

CHAPTER ONE

Private Philanthropy and the Self-Help Myth

Foundations are bizarre beasts. They are created to solve societal problems by using inordinate amounts of wealth—wealth that is inherently contradictory because it was gleaned out of the inequalities that it proposes to address.

Author interview with a foundation program officer, San Francisco, California, 2009

At a Hilton Hotel in Chicago, Illinois, dessert and coffee were served as the opening luncheon plenary of the 2013 annual conference of the Council on Foundations commenced.¹ On a raised stage in front of a packed room of philanthropy professionals, Ellen Alberding, president of the Joyce Foundation, introduced the panel, “A National Dialogue on Healthy and Safe Communities.” The lunching crowd chatted over her welcome. Only as youthful James Anderson, raised in a poor Chicago neighborhood, stood up to speak was full attention drawn to the stage. Anderson captivated the room with his story of a triumphant journey out of poverty, abandonment, and abuse at the hands of his father. “No one cared about me,” he told us. After years of isolation and

loneliness he joined a gang and got hooked on meth. Eventually he found himself in prison. Then, one day, someone from the Wellness Foundation approached him. Being invited to participate in the Anti-Recidivism Coalition was all Anderson needed. He finally found the will to pull it together because someone gave him reason to believe in himself. To rousing applause, and tears in the eyes of the women seated at my table (including me), Anderson concluded: “One person can change a life.”

I attended the Council on Foundations conference as an ethnographic researcher interested in the response of private foundations to deepening poverty and inequality in the United States. As I listened to James Anderson’s rousing speech, a woman maybe forty-five or fifty years old, with the name Paulina embroidered on her server uniform, carried a large tray to our table. Visibly straining, sweat on her brow, Paulina lowered fifteen plates of grilled chicken, potatoes, and broccoli rabe to her serving stool. I was struck with the contradiction of the buoyant professionals gathered to celebrate their work to alleviate poverty, while being served by some of the poorest people in the United States: food-industry workers. I was also struck by how throughout the course of the three-day conference most panels included a real-life tragedy-turned-victory story of individuals like Anderson who had pulled themselves out of poverty.

These moments provide a window into the philanthropic trend of asking the poor to help themselves, while avoiding the structural causes of poverty and inequality. At the heart of the self-help approach is the enduring belief that entrenched poverty is the result of social and economic isolation that has trapped poor people within a culture of poverty marked by hopelessness and self-harming behaviors. This belief corresponds with the argument that poverty can only be interrupted

when individual poor people take responsibility for changing the way they act.² Questions of unequal opportunities, histories of exclusion, profiling along the lines of race, gender, class, and legal status, and capitalist economies that produce wealth for a few and poverty for many are most commonly avoided. The mainstream self-help narrative also fails to recognize that success stories are often made possible by an ongoing social infrastructure of aid, including public assistance programs and institutions, family networks, and private charity. James Anderson, for example, did not help himself alone. He was provided with a support system and resources as a youth coordinator with the Wellness Foundation's Anti-Recidivism Coalition.

Over the past thirty years, the self-help approach to poverty alleviation has gained new ground in economically struggling urban centers and rural regions in the United States and the global South.³ In the United States, the "trickle-down economics" and anti-state policies initiated by Ronald Reagan's administration (1981–1989) included significant cuts to the upper tax brackets and a three-decade trend of trade liberalization, a shrinking public sector, wage stagnation, increase in part-time and low-wage jobs, and expanding inequality.⁴ With the conservative attack on the Great Society programs of the War on Poverty, the idea that the individual poor person, not the state, is responsible for helping themselves out of poverty became increasingly popular ideology.⁵ During this time the unions, public institutions and programs, and grass-roots groups that organize and advocate for poor people have suffered declining resources and legitimacy. In some cases they have bureaucratized and professionalized in ways that fail to serve the needs of the new working poor.⁶ In the same thirty years, these trends allowed private wealth for the top 1 percent of the population and in the

philanthropic sector to rapidly expand.⁷ In many regions public programs were replaced by privately funded nonprofit organizations that serve poor and marginalized communities.⁸

Yet, have these private investments changed the conditions of poverty or helped the people they claim to serve? This book shows how private foundations maintain systems of inequality by funding individualistic programs that appear to address poverty but that in practice often avoid the root causes of the problems foundations propose to solve. For the people in this book—social movement leaders and nonprofit organizational staff concerned with farmworker and immigrant poverty—the dominant self-help formula ultimately acceptable to foundations is particularly problematic. The poverty in California's Central Valley is not the result of the culture or behaviors of poor people. Instead, just as in resource-rich regions in the global South, poverty is produced through relationships of capital production, often hidden from sight, amidst great wealth. Beyond the main highways and thoroughfares that run up and down the Central Valley of California, many families struggle with food insecurity and poor health, and live in substandard homes, often with no heat or clean running water. This enduring poverty is produced and maintained through large-scale farming that relies on low-wage, labor-intensive seasonal fieldwork, high pesticide use, an entrenched labor contractor system, and unmonitored working conditions for the increasingly undocumented immigrants who produce profit for major agricultural and food retail conglomerates.

Today, poverty rates in the Central Valley are higher than those in postindustrial Appalachia and Detroit.⁹ According to the 2012 US Census, three of the region's main metropolitan areas, Fresno, Bakersfield, and Modesto, rank among the poorest

in the state and the nation.¹⁰ Fresno County, which produces more than \$6 billion per year in agricultural products, ranks as the second-most impoverished area in the nation. Recent journalistic reporting and ethnographic research confirm this seemingly permanent condition, documenting high unemployment, meager wages, widespread food insecurity, health disparities owing to heavy pesticide use and labor-intensive work, substandard housing conditions, and rampant discrimination against immigrants.¹¹ Indigenous Oaxacan migrants to the valley are the latest to suffer from persistent poverty produced through industrial agriculture.¹²

The case studies featured in this book capture critical historical moments when private foundations attempted to address migrant poverty in the Central Valley region. In each instance philanthropic investments obscured the real stakes involved by asking farmworkers to “help themselves” while silencing stories of the enduring abuses of industrial agriculture. The archival and ethnographic case studies featured in this book, from philanthropic investments in farmworker leadership development leading up to the historic farmworker movement, to the large-scale, foundation-driven initiatives of the 1990s and 2000s, show how foundations fail to address poverty and inequality by setting firm boundaries around definitions of self-help. Limits are most often set on labor organizing, strikes, boycotts, immigrant rights, and advocacy approaches that hold industry accountable for the enduring abuses of farmworkers and immigrants.

