PhiLab

# Research Paper

## The Role of Grantmaking Foundations in Sustaining Progressive Social Movements

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## Description du réseau PhiLab

Le réseau canadien de recherche partenariale sur la philanthropie (PhiLab), anciennement Laboratoire montréalais de recherche sur la philanthropie canadienne, a été pensé en 2014 dans le cadre de la conception de la demande de financement du projet développement de partenariat CRSH intitulé "Innovation sociale, changement sociétal et Fondations subventionnaires canadiennes". Ce financement a été reconduit en 2018 sous le nom "Evaluation du rôle et des actions de fondations subventionnaires canadiennes en réponse à l'enjeu des inégalités sociales et des défis environnementaux". Depuis ses débuts, le Réseau constitue un lieu de recherche, de partage d'information et de mobilisation des connaissances des fondations canadiennes. Des recherches conduites en partenariat permettent la coproduction de nouvelles connaissances dédiées à une diversité d'acteurs : des représentants gouvernementaux, des chercheurs universitaires, des représentants du secteur philanthropique et leurs organisations affiliées ou partenaires.

Le centre de recherche (Hub) mère se situe dans le centre-ville de Montréal, sur le campus de l'Université du Québec à Montréal (UQÀM).

Le Réseau regroupe des chercheurs, des décideurs et des membres de la communauté philanthropique à travers le monde afin de partager des informations, des ressources et des idées.

## PhiLab Network Description

The Canadian network of partnership-oriented research on philanthropy (PhiLab), previously called the Montreal Research Laboratory on Canadian philanthropy, was thought up in 2014 as part of the conception of a funding request by the SSHRC partnership development project called "Social innovation, social change, and Canadian Grantmaking Foundations". From it's beginning, the Network was a place for research, information exchange and mobilization of Canadian foundations' knowledge. Research conducted in partnership allows for the co-production of new knowledge dedicated to a diversity of actors: government representatives, university researchers, representatives of the philanthropic sector and their affiliate organizations or partners.

The project's headquarters are located in downtown Montreal, on the Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM) campus.

The Network brings together researchers, decision-makers and members of the philanthropic community from around the world in order to share information, resources and ideas.

## Résumé

Cette revue de littérature constitue la première phase d'un projet de recherche plus vaste portant sur le rôle des fondations subventionnaires dans le soutien aux mouvements sociaux et environnementaux progressistes dans des contextes politiques de plus en plus restrictifs. Elle examine la relation complexe entre philanthropie et activisme, en mettant en lumière la manière dont le financement philanthropique peut à la fois renforcer les mouvements en leur fournissant des ressources essentielles et les contraindre par les priorités de financement et les attentes institutionnelles.

En s'appuyant sur les travaux et la littérature grise portant sur les mouvements féministes, les mouvements pour la justice raciale et les mouvements pour la justice climatique, cette revue met en évidence les principaux débats, les tendances récurrentes et les lacunes de la littérature. Elle établit les bases conceptuelles de la prochaine phase du projet, qui visera à comprendre comment les fondations subventionnaires peuvent soutenir les mouvements progressistes tout en préservant leur autonomie et leur capacité à favoriser des transformations sociales durables.



## Mots-clés

Mouvements sociaux • féminisme • justice raciale • justice climatique • fondations subventionnaires • philanthropie



## Abstract

This literature review represents the first phase of a broader research project examining the role of grantmaking foundations in sustaining progressive social and environmental movements under increasingly restrictive political contexts. It explores the complex relationship between philanthropy and activism, highlighting how foundation funding can both strengthen movements by providing essential resources and constrain them through funding priorities and institutional expectations.

Drawing on research and grey literature on feminist, racial justice, and climate movements, the review identifies key debates, recurring patterns, and gaps in the literature. It establishes the conceptual foundation for the next phase of the project, which will examine how grantmaking foundations can support progressive movements while preserving their autonomy and capacity for transformative social change.



## Key words

Social movements • feminism • racial justice • climate justice • grantmaking foundations • philanthropy

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Research paper
*Phase 1: literature review*

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*Social movements are at once the symptoms and the instruments of progress. Ignore them and statesmanship is irrelevant; fail to use them and it is weak.*

*Walter Lippmann*[1]

[1] Lippmann, W. (2020 [1914]). A preface to politics. Wilder Publications

## 1. Introduction

This literature review examines the complex dynamics between philanthropy and activism, focusing on how grantmaking foundations influence, shape, and constrain social movements, particularly in the context of growing pressure from conservative and right-wing governments. As right-wing political parties gain power across North America, Latin America, and Europe, bringing policies of economic austerity, climate denialism, and xenophobic nationalism, understanding the linkages between social movements and philanthropic actors becomes increasingly urgent.

For the purposes of this research, social movements are understood as collective efforts by citizens, groups, and communities who organize around shared goals to confront social problems, resist domination, or transform the conditions in which they live (UNICEF, 2025). Grantmaking foundations, conversely, are independent philanthropic organizations that use donated assets to make grants to other charitable organizations, usually according to the purposes set out at their establishment (Alliance Magazine, n.d.).

