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When Billionaires Think They Have All the Answers

By: Ankur Sarin

An investigation into Bill Gates's philanthropic interventions questions the efficacy of his work and asks what gives him the legitimacy to intervene in public policy. It argues that we have become too accepting of his wealth and influence, and we must instead challenge his power.

Regardless of how loud the alarm bells from history ring, the aura around all-knowing men shows no signs of waning. With origin stories of individual exceptionalism, hard work, and genius, they stride the world as demigods. Projecting certainty and objectivity, they delegitimise doubters and answer seekers as ideologically motivated. They speak the language of empowerment, as long as power is concentrated around them.

In *The Bill Gates Problem*, Tim Schwab cracks the image of one such man (and puts it on the cover), but clearly there are many more around and many to come. However, unless the rest of us come to accept ourselves as lesser humans with no agency and ability to make choices, it would be a mistake to read the book as only about Bill Gates.

The book title lends itself to at least two interpretations: one which speaks specifically of the problem created by Gates and another which refers to a larger class of problems significantly exemplified by Gates. I suspect that while Schwab, an investigative journalist who has followed the Gates story for at least two decades, favours the latter. He sees 'Bill Gates' as a large enough problem meriting our attention.

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Schwab urges us not to “doubt that Bill Gates really believes he is helping the poor” but subsequently tries to convince us it could not be true. He painstakingly walks us through several domains that the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has worked in – vaccines, education, health, family planning, agriculture, journalism, climate change, and responding to Covid-19, amongst others. Schwab not only questions the efficacy of Gates's interventions but also asks what gives him the right and legitimacy to intervene.

In doing so, Schwab also points the finger in our direction, wanting to shake us from a “collective Stockholm syndrome,” which he argues has “made us believe we should applaud Gates's usurpation of power, not challenge it.” At a couple of places, the book refers to the “Bill Chill”: the chilling effect exerted by the size and influence of Gates on any critique. It would also have been fair to talk about the role of what we could dub the 'Bill Thrill': the exhilaration of being in the same room as Gates or of receiving funding from him.

New White Man's Burden

The 470-page book has only two images: a shattered image of Gates on its cover and the Smithsonian portrait of Bill and Melinda Gates near its middle. As Schwab points out, the Gates couple dominate the portrait with a digital screen carrying a “tableau of smiling, hopeful Black and brown faces” in the background. The remarkably tone deaf portrait is used by Schwab to invoke the “white man's burden,” the civilising burden purportedly carried by colonisers, which provided the moral imperative for colonisation.

The picture also reflects Schwab's characterisation of Gates's philanthropy, pursued under the cloak of highly noble objectives but practised in ways that keep wealth and power concentrated amongst those already endowed with them. Pointing to a surprising statistic, “more than 80 percent of all of Gates's giving goes to just three nations: the United States, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom,” Schwab argues that the Gates model essentially works to keep the dependence of the poor on the wealthy intact.

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Arguably, it does so not only in terms of who the chief decision-makers are but also in terms of the kind of knowledge it produces, the ideas it supports, and whose financial interests it serves. Mimicking colonisation, the “local” experts Gates works with and supports are often coopted elites, Schwab argues, unrepresentative of larger communities and often severely conflicted themselves. Likewise, the supported “solutions” – whether it be prioritising intellectual property rights around vaccines in the middle of a pandemic, patenting seeds for poor farmers, or favouring female contraception – serve to further enrich monopolistic corporations whose financial interests are reportedly closely intertwined with that of Gates.



This new form of “colonialism” that Schwab alludes to finds manifestation in new domains such as vaccines and in old ones such as agriculture. Detailing the attempted replication of the “green revolution” through the Gates-funded Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA), Schwab observes that Gates’s techno-optimistic vision prevents him from seeing the failures of the original green revolution, including depleted groundwater, eroded soil quality, and increased inequality.

Instead, the primary measure driving Gates’s philanthropic efforts appear to be metrics such as crop yield, which have proved to be conveniently reductive when intervening from a distance, and grossly insufficient for eliminating problems such as malnutrition. They are even problematic in terms of ecological sustainability for those closer to the ground. Gates’s support of entities such as Alliance for Science, which is promoting genetically modified food in poor nations, is similarly questioned for its double standards, given the widespread scepticism about the technology in most parts of the world.

Schwab points to the initiatives that Gates displaces: the issues, problems, and solutions that get neglected because they are overshadowed by his might and resources.

The chapter also highlights the dependency on Gates, which makes it difficult to critically evaluate the controversial solutions being pushed on those who do not have alternatives to contest them. As one of Schwab’s interviewees remarks, “They fund the researchers, they fund the drafting of laws, they fund projects, they fund agro-dealers, they got things off the ground [...] It’s a lot of money over time.”

Schwab questions the reliability of Gates’s “impact” numbers that often serve to legitimise his interventions by pointing to the lack of transparency and independence in how they are generated. More substantively, Schwab points to the initiatives that Gates displaces: the issues, problems, and solutions that get neglected because they are overshadowed by his might and resources.

Schwab raises the question of what the right counterfactual or comparison for estimating Gates’s impact would be: a world in which such resources never existed under one person’s discretion, a world in which these resources were never spent in “helping the poor,” a world in which these resources were spent by someone else, perhaps in a different way? It would be helpful if Gates publicly provided the data for others to make their own assessments. However, given that the data itself is unlikely to be independent and would almost definitely be unable to capture all the dimensions Schwab discusses, I am sceptical of the viability of such an exercise. In such a context, perhaps the no-holds barred approach that Schwab adopts might be the only way for us to get a better measure of Gates’s work?

Is Gates the Problem?