However, unlike much of the critical philanthropy literature, which focuses on the successful implementation of straightforward capitalist agendas among major private foundations, the following cases show how foundation investments are actively contested and negotiated. The stories told by social movement

leaders, nonprofit organizational professionals, and even foundation staff reveal that the self-help framework dominant in philanthropic circles is not always clear or fully accepted but is rather diversely interpreted and actively negotiated.¹³ Sometimes funding frameworks come directly from poor people's movements and are purposefully adopted, changed, and co-opted by foundations. Occasionally, grass-roots groups attempt to co-opt ideas that come from the philanthropic sector. On rare occasions, the interests of funders and social movements align. Self-help can mean consciousness-raising, self-determination, and organizing against dominant power structures, as demonstrated in the people's education, food justice, and community service programs of the historic Black Power movement and the early years of the farmworker movement.¹⁴ The long history of African American self-help in particular, from the industrial education of Booker T. Washington to the more radical politics of the Black Panthers, underscores a more transformative potential.¹⁵ Like the Panthers, Cesar Chavez of the California farmworker movement initially activated the self-help model to build dignity, pride, and ownership in self-directed organizations to replace and challenge mainstream institutions not designed to serve farmworkers and disenfranchised immigrants in rural California.

Most critical scholarship on philanthropy does not show how foundation and nonprofit organizational staff struggle with these alternate understandings and contradictions. Instead of viewing foundations as closed systems adept at implementing clear-cut capitalist agendas, this book focuses on how power is maintained by sometimes well-intended foundation and nonprofit staff who negotiate, translate, and ultimately water down organizing agendas into benign self-help programs acceptable to

foundation leadership and networks. When funding grass-roots poor people's movements, philanthropic power runs through the very process of forging agreements between greatly unequal partners such as wealthy funders and social movement leaders. Most frequently, acceptable translations of self-help fall into the spaces between bootstrap capitalism and radical self-determination. From the settlement house movement¹⁶ of the Progressive Era, to the War on Poverty in the United States during the 1960s,¹⁷ to current capitalist approaches to integrate the "bottom billion" into the global marketplace,¹⁸ to recent efforts to train girls to become economic agents in fighting global poverty,¹⁹ local leaders, activists, entrepreneurs, nonprofit professionals, and funders have attempted to reframe self-help agendas. Social movement leaders and community organizers who negotiate philanthropy have achieved important victories. More often, foundations set the terms of debate, attracting attention to the weaknesses, behaviors, and responsibilities of the poor and shifting the focus away from the social, political, and economic relationships of power that produce and maintain poverty.

In the cases featured in this book, foundation and organizational staff struggle to address migrant poverty in California's Central Valley, which is simultaneously one of the wealthiest agricultural production regions in the world and home to the poorest Californians. Compromises between foundation staff and social movement leaders, such as Cesar Chavez of the farmworker movement, and modern-day farmworker and immigrant organizers, in the end produce frameworks of poverty alleviation that exclude questions regarding the structural inequality produced through industrial agriculture. By translating an initially radical stance of "mutual aid" or self-determination elaborated by community organizers into nonthreatening self-help

programs, foundations ensure that critique or confrontation of industry is avoided.

Within these funding agreements and institutional arrangements a key contradiction of self-help philanthropy is revealed. Private foundation investments in self-help sometimes activate and even politicize the people engaged. Yet that politicization eventually upsets funders who find this politics threatening. When fearful of collective action or uprising, foundations reign in financial commitments and re-inscribe limits around what kind of self-help is acceptable. Eventually, the aspirations of grass-roots organizations are derailed by grant agreements that prescribe firm limits and make demands on the time, energy, and ideology of newly professionalized staff. The historical and ethnographic studies featured in the following pages reveal the contradictory impasses produced through foundation-funded self-help and participatory approaches to reducing poverty. Never completely foreclosed, privately funded movements are, as Piven and Cloward propose in their classic book *Poor People's Movements*, both constituted by and in resistance against bureaucratic institutional structures.²⁰

Beyond limiting confrontation of an industry that produces geographic patterns of poverty, the philanthropic approach documented in this book alters the very nature of social change. Distracted and bogged down by professional management and partnership requirements, short-term foundation-funded programs replace the day-to-day engagement required to organize people in movement building.²¹ In social movements that aim to create long-haul systemic change, community-based leaders, popular educators, and organizers build spaces where people's lived experiences are shared, analyzed, and crafted in concrete strategies to galvanize alliances against the dominant system and toward cre-

ating alternative futures.²² This process of strategically articulating the concerns and creative visions of those the current system does not serve holds the seeds of fundamental change. Like the dominant self-help approach, it activates people beyond hopelessness, yet replaces competitive and individual mobility approaches with collective dignity, self-determination, and new cooperative ways of working and living. When foundation funding is introduced, resources are shifted away from the daily work of movement building and toward short-term grant deadlines and funding requirements. Inundated with program management, paperwork, and meetings to maintain philanthropic relationships, leaders and organizers become institutional professionals accountable to foundations and not to the people they claim to represent or serve.

The remainder of this chapter provides a framework for understanding the power of philanthropy; the history of American philanthropists' self-help approach in the twentieth century; and the geographical and political context for the archival and ethnographic case studies of philanthropic initiatives to address migrant poverty in California's Central Valley.

THE POWER OF PHILANTHROPY

The key role of private philanthropy in alleviating poverty has long been celebrated in the United States and is gaining popularity around the globe. From Andrew Carnegie's *Gospel of Wealth* (1889) to Bishop and Green's *Philanthrocapitalism: How the Rich Can Save the World* (2008), to the treatises of public figures such as Bill Clinton and Bill Gates, donors maintain that investing private wealth in research, programs, and (more recently) venture capital financing in impoverished regions is the best method for

addressing the “poverty problem.” But the proponents of philanthropy or “creative capitalism” as the solution to global poverty have a growing collection of critics. In 2007, an organization called INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence published *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded: Beyond the Non-Profit Industrial Complex*. In this book, scholars and activists document how an advanced “non-profit industrial complex”—representing a set of entrenched symbiotic relationships between the state and private funders—maintains relationships of power and fails to address issues of structural inequality. The studies featured in INCITE!’s publication show how the non-profit industrial complex monitors and controls social justice organizations, redirects activist energies into professionalized behaviors, and encourages social movements to model rather than challenge business and corporate practices. At the broad scale, these studies show how private foundations use public money and tax breaks to engage in ameliorative activities that mask exploitative capitalist work that creates poverty and inequality.