The relationship between grantmaking foundations and social movements is marked by a fundamental tension between empowerment and control. In concrete terms, foundation funding can help movements grow, organize, and fight more effectively; at the same time, it can introduce expectations that make movements safer, more professionalized, or less confrontational than they might otherwise choose to be. This paradox reflects what we might call the "philanthropic dilemma": movements need resources to sustain themselves and scale their impact, yet accepting foundation funding often comes with explicit or implicit expectations that can moderate tactics, narrow agendas, or channel activism toward institutionally acceptable forms.

From the American Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s to contemporary mobilizations for social and environmental justice, grantmaking foundations have played pivotal yet ambivalent roles in progressive causes. Historical analysis reveals that foundations have simultaneously supported groundbreaking social change—funding legal challenges, organizational infrastructure, and advocacy campaigns—while also constraining more radical possibilities by favouring moderate voices, imposing bureaucratic requirements, and promoting service delivery over systemic transformation. Due to their substantial financial and political resources, philanthropies wield significant capacity for both sustaining and shaping movements, presenting opportunities and challenges that demand careful analysis.

This dynamic becomes particularly complex under hostile political conditions. When conservative governments implement restrictive policies—such as limits on protest rights, rollbacks of environmental protections, cuts to civil society funding, or attacks on "woke" initiatives—foundations face pressure to either retreat from controversial causes or risk political backlash. Some foundations may respond by supporting movements more boldly as

a counterweight to state hostility, while others may withdraw to protect their tax-exempt status or avoid regulatory scrutiny. These responses have profound implications for movement sustainability and strategic capacity.

The stakes of understanding these relationships extend beyond academic inquiry. As democratic norms face mounting pressure globally, the role of civil society—including both grassroots movements and philanthropic institutions—in defending pluralism, social justice, and environmental protection becomes increasingly consequential. Whether foundations serve as buffers against authoritarian drift or inadvertently contribute to the depoliticization of dissent depends partly on how these philanthropic relationships are structured and sustained. This research seeks to answer the following question: What role do grantmaking foundations play in sustaining progressive social and environmental movements in the face of restrictive policies enacted by conservative and right-wing governments (e.g., limits on protest, rollbacks of environmental protections, or funding cuts to civil society)?

To address this question comprehensively, the review examines three distinct yet interconnected domains of philanthropic engagement: feminist movements, racial justice organizing, and climate activism. Each represents a crucial arena of contemporary social struggle, and each reveals different dimensions of the foundation-movement relationship. Through this comparative approach, the analysis aims to identify both common patterns and domain-specific dynamics, ultimately contributing to a more nuanced understanding of how philanthropic power intersects with social change efforts in politically challenging times.

## 2. Empirical Context

In the United States after World War II, many large philanthropic foundations distanced themselves from direct political engagement, shifting their support toward academic institutions and ostensibly 'neutral' research — a pattern that later influenced Canadian and other North American foundations as well. This shift was guided by the belief that value-free scientific inquiry would lead to better public policy. Yet, as Gavin Marshall (2015) shows in his study of Black liberation struggles, this retreat also served to depoliticize philanthropy and reinforce social control, as foundations funded research and self-help models in ways that contained more radical claims for systemic change. Similarly, Erica Kohl-Arenas (2015) argues that philanthropic investment in "self-help" initiatives positioned foundations as consensus brokers, mediating between state institutions and grassroots actors in ways that preserved dominant structures while appearing progressive.

However, in the 1970s and 1980s, these foundations were caught off guard by the emergence of a well-organized conservative philanthropic network that boldly pursued ideological objectives. Benjamin Marquez's (2003) analysis of Mexican-American political organizations demonstrates how foundation support could bankroll movement infrastructure while steering strategies toward institutionalized, moderate advocacy. This tension between empowerment and constraint became central to debates about movement sustainability. In response to this rightward shift, historian Alice O'Connor (2007) urges progressive foundations to reconnect with the reformist spirit of their early 20th-century founders. She argues that, while maintaining high standards of scholarly rigour, these institutions should be explicit about the progressive values driving their work. By doing so, foundations can help reinvigorate democratic debate and use empirical research to address core ethical issues, such as growing social and economic inequality.

Philanthropy influences far more than funding. Foundations shape organizing models, leadership styles, and the capacity of movements to build lasting alliances (Masters & Osborn, 2010). While this support can enhance collective action, it also tends to promote reformist and institutional approaches that are less likely to challenge dominant social structures. Movement sustainability, in this context, becomes a critical issue. Corrigall-Brown (2022) highlights the conditions that allow movements to endure: diversifying tactics—ranging from direct action to institutional advocacy and community organizing—and building local alliances can reduce dependence on institutional funding and preserve activist flexibility. This tension between resources and autonomy becomes even more visible at the international level.

Ishkanian (2022), in her work on contemporary social movements, shows that philanthropy can act as both a catalyst and an obstacle to transformative struggles. Through examples ranging from gender justice to climate action, she demonstrates how movements challenge state and elite structures, and how foundations, by setting frameworks for action and legitimacy, contribute to shaping or constraining these dynamics. Fisher (2013) extends this

reflection through a comparative perspective. She insists on the importance of foundations adapting to local contexts and co-constructing their interventions with grassroots actors, rather than imposing standardized models disconnected from local realities.

