

Philanthropy in Mexico

Angeles Espinosa Yglesias*

In recent years Mexico has witnessed the development of an activity which, unfortunately, is still poorly understood: philanthropy. As a range of foundations have come into being and grown, Mexican society has become aware of the activities of philanthropists, both as individuals and in their collective form (the foundations themselves). Most people still confuse philanthropy with charity or welfare.

Yet philanthropy is something different. In order to discuss philanthropy today we need to understand that it is not a synonym for charity; instead, as the etymology of the word indicates, it means the love of human beings. This love is based on the possibility of improving the life of social groups in terms of their basic needs, in a way which is disinterested albeit not devoid of objectives.

As defined by one of the most knowledgeable figures in the field, James A. Joseph, President of the Council for Foundations, philanthropy must be "the art of giving." Like any art, it has its secrets.

Philanthropy arises as a means for benefiting society, or in some cases particular people, families, businesses or corporations which decide to devote a certain portion of their capital to works that advance development within a given society.

In ancient times philanthropy as such did not exist; neither did foundations, which are the institutions through which the philanthropic spirit is presently expressed. When thinking of Pericles

or the Medicis we can scarcely speak of philanthropy. What did exist was patronage. Princes, great men of the church, kings and the well-to-do financed artists, making it possible for them to survive in exchange for tangible works of art which became the property of those who contributed their resources. Patronage was a way of helping the poet, sculptor, musician, painter or architect.

Many examples relating to patronage could be mentioned, but here I only want to cite it as an antecedent to philanthropy and to the context in which the latter is carried out today. While in the case of patrons the phenomenon consisted of direct, personal support, which usually depended on the sympathy a powerful person felt toward an artist or scientist, philanthropic work is less personal and has other goals.

In the case of Mexico, for example, foundations—which have made private giving possible—appeared with the arrival of the Spaniards. The conquistador Hernán Cortés created the first philanthropic-type institution in Mexico. He established the *patronato* (association, literally patronage) which, from 1524 to 1527, founded the first hospital in the Americas: the Hospital of the Most Pure Conception of Our Lady, subsequently known as the Hospital de Jesús.

The tradition of benefactors seeking to improve social conditions continued, and in 1540 Fray Juan de Zumárraga founded the Hospital of the Love of God, whose purpose was to treat syphilitics; Pedro López created the Hospital de San Lázaro for lepers; Don Antonio de Mendoza donated several of his haciendas as grounds for

what would later become the University of Mexico.

Over the course of three centuries the foundations of New Spain (as Mexico was known in Colonial times) grew, under the control of the Catholic Church. While few welfare institutions were independent of the clergy, one of those that did exist was the Monte de Piedad,¹ which is presently a government affiliate having nothing in common with the original institution of that name.

Between Independence and the Revolution the tradition of foundations decreased considerably due to social and political unrest. It was only in the mid-20th century that this tradition began to regain strength, growing substantially in recent years.

One example of the growth of private foundations devoted to public welfare during the 1950s is the Mary Street Jenkins Foundation, of whose board of directors I am a member. Created by Guillermo Jenkins in 1954 with assets of more than seven million dollars, the Jenkins Foundation set several goals for itself, in pursuit of which we have been working for many years.

One of these goals has been supporting education, since both Mr. Jenkins and my father, Manuel Espinosa Yglesias, as well as the rest of those who make up the board of directors believe that a society can achieve a better future only on the basis of solid education.

Thus the Jenkins Foundation has invested significant sums in the

¹ Literally, Mountain of Charity; a large-scale pawn shop whose proceeds are used for public assistance. (Editor's note.)

* Director of the Amparo Museum.

University of the Americas at Puebla, which in Mexico, Latin America and the United States is considered one of the continent's outstanding centers of higher education.

The second foundation that I represent bears the name of my mother, Amparo. On the basis of the experience my father acquired as president of the Jenkins Foundation, in 1979 he created the Amparo Foundation in memory of my mother. He made it clear that the foundation's objective would be to carry out beneficent activities in Mexico; in the foundation's charter he put forward the goals he intended it to achieve.

The three basic goals were, and continue to be: support to educational institutions, promotion of culture and creation of health centers. The Amparo Foundation's most significant works have involved contributions to the excavation of the Templo Mayor, the creation of Mexico City's Monte Fénix Clinic and the establishment of the Amparo Museum in the city of Puebla. The latter was an ambitious project costing years of effort, but

three years after the museum opened its doors to the public it is considered one of Latin America's most important cultural centers.

This contrasts with experiences I have recently had with a number of people who represent various institutions yet lack the understanding that the purpose of philanthropic activities—whether those of individuals or of foundations—is not to publicize the name of the person who initiated them, that their activities are not charity and that the resources they distribute, while not intended to produce profits, are oriented to producing concrete results.

Thus we can see how the two foundations in whose directorship I take an active part have devoted their resources to the social, educational and cultural well-being of Mexico. Like us, other Mexican businessmen have created foundations with the objective of benefiting the Mexico of today. Among them are the Miguel Alemán, Domecq and Gilberto foundations, the Televisa Cultural Foundation, the Mexican Foundation for Rural

Development and a great many others which, as of this writing, come to the extraordinary number of 608.

The "Directory of Philanthropic Institutions" explains the field of action of each foundation. Prominent among them are those related to ecology, health, education, development, research, science and technology, culture, art, human rights and social welfare.

In this context I would like to highlight the activities undertaken by Manuel Arango with the creation of the Mexican Philanthropy Center, which has laid the basis for national foundations to have a common core through which they can communicate and carry out joint activities.

Once again, without seeking the spotlight, motivated by that "art of giving" which is the essence of genuine philanthropy, this entrepreneur decided to establish the trail-blazing Mira (Look) program—the motto of which is "look after others"—and promotes the activities of Mexican foundations, whose numbers are growing daily ❧

MEXICAN STUDIES/ESTUDIOS MEXICANOS

Volume 8, Number 2 Summer 1992

Articles

Quinto Centenario: Tomar en cuenta a los otros Miguel León Portilla

Modernizing Visions, Chilango Blueprints, and Provincial Growing Pains:

Mérida at the Turn of the Century Gilbert M. Joseph and Allen Wells

Schisms in the Mexican Political Elite and the Technocrat/Politician Typology Juan D. Lindau

La difícil transición política en México Rogelio Hernández Rodríguez

Measuring Legitimacy in Mexico: An Analysis of Public Opinion during the 1988 Presidential Campaign Franz A. von Sauer

Review Essay

The Emergence of Mexican Business History John E. Kicza

Los factores del retraso de la industrialización en México: Reflexión historiográfica
Pedro Pérez Herrero

In Mexico, contact:

Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos
UNAM, Instituto de Investigaciones Históricas
Circuito Mario de la Cueva
Ciudad Universitaria
04510 México D.F.

In the US, contact:

University of California Press
Journals Division
2120 Berkeley Way
Berkeley, CA 94720
FAX: (510) 643-7127