The Revolution Will Not Be Funded builds on a tradition of critical “Gramscian” philanthropy scholarship that suggests that the Big Three foundations (Carnegie, Rockefeller, and Ford) are central to maintaining Western capitalist imperialism in educational systems and foreign policy.²³ Drawing on the ideas of Italian cultural theorist Antonio Gramsci, these studies show how capitalist control is maintained not only through direct force but also through “cultural hegemony.”²⁴ Cultural hegemony can be understood as a system of ideological power managed through a set of worldviews, such as the dominant self-help philosophy, imposed on poor and oppressed people. Cultural norms and values promoted by foundations become “hegemonic” when they appear to be natural “common sense,” inevitable and even beneficial to everyone,

though in reality they only preserve the status quo. In these studies, the focus of analysis is on how the Big Three generate popular consent by claiming to address the causes of systemic marginalization of human populations though, in reality, through ameliorative projects and thinly veiled capitalist ideology, they maintain the systems of power that generate the very problems they claim to address.²⁵

A recent study in this tradition shows how the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation, allegedly concerned with pressing food security problems in Sub-Saharan Africa, are in reality promoting dependency on genetically modified crops and enacting new forms of land privatization through partnerships with Cargill and Monsanto.²⁶ International activist groups, such as Via Campesina, condemn this trend as a massive land grab from poor farmers and a misappropriation of humanitarian investments for commercial ends.²⁷ In a similar vein, foundation investments in US public school reform have been shown to almost always advance privatization, choice, and competitive approaches that build market opportunities for private educational service providers while failing to improve outcomes for poor students.²⁸ Other studies document how in settings such as New Orleans, post-Katrina disaster recovery aid was turned into a for-profit endeavor through partnerships between nonprofit organizations, foundations, and private developers.²⁹ Even philanthropic insiders join the chorus. Most recently, Peter Buffett, son of billionaire philanthropist Warren Buffett, described the inability of foundations to address the causes of inequality as the curse of “philanthropic colonialism” in which boardrooms in the “charitable industrial complex” are populated by wealthy trustees, “searching for answers with their right hand to problems that others in the room have created with their left.”³⁰

Like this emerging body of critical scholarship, I found through my own research that seemingly benevolent program frameworks such as self-help, civic participation, and social capital; institutionalization of poor people's organizations; and professionalization of organizing staff weaken and redirect the work of nonprofit organizations that aim to address the structural causes of poverty and inequality. However, unlike much of the literature and popular punditry, I observed that control is not always represented in clear capitalist agendas or unified grand visions. Rather, the power of private philanthropy is a piecemeal process of adapting, negotiating, and eventually incorporating and neutralizing the leadership and strategies of radical social movements at different historical conjunctures.

The relationship between community organizers, movement leaders, and private funders in the Central Valley is akin to the rich historical accounts described by John Arena in his 2012 book, *Driven from New Orleans*. Arena's book, based on his own experiences as an activist and on detailed ethnographic research, shows how leading up to and throughout the neoliberal era of the past twenty years nonprofit organizations in New Orleans played a role in displacing communities and privatizing public housing. Tracing community-based struggles around public housing in New Orleans, from the post-segregation era to resistance around displacement in the 1980s, to the lost opportunities of the HOPE VI housing program, to redevelopment battles after the destruction wrought by Hurricane Katrina, Arena shows how grass-roots activists are transformed into nonprofit officials. Although many heated battles arise (and continue), over time the professionalized activists working within nonprofit organizations abandoned direct action organizing in favor of insider negotiations with major institutions, including real estate and the political establishment. In

the end, partnerships with nonprofits legitimated the actions of developers and politicians who needed their support but who did not serve the interests of the grass-roots base these nonprofit organizations claimed to represent.

This dynamic is subtler and less straightforward for the investments of foundations in the mostly rural Central Valley region and in a funding area such as agricultural poverty. Both are overshadowed by philanthropic investments in major cities and in sectors experiencing seismic reforms such as education, housing, and health care. For example, the case of the Immigrant Participation Collaborative (IPC)³¹, the focus of chapter 3, shows how a diverse range of nonprofit leaders concerned with igniting immigrant rights organizing debated how to achieve their goals through a foundation-funded civic-participation initiative. The IPC's members knew—some, because of years of experience in the farmworker movement—how civic participation and self-help approaches to addressing poverty can either radically challenge or obscure enduring structures of inequality, depending on who sets the limits. They also knew they could “spin” their work to funders, despite what they hoped to achieve on the ground. Rather than being fully duped, appeased, or controlled, the IPC's grantees and the lead foundation program officer strategized around how to attract funding for community organizing projects from what they rightly identified as confrontation-shy “conservative” trustees. Yet, even as the nonprofit grantees attempted to strategically negotiate the grant-making process, participation in the foundation-driven collaborative ultimately distracted IPC members away from an authentic process of organizing immigrant and farmworker communities and constituents.

Another example of these negotiations, featured in chapter 2, examines debates between farmworker movement leader Cesar

Chavez and funders interested in supporting the movement. These parleys contributed to what several recent movement scholars identify as Chavez's move away from farm labor organizing and toward building professionalized staff and nonprofit organizations, which led to the demise of the movement.³² However, a straightforward story of co-optation and control is insufficient because, although Chavez was angered by the unwillingness of private foundations to fund union organizing, he was conflicted by the union model. Trained in the Community Service Organization tradition of organizing religious congregations and neighborhoods into member-supported civic institutions, Chavez considered himself a unique union leader because he was not a "union man."³³ As recalled by a long-time farmworker organizer I interviewed, Chavez once asked an inner circle of UFW leaders, "Are we the oak tree or are we the mistletoe? Do we want to feed off of a strong and solid industry, like the mistletoe that grows on the oak? Do we want to set our limits around negotiating contracts? Or do we want to build a self-sustaining movement through our own institutions?"³⁴ Beyond unionization, Chavez was interested in building farmworker-led mutual aid organizations, creating new models of cooperative living, and promoting farm labor as a sustainable and respectable profession. Despite his frustration with foundations, Chavez eventually agreed with the Field Foundation to form private nonprofits, the first being the National Farm Worker Service Center. Yet according to the funders, they could not address issues in the economic sphere. In the end, the agreement to found nonprofit organizations initially met the needs of both funders and movement leaders but required theories of change and professionalized practices that precluded confrontation with industry.

