

March 2001

*What's Love Got to Do With it?: A Critical Look at American
Charity.* David Wagner.

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw>



Part of the Social Work Commons

Recommended Citation

(2001) "*What's Love Got to Do With it?: A Critical Look at American Charity.* David Wagner.," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 28: Iss. 1, Article 18.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15453/0191-5096.2717>

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol28/iss1/18>

This Book Note is brought to you by the Western Michigan University School of Social Work. For more information, please contact wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu.



Although the situation has improved, poverty rates in the region remain high.

The study found that social assistance did play a role in poverty alleviation but that it was costly and wasteful. The authors found a high incidence of 'leakage' in which families who were not in poverty received social assistance. They also found many cases of discrimination against poor people and the denial of benefits to those living in particular regions. It is unfortunate that while the authors found that social assistance was not the most effective way of responding to the crisis, they did not discuss the potential role of alternative social policy instruments in reducing poverty. Nevertheless, this book provides valuable information about poverty and social policy in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, and it offers useful lessons for other parts of the world facing economic difficulties.

David Wagner, *What's Love Got to Do with It?: A Critical Look at American Charity*. New York: The New Press, 2000. \$25.00 hardcover.

Americans have long emphasized the role of philanthropy in meeting social needs. Political and business notables, church leaders and ordinary citizens all agree that charitable giving is a noble endeavor that helps the less fortunate, fosters desirable moral values, and creates a more caring society. The non-profit sector is widely believed to be preferable to public provisions, and its expansion has been systematically promoted. Through public subsidies, contracts with government agencies and generous tax incentives, it has grown enormously, and is today a major provider of social services. Many Americans believe, with justification, that their country has the best developed and most vibrant system of philanthropy in the world.

Given its importance and the widespread support it enjoys, it is perhaps surprising that a social work educator should subject American charities to such vigorous criticism. But David Wagner's account of the 'dark side' of philanthropy merits serious consideration. From colonial times to the present, he contends, organized philanthropy has projected a symbolic but fallacious image of institutionalized altruism which fails to deal with the nation's most pressing social problems, promotes self-serving

behavior among the proponents of charity, stifles effective government intervention and co-opts radical groups that seek to promote progressive social change.

Wagner is polemical but appropriately hard-hitting. Focusing first on the historical development of philanthropy, he exposes the way Christian 'altruism' forced Native Americans to convert to Christianity, and then proceeded to enslave, dispossess and even kill them. He also shows how the industrial barons of the late 19th century used philanthropy for their own, self-serving purposes. These practices continue today on a vast scale but are heavily subsidized by tax payers, limiting alternative and potentially more effective public social service programs.

This book is to be commended for facilitating critical thinking about a topic severely lacking in critical analysis. It challenges the complacency which characterizes much of the literature on philanthropy today. Although it will outrage some, it is well written and engaging, and deserves extensive discussion. It should be prescribed reading for all social work students and those in non-profit management programs.

Raam A. Cnaan with Robert J. Wineburg and Stephanie C. Boddie, *The Newer Deal: Social Work and Religion in Partnership*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1999. \$49.50 hardcover, \$22.50 papercover.

Although religious organizations have historically catered to the needy, the expansion of government social programs during the middle decades of this century gradually diminished their importance. It was widely accepted in social policy circles in the 1950s and 1960s that both secular and religious charitable effort would dwindle as government social programs expanded. This attitude was reinforced by the emergence of social work which promoted the professionalization of charitable activity. Help to those in need would not be provided by well-meaning individuals but by professionally qualified social workers, trained in scientific methods and skilled in solving human problems.

These beliefs were seriously challenged during the 1980s when politicians on the political right began systematically to attack both state social service provision and social welfare professionalization. Since President Reagan first appealed to the