

8. Benefactor versus philanthropist

The three functions of benefactors converge in the phenomenon of benefaction and differentiate it from philanthropy. However, a further clarification of the concept of “benefaction” can be made through comparing it to the related phenomena and concepts of “philanthropy” and “volunteerism.”

In general, there is a certain tendency to confusion of the terms benefactor-philanthropist-volunteer, an obscuring fact for comprehending the particular features and the differentia specifica characterising the phenomena of benefaction, philanthropy and volunteerism.

The philanthropist is an (able) individual who aids large number of (unable) individuals. He carries out, on varying scales and as an individual function, the typical gestures of solidarity and altruism required by traditional social life. Thus, the philanthropist develops feelings of solidarity and a humanistic function in an exemplary way, distinguishing it as a social intervention, which ultimately reinforces social cohesion and bonds (the social function of philanthropy). The phenomenon cultivates human solidarity, love for one’s fellow man, and Christian kindness. It also contributes to concealing class opposition behind a screen of human complementarity between “a kind man” and “a man in

need.” As such, it is an individual gesture from one person to another person, isolated and personal, lacking the mediation of the institutional element which characterises the benefactor and distinguishes him from the philanthropist and the provider of individual charity.

Philanthropists belong in the category of traditional intellectuals.⁴³ They do not serve the imperative of a specific social class, but they serve a timeless social need. For this reason, their function is characterised by the traditional intellectual’s trans-historical quality. The priest and the doctor functioned in traditional society in an analogous way.

Organic intellectuals connect their activity with a powerful and ascendant social class. Philanthropy renders the social bond perceptible in the following way: it creates a tangible representation of it through the accomplishment of specific gestures “from person to person,” the logic and aim of which is the cultivation of the social bond beyond its intra-familial version. It shapes cultural representations and models of behavior which are not necessarily institutionalised as in the benefactor’s case, and consequently contributes to organising culture.⁴⁴ In this way, the philanthropist performs the function of the traditional and not of the organic intellectual.

The dispensing of charity found in philanthropy, and in philanthropic activity in general, is thus different from the beneficent function where the individual undertakes works that, according to traditional perceptions, would normally belong to institutional collectivities. The benefactor avoids doing good deeds in the form of a number of individualised gestures, as is the case with the philanthropist. The former concentrates his beneficent practice into an institution such as a school or a hospital, or a specific area, such as his village of origin, and in so doing secures not only the most effective result, but also its continuation, even after his biological end.

In the case of philanthropy, the philanthropist responds to personal demands from his/her fellow men, covering their needs, and accepting the expression of their thanks for the gesture he/she personally made to them. Philanthropy, in this sense, is also present in the Greek world. At the time of the Asia Minor catastrophe, philanthropic activity was

developed in all areas where refugees were concentrated. For instance, the city of Ermoupolis on the island of Syros, where many refugees found shelter in 1922, was described at the time as “a city which has a strong tradition of philanthropic activity, which it will apply in the current conditions to relieve social issues: fundraising, donations, distribution of foodstuffs, women’s workshops and other ways of providing relief will be intensified in order to meet social needs.”⁴⁵ In the following year, this philanthropic was modified into a beneficent function, when the American East Relief established an immense orphanage on the island, where “thousands of orphan refugee children found a home, while being provided with vocational training.”⁴⁶