Through my archival and ethnographic research, I observed how professional management requirements and tenuous agreements between funders and community-based institutions are the very mechanism by which strategies are redirected away from addressing the causes of poverty. Asking Central Valley farmworkers and immigrants, the poorest Californians, to agree on poverty action strategies alongside funders and the wealthiest agricultural producers in the world builds consensus around ways in which people can improve their own conditions and preserve the health of the agricultural industry. However, this agreement evades questions about the massive inequality maintained through agricultural production and regional abandonment. Differences, conflicts, and the political and economic stakes of the less powerful are thereby disguised, in the end generating consent. In other words, recalling cultural theorist Ernesto LaClau, “A class is hegemonic not so much to the extent that it is able to impose a uniform conception of the world on the rest of society, but to the extent that it can articulate different visions of the world in such a way that their political antagonism is neutralized.”³⁵

Beyond California’s Central Valley, the power of self-help poverty action gained traction in the nonprofit and philanthropic sectors in the course of the twentieth century, as will be discussed in the following section. I then provide geographic and historical context for the studies featured in this book.

AMERICAN PHILANTHROPY AND THE SELF-HELP MYTH

California farmworkers have been inheritors of the long legacy of self-help poverty programming in American philanthropy.

Combined self-help and civic action (today often termed *civic engagement* or *civic participation*) are commonly conceived of as “good” and necessary elements in approaches to alleviating poverty.³⁶ One might ask why we would not want poor people to actively participate in, rather than passively receive, poverty programs such as food stamps, housing assistance, earned income tax credits, or cash-based financial assistance. Why would we not want people to help themselves learn new work, parenting, or social skills and gain confidence from their own individual efforts to improve their lives? Yet we seldom ask what these frameworks omit and whom they hold accountable to alleviate poverty. These omissions are key to understanding one of the central dilemmas of self-help philanthropy: when the poor help themselves they may end up taking on the social and economic infrastructure that makes philanthropic wealth possible. As clearly stated in a 1965 Rosenberg Foundation annual report, “Almost everybody approves if farm workers decide to build houses for themselves; not everybody approves if they decide to go on strike.”

Constantly present in American poverty programming for more than a century, self-help poverty action has had a powerful influence through what it asks people to do and what it obscures. Recent historical studies have shown that American poverty programs have progressively rejected a correlation between poverty and the relations of production (including market regulation, wages, job creation, structural racism and discrimination, and high costs of housing, food, education, and services) in favor of framing poverty as an expression of the behavioral problems and democratic participation of the poor.³⁷ By separating questions of production, labor, and institutionalized structural inequality from the moral and behavioral explanations of poverty, the self-help approach has been depoliticized—excluding action

that challenges the status quo.³⁸ Private foundations have played a central role in this transformation, which is evidenced by strategic interventions during specific historical moments of crisis.

Perhaps the original American philanthropist to articulate the self-help approach was Andrew Carnegie. In 1889, more than a decade before the first private foundation was incorporated in the United States,³⁹ he proposed: “The problem of our age is the proper administration of wealth, that the ties of brotherhood may still bind together the rich and poor in harmonious relationship.”⁴⁰ Commenting on unprecedented rapid industrialization, Carnegie worried about the growing divide between the rich and poor. However, he was not worried about poor people themselves, as he believed that the growing economic divide was the natural result of progress and the individualistic “survival of the fittest.” In other words, he was an early observer and supporter of the vast inequality produced by advanced capitalism. Instead, Carnegie was concerned about the possibility of urban unrest bred from the distrust between people in an increasingly divided society reliant on “thousands of operatives in the factory, or in the mine, of whom the employer can know little or nothing, and to whom he is little better than a myth.” For Carnegie, the answer to declining trust between owner and worker was for industrialists to give away their wealth—a process in which “the main consideration should be to help those who help themselves . . . to place within reach the ladders upon which the aspiring can rise,” so that “the laws of accumulation will be left free, the laws of distribution free.”⁴¹ In the spirit of American individualism and bootstrap capitalism, Carnegie proposed that the new rich had a responsibility to help the poor help themselves—in the interest of preventing protest.

Also in 1889, progressive activist and settlement house worker Jane Addams (one of America's first "professional poverty warriors"⁴²) founded Hull House with a similar concern about rising inequality in American industrial cities. Initially inspired by London's Toynbee Hall, Hull House was a residential education center that provided opportunities for urban migrants to support their families through cooperative childcare, cooking, savings, and cultural and artistic programs. At the time, this was an innovative approach that encouraged people to improve their own conditions instead of asking traditional charities for assistance. Yet Addams (and the founding cohort of progressive white female settlement house workers) also engaged Hull House residents in action research and eventually community organizing to pressure for corporate and legislative reform of working conditions, wages, and rights for the rapidly expanding population of immigrant factory workers.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, the first three American foundations—the Carnegie Foundation (1905), the Russell Sage Foundation (1907), and the Rockefeller Foundation (1913)—were created to shield substantial industrial earnings from taxation under new federal legislation and to engage in philanthropic activity.⁴³ All three funded the popular Progressive Era survey research on increasing urban poverty initiated by Addams's settlement house workers.⁴⁴ But none would fund the immigrant and labor-related organizing that threatened the circumstances that allowed industrial capital to thrive. For the Rockefeller Foundation in particular, Jane Addams's migrant self-help served two purposes: to alleviate poverty and to protect industrialists from political unrest in the increasingly impoverished American city.⁴⁵ Although she refused a full-time faculty appointment at the University of Chicago based on her critique of the Rockefeller-funded

research agenda, Addams eventually became a popular lecturer there, and her ideas (and other settlement movement narratives) directly informed a more neutral iteration of self-help poverty action and eventually urban renewal.⁴⁶ With a grant from the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial Fund, the Chicago School sociologists, led most prominently by Robert E. Park and Ernest E. Burgess, transformed the structural political economy analysis of Addams's era into a social-psychological "urban ecology" theory of social disorganization and dysfunction in urban neighborhoods.⁴⁷ Multiple studies produced by Chicago graduate students followed in Park and Burgess's path, cementing the move toward social disorganization and behavioral deviance.⁴⁸

