the members of the “society,” nor that the philanthropist personally know the needy who received their aid.

Convinced of the efficacy of organized philanthropy, New Englanders formed organizations for the relief of the poor, the care of orphans, the conversion of Indians, the education of young men for the ministry, the spread of the Gospel, the comfort of the imprisoned, and other worthy causes. These new organizations of the early republic made a profound impression upon American society in two ways. They served as models for the benevolent crusades of the antebellum years and they established the modern “eleemosynary” corporation in America (pp. 140-142), the forerunner of twentieth-century philanthropic organizations. Furthermore, the philanthropic organizations of the early republic were much involved with changes in women’s roles. Unlike charity, which was understood as ideally a constant guideline in each one’s life, philanthropy was secured in organizations—a difference that raised the question of whether some people might be more suitable for philanthropic “work” than were others. Americans of the early republic answered the question by reasoning that women played a special role in philanthropy. Not only could women soften the hearts and open the pockets of the men around them, reasoned Americans, but also women were uniquely suited to philanthropic work involving women and children (155-156). Timothy Dwight, who traced the evolution of charity into philanthropy, expressed such ideas. With their innate charity, believed Dwight, women assume a special responsibility to “check the vices, refine the manners, and amend the hearts, of men.” [Dwight, *A Discourse, in Two Parts, Delivered July 23, 1812, on the Public Fast, in the Chapel at Yale College* (New Haven: Howe and Defrost, 1812), 27.] In discussing the needy children in New Haven, Dwight wrote, “The wants and sufferings of families are incomparably better understood, and more perfectly comprehended, by women, than by men.” [Dwight, *The Charitable Blessed:*

*A Sermon, Preached in the First Church in New-Haven, August 8, 1810* (New Haven: Sidney's Press, 1810), 17.] Thus, the early republic saw a boom in Female Charitable Societies, Ladies' Friendly Societies, and Women's Benevolent Organizations, which concerned themselves with the relief and religious education of poor women and children as well as sometimes the practical and spiritual needs of black families. These Female Societies made their mark on history not only by defining a "women's sphere" in which women could advance into public life in roles supposedly uniquely suited for their gender, but also in building the foundation for later crusades, such as the abolitionist and the temperance movements, in which women played major roles. [An excellent study showing modern historiographical approaches to women and philanthropy is Lori D. Ginzberg, *Women and the Work of Benevolence: Morality, Politics, and Class in the Nineteenth-Century United States* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).]

Wright ends his book with invaluable reference and bibliographical material. An appendix on "Charitable Motivations and Historical Writing" (pp. 199-206) is the most sensible commentary available on the various scholarly approaches, some starkly reductionist, to philanthropy. Wright's other end-material gives employment and financial information about the members of charitable societies along with "A Census of Charitable Organizations in New England, 1657-1817" (pp. 228-269). Wright's study is thus not only an intelligent analysis of the origins of philanthropy in the United States, but an open door that allows new consideration of Americans' past efforts to bring charity into the world.

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