Could the book have been called the ‘Development Problem’ or the ‘Billionaire’s Philanthropy Problem’ instead of the ‘Bill Gates Problem’? Tracing the origins of the population control movement to eugenics, Schwab asks the most obvious but rarely asked question, “Why do so many billionaires obsess over the procreative habits of the global poor?” The subsequent discussion is a reminder of the emptiness of claims of providing choices to the poor when you already believe you know what is best for them – in this case, smaller family sizes.

The emptiness can take a toxic form when you need to not only line up your programme logistics and investments behind the preferred choice but also tie the programme staff’s livelihood to ensuring the poor make the “right” choice (in this case, hormone implants for women). Reflecting his engagement with larger development issues, Schwab argues, “Once you start creating numerical targets, they quickly become quotas, and perverse incentives invariably appear to meet these quotas.”

The theme of perverse incentives resurfaces in the chapter on India as well. Describing the failed transition of a resource-intensive anti-HIV programme initially implemented by non-governmental organisations using Gates funds to the government, Schwab asks if we can expect an “industry whose survival depends on the perpetuity of poverty” to do so.

Surely these critiques, and other sharp ones such as “In the narrow ambitions of philanthropy and international development, the goal is often to tackle the problems you think you can solve, that will rack up quick wins, rather than addressing root causes,” go beyond Gates. Likewise, the criticism of narrow, technical solutions favoured by Gates has to confront the seductive ability of technology, which always appears to be offering something new. While Gates has undoubtedly been influential in reinforcing these systemic problems, locating the problem in only a person or entity risks creating the delusion that replacing the individual will solve them. I do not believe Schwab has such delusions but I suspect he would not absolve Gates either.

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Right from the first page, Schwab does not allow Gates’s public persona as an incredibly generous, intelligent human being using his wealth to save the world to condition how we read the book. Instead, questioning the origin of his wealth, Schwab describes how a richer, brasher Gates strong-armed Paul Allen into securing a larger share of Microsoft. Rather chillingly, he turns our attention to Gates’ creepy association with Jeffery Epstein – a convicted predator of underage girls – while talking about his apparent objective of empowering women.

You might expect Gates to retort (as he has in other contexts) that we should focus on the substance of his work and not make it personal. However, in the complex world of social change, where trust is a currency far more important than anything Gates can provide, can the personal really be avoided?

Are Billionaires Accountable?

This might sound like a rhetorical question, but it is not. The idea that the money of billionaires is a product of their hard work and expertise and that it is up to them to decide how and where to spend it is axiomatic in popular notions of a capitalistic society. Taxes (and hence democratic accountability) are avoided by diverting income to philanthropy and Schwab argues for the need of greater public accountability on the grounds that private funds are used to leverage larger public funds to pursue agendas set by private philanthropy.

Arguably, the “distinctly Gatesian culture – of nonaccountability and nontransparency” may not be so distinct. In several instances, Schwab espouses the ideals of democratic scrutiny and accountability, which sound theoretically appealing but also empirically naive. The issue of accountability is clearly one that needs wider discussion, but it is hard to argue against the proposition that if you are going to try and influence society, you need to find ways of becoming socially accountable. While this might sound like a moralistic position (and it is okay if it does), I believe that the moral framework of capitalism does not permit the unfettered freedom that donors of philanthropic capital might desire.

A theoretical justification for owners of capital having the essential decision-making powers is that their claims to the firm’s earnings arise only after other claimants (employees, lenders, and so on) have been compensated. Since they carry the risks, the profits should be theirs. What risk do philanthropists carry in any of the projects they fund? Clearly, the contradictions in 'giving' your money away but still wanting to control it needs a lot more critical examination. Democratic accountability at least sets a goal post and it would be useful to identify one for philanthropy as well.

Civil Society in an Unequal Time

At a time when civil society is struggling to find resources to work independently, when there is an acute absence of trustworthy data to even ascertain the reality of the world we live in, is it pragmatic to raise questions of an entity that at least has the potential to create a counter narrative? This is a difficult question to answer. However, it might be worth reminding ourselves that the virtue of civil society primarily comes from its potential to have an independent voice, keeping a check and providing alternatives to dominant ideas and institutions of the state and market, perhaps even promoting a democratic ethos that goes beyond mere electoral participation.

What do the behavioural traits that help alpha males succeed in a winner-takes-it-all marketplace translate to in a world where compassion and equity are supposed to be significant concerns?

Even in the realm of service delivery, it is this moral core that enables the promise of greater efficacy compared to other market providers. People participate and contribute to it because they value something that money presumably cannot buy. What kind of a civil society emerges when it is monopolised by “high net worth” individuals (predominantly men) who extol ideas of innovation, competition, and free markets but have a questionable commitment of their own to such ideals?

What do the behavioural traits that help alpha males succeed in a winner-takes-it-all marketplace (Gates is described as a “domineering, brusque bully”) translate to in a world where compassion and equity are supposed to be significant concerns? What is the impact of language and metrics borrowed largely from the business and financial world because that is the language donors are most comfortable with and align with their ideas of success?

Although Schwab does not condemn all philanthropy (an intriguing stance given the questions he raises), his account of Gates undoubtedly leaves us with plenty to be pessimistic about. I do not believe Schwab’s work is flawless and find some of his suggestions rather naive. For instance, the idea that Gates would be better off disbursing funds directly to the poor not only ignores the complexities of doing so but also ignores the structural exclusions that he accuses Gates of neglecting. However, it would be unfair to task the responsibility of finding solutions to individuals courageously helping us see the problems.

And clearly there is no bigger or responsible entity than Gates (and here I would distinguish the person from the institution) to take on the task of constructively engaging in finding solutions. While the answer to the question of where the solutions will come from remains unclear, I believe the book convincingly articulates the necessity of grappling with them.

The views expressed here are personal.