One graduate student, Saul Alinsky, perhaps the first professional community organizer in the United States and founder of the Industrial Areas Foundation, critiqued the urban-ecology approach of the Chicago School. Through his own work in Back of the Yards, a poor neighborhood centered on the meatpacking industry in Chicago and popularized in Upton Sinclair's 1906 novel *The Jungle*, Alinsky repoliticized self-help poverty action. Alinsky's method focused on neighbor-to-neighbor resident organizing, building individual leadership and institutional power to demand equal resources, opportunities, and political reform. Another set of activist-scholars, Richard Cloward and Lloyd Ohlin, critiqued the dominant theories of the day, proposing that "deviant" behavior (juvenile delinquency in particular) was not the cause but the result of poverty. In proposing that youths' lives are best improved by collectively mobilizing for legitimate opportunities, they brought a structural analysis of unequal opportunity structures back into the self-help framework.⁴⁹

Cloward and Ohlin's opportunity theory was picked up, funded, experimented on, and eventually neutralized by the

Ford Foundation in the 1950s. Founded in 1936, and fully operational after a gift from the trust of Henry Ford in 1947, the Ford Foundation entered the philanthropic scene with an intrepid agenda in foreign policy and urban reform.⁵⁰ On the domestic front in the 1950s, Ford Foundation public affairs director Paul Ylvisaker hoped to address concerns with the mounting tensions among Black and Appalachian migrants from the rural South to the urban centers in the North. During the mid-to-late 1950s, mass migration of poor southerners to the urban centers of the North created newly visible geographies of racial inequality and poverty. Urban poverty was exacerbated by rising unemployment, automation and changing industries, unequal educational and hiring practices, and declining housing stock. In the wake of a widely criticized response to these shifts in the form of “slum clearance” and urban renewal programs, Ylvisaker launched a series of comprehensive Ford Foundation initiatives. The largest included the Great Cities School Improvement Project, Richard Cloward’s Mobilization for Youth, and the Gray Areas program, which became models for the American War on Poverty launched by President Johnson in 1964.⁵¹ At the center of each of these initiatives was the participation of the poor in self-improvement and leadership development, theoretically to engage in decision-making on the matters of most concern in their own lives.

By multiple accounts, each of these Ford Foundation initiatives failed when the foundation’s self-help approach reached its own limits.⁵² The 1959 Great Cities School Improvement Project made one-year grants to ten city school districts. Although the project initially targeted curricular revisions and teacher training, Ylvisaker had broader urban renewal goals. He was optimistic that a reformulated agenda that incorporated the urban poor as stakeholders would ease some of the mounting tensions in the

inner city.⁵³ However, it quickly became clear that the predominantly Black parents brought together in the initiative's programs were most concerned about racial exclusion from the housing and job markets—issues that the project refused to address. Like Great Cities, Mobilization for Youth mandated youth training and participation as a solution to juvenile delinquency in New York's Lower East Side neighborhood. However, their efforts were defunded when the radical program staff organized to challenge local bureaucracies and school officials. In these instances, one of the main contradictions of self-help philanthropy is revealed: the goals of activating the poor end up threatening the social and economic infrastructure that foundations rely on to make profits.

In the early 1960s, when tensions in urban areas across the country were rising (including protests against slum clearance, calls for community control, heightened mobilizations by the Black and Latino self-determination movements, and the general mood of social unrest inspired by national-independence movements around the globe), Ylvisaker was aware that critiques of racial discrimination and unequal opportunity structures were at the heart of the growing turbulence. He also knew that at this time his board of trustees would not be comfortable framing any Ford Foundation project around race.⁵⁴ In an effort to present (to the emerging social movement organizations) and obscure (to his board and to other philanthropic interests) the central issues of the time, Ylvisaker framed the Gray Areas program with behavioral barriers that prevented southern Black and Appalachian migrants from assimilating and integrating in the northern city. This time, the foundation required the formation of networks of new and existing nonprofit organizations to collectively form migrant education, community development, and neighborhood

safety programs funded and managed by the foundation. Again, the aim was to help people improve their own conditions by becoming active, responsible citizens and partners in an experiment in multi-stakeholder community development.

The Gray Areas program cooled tensions by redirecting local organizations and leaders toward improving their own individual behaviors and away from racial protest as in the previous initiatives. Programs were quickly defunded when partners from the Black Panthers took their self-help to the political bargaining table and demanded control.⁵⁵ In this instance, the limits presented by the Gray Areas program reflect the historical and enduring tension between “racial uplift” and “Black Power.”⁵⁶ Whereas Black Panther leaders in Oakland connected Black self-help with collective resistance to social, economic, and political oppression of a colonized ghetto under global Western imperialism, the framers of the Gray Areas program played on the middle-class Black tradition of “racial uplift.” The project’s migrant education and neighborhood safety programming echoed an assimilationist ideology historically articulated by Black elites in concert with white liberals during the Reconstruction Era that promoted discipline and educational achievement as a means of mobility into the middle class. This approach is in tension with the more radical anti-imperialist and economic justice project promoted by both Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, which called for group empowerment toward universal and international human rights. These ideological and tactical debates continue today as conservative politicians evoke a “color-blind” self-help ideology that pejoratively pathologizes poor Black families, while a racial justice movement calls individuals to action to end racial profiling, police brutality, and a “prison–industrial complex” designed to control Black populations.

Instead of retreating from Black activism during the late 1960s to 1970s, under the leadership of foundation president McGeorge Bundy, the Ford Foundation continued to support, negotiate, and forge agreements with Black leaders in key organizations such as the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). Karen Ferguson's recent book *Top Down: The Ford Foundation, Black Power, and the Reinvention of Racial Liberalism* shows how Ford made significant contributions to watering down Black Power ideology toward the new "color-blind" racial liberalism seen today, through the establishment of foundation-funded programs and the training of Black leadership.⁵⁷

This era of Ford Foundation funding also had international implications. The community-participation-plus-policing elements of its juvenile delinquency experiment dovetailed directly with international Cold War counterinsurgency and security programs abroad.⁵⁸ Alongside Ford, the Rockefeller Foundation, in partnership with the World Bank, implemented self-help poverty action programming in international contexts where national independence battles were being fought and in which the "communist threat" was presented by indigenous poor people's movements in the late 1950s and early 1960s.⁵⁹ Scholars have documented the ways in which Rockefeller's global development and "Green Revolution" funding was an attempt to contain peasant uprising in the face of resource scarcity and growing populations in the global South.⁶⁰ In these contexts, poverty action was negotiated from the top by foundations, governments, and major development institutions and from the bottom by grass-roots organizations and leaders. In the United States and Latin American contexts, those on the right and the left of the political spectrum appeared to agree that community action among the poor should be encouraged. Yet they understood

very different things: was self-help designed to engage diverse stakeholders in maintaining the status quo, or to encourage consciousness-raising and revolutionary action?⁶¹

Only a few years after the Gray Areas program folded, the self-help framework was rearticulated through the increasingly accepted “culture of poverty” theory developed by Oscar Lewis and popularized by Harrington’s widely read *The Other America*.⁶² In step with the civil rights movement, self-help was rearticulated in the War on Poverty’s call to enlist the “maximum feasible participation” of the poor. Through the War on Poverty, the poor were encouraged to join federally funded Community Action Projects (CAPs) through local stakeholder committees, infrastructure development projects, and leadership training. Furthermore, the poor—at least at the start of the War on Poverty—were encouraged to mobilize grass-roots collective action to challenge responsible institutions and societal structures.⁶³ However, like the Ford Foundation projects, the War on Poverty is widely criticized for curtailing and defunding the activities of CAPs whose definitions of self-help were deemed too confrontational.⁶⁴

During the neoliberal shift of the 1980s, the idea of self-help took yet another turn as conservative politicians and public intellectuals put forth the now well-worn argument that a bloated welfare state (as a result of the public programming and legislation from the New Deal era to the War on Poverty) has created dependency among the poor.⁶⁵ With the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 and the defunding of many public programs for the poor, the new self-help emphasized individual reliance, entrepreneurialism, and market strategies, replacing the social-action tone of the 1960s. Critiquing the era from 1980 through the early 2000s, a rapidly expanding body of scholarship

on the “Shadow State,”⁶⁶ non-profit industrial complex,⁶⁷ and international “NGO-ization”⁶⁸ of global social movements maps the rapid expansion, institutionalization, professionalization, and continued depoliticization of nonprofit organizations increasingly contracted to do the work of a hollowed-out welfare state. The neoliberal ideology that promotes privatization, deregulation, liberalization of the market, and a hyper-focus on entrepreneurship further separates questions of the relations of production from the moral, behavioral, and now entrepreneurial responsibilities of the poor.⁶⁹ Recent critical global development scholarship describes the participation of the poor in programs such as microcredit and conditional cash transfer programs as representing a new neoliberal rationality that structures the lives of the poor around solving their own problems while obscuring the capitalist relationships that maintain poverty in the global South.⁷⁰

Yet, as this brief history has shown, self-help is not a new or unified approach to poverty alleviation unique to the global South. In the course of the twentieth century, the self-help framework has served to depoliticize the collective struggles of the poor through wielding public consensus on nonthreatening understandings of antipoverty work. These worldviews and conceptual frameworks are negotiated and spread through professionalized institutional relationships that incorporate and replace other forms of organization such as collective action, unionization, and cooperative or syndicalist approaches to organizing social change.⁷¹ By tracing the history of self-help poverty action, we see how real and identifiable state and private actors promote programs that attract attention to the weaknesses and responsibilities of the poor and divert attention away from the capitalist processes that create poverty.⁷²

In the wake of the recent financial crash and after the fifty-year anniversary of the War on Poverty, more people understand and acknowledge the structural causes of growing inequality. Research on industrial abandonment, histories of redlining and racial exclusion in the banking and housing sectors, jobs paying less than a living wage, unaccountable financial institutions, rising housing costs, disparities in educational opportunity, the racial wealth gap, food insecurity, and systemic racial profiling and violence in neighborhood policing have recently been popularized by public scholars such as Thomas Picketty,⁷³ Robert Reich,⁷⁴ Joseph Stiglitz,⁷⁵ Darriek Hamilton,⁷⁶ and movements such as Occupy Wall Street, #BlackLivesMatter, and Communities United Against Police Brutality.⁷⁷ Yet the enduring self-help poverty action framework has been cemented as “common sense”—a body of unexplored ideas, taken for granted, that maintains the status quo.⁷⁸ New radical movements are reclaiming self-help poverty action to address regional abandonment and structural racism in places such as Detroit, exemplified in Grace Lee Boggs’s *The Next American Revolution*.⁷⁹ Yet even Boggs proposes that the antagonistic organizing of the 1960s is no longer viable and that people must instead build a new culture from within. In this context, foundations interested in supporting nonprofits doing antipoverty work have less negotiating and translating work.

THE OTHER CALIFORNIA:
POVERTY IN THE CENTRAL VALLEY

Today, many of the towns dotting California’s main agricultural valley still resemble the migrant “Okie” settlements of the Great Depression.⁸⁰ Characterized by seasonal labor and substandard housing, conditions for the mostly Mexican, and increasingly

indigenous Oaxacan, migrant field workers have hardly improved since the farmworker movement.⁸¹ Drought and financial crisis have worsened an already dire situation. In towns and nearby urban hubs such as Modesto, Merced, Fresno, and Bakersfield, migrant families rely on food banks and donation centers to feed and clothe their children. Many agricultural field workers who decided to stay and establish a community, and who had maintained a meager sense of security by the 1990s, are now hitting the road and reinventing the migrant harvest trail from California to Oregon, Washington, Texas, and Arizona. Few return to Mexico, fearing tightened border security, increasingly dangerous conditions along migrant crossings, and permanent separation from their American-born children. The current drought has made farm labor jobs even more irregular, putting farms, field workers, and their families in an increasingly precarious position.

Produced and maintained through geographies of industrial agricultural production—including seasonal low-wage migrant employment, excessive land and water use, competition in global agricultural markets, and immigration policing—Central Valley farmworker and immigrant communities are among what Ruth Wilson Gilmore describes as advanced capitalism's forgotten places, "exhausted by the daily violence of environmental degradation, racism, underemployment, overwork, shrinking social wages, and the disappearance of whole ways of life."⁸² Yet poverty in California's Central Valley is not new, and the people who struggle financially in this region are not silent, destitute, hopeless, or without agency. Periodic outrage at and organizing against California's industrial agricultural system has cast national attention on the region, from John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* (1939) and Carey McWilliams's *Factories in the Field*

(1939), to Dorothea Lange's Works Progress Administration photographs of dustbowl migrants, to Edward R. Murrow's nationally televised 1960 exposé, *Harvest of Shame*, to multiple waves of farm labor organizing.

As these historic moments and more recent studies have established, much of the region's poverty is produced through a fragmented farm industry organized around what Philip Martin calls the "three c's" of farm labor.⁸³ The first C stands for *concentration*. Since the turn of the twentieth century, the vast majority of farmworkers have been employed on the largest farms that rely on labor-intensive seasonal work. On these farms a majority of field workers are without wages for significant portions of the farm cycle. Higher up in the food chain, concentration also concerns the food buyers, including supermarket conglomerates and food retailers like Walmart and McDonalds. Most large buyers have codes of conduct for fair treatment of workers along the supply chain of the food they purchase. However, local conditions are seldom monitored on either domestic or foreign farms. A recent journalistic series in the *Los Angeles Times* reveals the inhumane treatment, including withholding of wages, squalid living conditions, lack of water, and forced debt structures, suffered by farmworkers on the "mega-farms" in Mexico that many US food retailers buy from.⁸⁴ As is the case in the Central Valley, large chains such as WalMart, Safeway, and Whole Foods profit from produce from large farms that are seldom held accountable for the fair-treatment principles they all claim to embrace.

The second C stands for *contractors*. Farm labor is managed by contractors who negotiate, and profit from, the difference between what the farmer will pay to have a job done and what the workers are paid. Farmers benefit from this arrangement because it streamlines the hiring process and also makes it

difficult for worker advocates to directly negotiate and enforce wage standards and farm labor health, safety, and fair-treatment regulations. To this day, large growers find it easier to pay fines for labor and environmental abuses than to follow the regulations established by the farmworker movement and its allies.

The third C of California farm labor stands for *conflict*, a history of protest that continues but that has been unable to significantly change the industry. In the course of the twentieth century, this previously alluvial valley basin was made and remade by sometimes violent struggles over minerals, water, farmable land, and multiple socioeconomic, cultural, and political stakes—including the farmworker movement at its height during the 1960s and 1970s.⁸⁵ Through an innovative combination of place-based community organizing, mutual aid associations, culturally inspired leadership, and strikes and international boycotts, Chavez and the farmworker movement showed how people in a forgotten place can build pride, form powerful worker-led institutions, and connect local struggles beyond regional landscapes—breaking patterns of dependency in favor of self-determination and multifaceted social movements.

But despite the struggles and victories of the farmworker movement, migrant poverty endures. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the rapid expansion of low-wage, labor-intensive production systems and the active recruitment of undocumented workers from poor regions in Mexico—with increasingly fewer services and rights in the United States—further jeopardized an already impoverished farmworker population.⁸⁶ Between 1994 and today, trade liberalization under the North American Free Trade Agreement has decimated a large number of farms in rural Mexico unable to compete with the flood of genetically modified and tax-subsidized farm products from the

United States. Additional agricultural migrants, many of them indigenous people from Oaxaca, have traveled north in search of new ways to feed their families. Within this context, the Central Valley has attracted multiple antipoverty initiatives. Through my research on philanthropic investments in addressing migrant and immigrant poverty in the region, I observed how nonprofit organizations negotiate new articulations of self-help poverty action. At certain junctures, grass-roots leaders and private funders embraced the same articulation of empowering the poor to address questions of poverty, isolation, and marginalization, opening up a productive middle ground from which to organize. More often, they prescribed clear and certain limits. Although philanthropic investments have not alone altered the terrain of farmworker organizing, they have promoted theoretical frameworks and professionalized management practices that constrain the work of regional advocacy and organizing institutions around developing and integrating immigrants—but they do not organize, strike, or challenge any aspect of farm production or unequal opportunity structures.

Most recently, the explicitly “win-win” or “double bottom line” model of addressing poverty while also producing a return on investments for private partners and the industry has been taken up by funders inspired by the union-grower alliance for immigration reform—as represented in the AgJOBS legislation designed in an unprecedented compromise between farmworker advocates and major agricultural employers to address labor supply and the current immigration crisis. Despite worsening conditions for migrant field workers, many advocates believe that given the current climate of global financial crisis and competition, and the increasingly threatened status of undocumented workers, partnerships with growers to improve agricultural productivity

are the only viable strategy for improving the lives of farmworkers. The rhetoric of farmworker advocates now includes saving California agriculture from the dangers of global competition and the need to ensure a sustainable workforce through new guest-worker programs.

Part of the new worker–industry alliance includes historic movement nonprofit organizations working with growers to improve production strategies and industrial efficiency, thereby increasing the profit and competitiveness of farmers while increasing the output (and theoretically the wages) and sustainability of workers. Growers and farmworker advocates alike argue that in the context of the rapid globalization of agriculture, in which the cost of doing business is higher (e.g. for land, water, equipment, labor, and regulation costs) in California than in the global South, the human worker is the most malleable input to increase competitiveness. The grower needs to stay competitive, so it cannot risk changing, and the workers needs to learn new skills to boost production. Theoretically, this approach is a win-win situation, raising farm profits and workers' wages at the same time. Yet in this turn of events, self-help has taken a strange twist, with the poor responsible not only for themselves but for saving the industry.

Although the tools used in the win-win model may be promising in some respects, such as immigration reform, the negative effects are significant. Beyond the considerable limits to changing the agricultural industry, the win-win approach to self-help, when used among participants with such divergent power, denies central elements of politics and social change: building collective consciousness, conflict, and the identification of difference. The farmworker movement's self-help originally meant contesting an industry and society which refuse to acknowledge the dignity of the poor and marginalized, and in

the process conferring dignity on oneself. Radical self-help proposes that without this consciousness, created through the identification of relationships of power and oppression, the self is not helped. Part of the great success of the farmworker movement was its ability to dramatize the stark differences in life experience, privilege, and power between the farmworker (*la campesina/el campesino*) and the grower (*el mayordomo*) based on the lived experiences of farmworking families. Through their stark and simplified plays of *campesino* versus *mayordomo*, friend versus enemy, and good versus evil, *El Teatro Campesino*, a roving theater troupe that toured the fields, picket lines, nation, and globe, showed workers that every identity is relational and that the conditions and the very existence and suffering of the *campesino/a* was determined by opposition to the wealthy grower, or his or her “constitutive outside.”⁸⁷

Wielding new understandings of power and change, these images were spread through Radio Campesino and the pages of the movement’s paper, *El Malcreado* (which means “the mischievous,” or those who talk back to their parents; it was named after the paper of the Mexican Revolution). Despite the complexity and diversity within the farmworker population, these relational representations of the difference between “us” and “them” prompted anger, action, and a sense of collective struggle—the seeds of a movement. As in the more radical self-determination movements of the era, through diverse representations and actions, a generation of farmworkers, college student volunteers, legal aid workers, Catholic priests, and movement leaders learned from critical praxis that, as articulated by Paulo Freire, “Washing one’s hands of the conflict between the powerful and the powerless means to side with the powerful, not to be neutral.”⁸⁸

When funders, movement leaders, and advocacy institutions speak only of the kind of self-help they can agree on, what, then, is erased from regional organizing agendas? In our current moment, after agreement on immigration reform or how farmworkers can help save agriculture, growers will still find it easier to operate above the law. Only a few migrant field workers will have political power, human rights, healthy living conditions, fair wages, or children who believe that the world is full of opportunities. Thousands of California farmworkers will still sleep under the trees and in the drainage ditches of the fields they work in the hot sun of daylight.

PLAN OF THE BOOK

For two years, I immersed myself in the lives of community organizers, policymakers, and foundation staff to understand the ideas, cultures, and politics of their daily lives. I did not study the lives of Central Valley farmworkers and immigrants. There are several beautiful, moving, and politically important accounts of the lives of farmworkers,⁸⁹ yet few studies address the institutional structures that aid or hinder improving the conditions in agricultural communities. This book provides a new lens for examining the institutions and professionals who manage poverty programming, not “the poor”—or farmworkers—themselves. This is also not a comprehensive account of the farmworker movement or even farmworker organizing; rather, the three case studies provide a window into the relationship between private foundations; social movements; and the ideas, institutional structures, professional processes, and relationships negotiated through attempts to address entrenched poverty in a region.

The book begins with the social movements of the 1960s and the heated conversations and compromises between Chavez and the philanthropic investors in the farmworker movement. The first case study shows how the negotiations between Chavez and philanthropic allies resulted in the incorporation of nonprofit “movement institutions.” Chavez eventually retreated from union organizing to these institutions when the movement faced its most severe challenges. The ostensibly unified organizing message of building social, economic, and cultural power among migrant farmworkers was fractured when meeting its most threatening external and internal leadership challenges, including negotiations with private funders. Eventually, specific frameworks and exclusions separated the social movement from the union—and social justice from economic justice. Consumed by funding his new organizations, Chavez ultimately accepted a translation of farmworker self-help that featured poor field hands in need of philanthropic charity—but not a movement in struggle for self-determination and ownership among workers.

The second case study features the post-welfare reform era of the late 1990s and early 2000s, when foundations first experimented with designing and managing large-scale philanthropic “collaborative initiatives” in regions suffering from shrinking public resources. This chapter shows how nonprofit leaders working under the umbrella of a foundation-driven “immigrant civic participation collaborative” negotiated the foundation-prescribed limits as they struggled to address migrant poverty, marginalization, and an emerging immigrant rights movement. Through an ethnographic case study of the Stewart Kinney Foundation’s Immigrant Participation Collaborative,⁹⁰ which received more than \$5 million per year from 1996 through 2003, I show how the popular funding frameworks of the era—

including civic participation and social capital—diluted the organizing agendas of member partners, introduced new professional institutional practices, and fractured coalition-building in the region. While the collaborative structure proved cumbersome and distracting to member organizations, the civic-participation framework was strategically negotiated and created openings from which to launch new organizing campaigns.

The final case study is an ethnographic investigation of a \$50 million foundation initiative that reflects the recent entrepreneurial and market-based trend in philanthropic giving. The “win-win” model of the Western Foundation’s Farm Worker Community Building Initiative sought to facilitate processes that identify where growers and workers can collaborate. It would not allow any issues to be aired that challenge the economic interests of growers. I argue that advocates operating with this model, at a time when growers and workers alike suffer from financial insecurity, do not address the structural issues inherent in a labor system that requires a constant influx of migrants from poverty-stricken areas of Mexico. Through the story of the Western Foundation’s initiative and its strictly enforced “asset-based” model, this chapter shows how the neoliberal framework is not always presented through conspiratorial agendas but is solidified by reworking movement strategies into programs that claim to guarantee mutual prosperity.

The combined chapters show how professional foundation staff, working in the interest of their philanthropic institutions, negotiate the inherent political limits of mainstream philanthropy. From the establishment of the Rockefeller, Carnegie, and Ford Foundations to the multiple general-purpose foundations making grants to nonprofit organizations today, philanthropic giving has clearly defined boundaries.⁹¹ Created and

maintained by wealth generated from the surplus of capitalist production, foundations interested in poverty alleviation will generally not fund labor organizing. Foundations interested in environmental degradation generally do not fund organizations fighting global corporate abuses of land, nature, and people. Foundations interested in immigrants prefer to fund citizenship education, not immigrant rights. In other words, foundation priorities reveal the grand paradox of funding working-class organizing through the surplus of capital. Can the surplus of capitalist exploitation be used to aid those on whose backs this surplus is generated? Can these surplus dollars contribute to addressing entrenched poverty while refusing to address systemic questions of labor, migration, and human rights? The stories told in this book highlight how professionals—social movement leaders, organizational staff, consultants, and foundation program officers—struggle with these questions.