Yet this fragile balance is increasingly under the strain. The Johnson Center's 2025 11 Trends in Philanthropy report warns of a rollback in support for social justice movements, despite a surge in philanthropic commitments following the 2020 racial justice protests. This regression is largely driven by growing political polarization and a backlash against Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) commitments. In this context, Hong and Mersha (2024) highlight a central paradox: while some foundations fund progressive initiatives, they may simultaneously support systems and structures that perpetuate inequality. For them, philanthropy too often remains rooted in the logic of institutional optimization, using DEI as a reputational tool rather than a genuine lever for power redistribution. This observation calls for a structural transformation of the role of foundations. Edwards (2010) similarly warns that the transposition of business logic into philanthropy risks stifling systemic change. In Small Change: Why Business Won't Save the World, he cautions against "philanthrocapitalism"—an approach focused on performance and measurable outcomes, often disconnected from lived realities and ill suited to support the more confrontational dimensions of social movements. McGoey's (2015) study of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation further shows how corporate philanthropy can reinforce market-based logic that is difficult to reconcile with redistributive or community-led approaches to social justice.

Before these more recent works, scholars such as Pastor and Ortiz (2009), Ostrander (1995), and Silver (1997) had already demonstrated the profound influence of funding on social movements. Pastor and Ortiz (2009) show how financial support can shape tactical choices, often pushing movements to adopt strategies that align with funders' expectations and, in turn, constraining the scope of activism. Ostrander (1995), likewise, explores how funding decisions within democratically organized philanthropy can empower grassroots organizations while also influencing activist narratives, as seen in her study of the Haymarket People's Fund. Silver (1997) examines the broader implications of funding for the demands movements are willing to voice, illustrating how financial support can lead movements to moderate their goals in order to appeal to funders. Collectively, these scholars underscore the complex relationship between funding and activism: financial support is crucial for movement sustainability, but it can also shape strategies, narratives, and demands in significant ways.

Together, these works point to a common idea: while philanthropy often presents itself as an ally of social movements, it may also become their inadvertent gatekeeper by imposing its own frameworks, governance logic, and strategic priorities. More recent work deepens this concern: Dunning (2023) and Francis (2019) show how donor control and white funding can redirect racial justice agendas; Saifer and Zanoni (2025) analyze how accountability relations may reproduce racial capitalism; and Baur and Schmitz (2012) explain how demands for accountability can foster co-optation. However, philanthropic influence is neither

homogeneous nor irreversible. Many movements today are developing autonomy strategies—self-financing, horizontal redistribution models, resource pooling, or refusal of conditional funding. This activist creativity reflects a clear intent to safeguard their capacity for disruption and systemic transformation.

## 3. Methodology

The literature review was conducted using a systematic approach inspired by the five steps proposed by Khan et al. (2003). To make the review process more transparent, the literature search combined academic databases and grey literature sources, including Google Scholar, Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR, Cairn, Érudit, ProQuest, institutional reports, foundation publications, and reports produced by philanthropic or movement-support organizations. The search was conducted in spring 2025 and covered publications available up to May 2025. Keywords were used in English and French, including combinations of terms such as "philanthropy," "grantmaking foundations," "social movements," "movement funding," "feminist philanthropy," "racial justice," "climate justice," "grassroots organizing," "NGOization," "co-optation," "trust-based philanthropy," and "right-wing governments." Sources were selected when they addressed, directly or indirectly, the relationship between philanthropic funding and progressive social or environmental movements, with particular attention to resources, autonomy, institutionalization, co-optation, and political backlash. Publications were excluded when they focused only on charity or nonprofit management without engaging with social movements, power relations, or structural change. The final corpus brought together approximately 80 academic and non-academic sources, allowing for both theoretical discussion and empirical comparison across the three fields examined in the report.

*Selection criteria*: Based on a general evaluative context of the relation between grantmaking foundations and social movements, our reflection is structured around three principal axes, exploring the diversity of relationships between grantmaking foundations and contemporary social and environmental struggles:

1. **Philanthropy and Feminist Movements:**
   We will examine how foundations have supported the success of feminist movements while influencing their political priorities and modes of action. We will further explore the dilemmas that feminist activists face when seeking funding, and how empowerment can be preserved without falling into the trap of respectability politics or co-optation.

2. **Philanthropy and Racial Justice Movements:** We will analyze the relationship between philanthropy and racial justice movements, examining how foundations support—or hinder—struggles that challenge structural racism. We will explore which

funding practices inadvertently promote institutionalized views over more radical perspectives.

3. **Philanthropy and Climate Justice Movements:** Finally, we will examine the philanthropic sector's involvement in climate justice struggles, asking whether foundations can contribute to ecological transformation without questioning the economic logic from which their endowments often originate. We will discuss the tensions that arise between the environmental actions of philanthropies and the systemic critiques advanced by movement organizations and actors.

Through these three lenses, we aim to interrogate philanthropy not only as a source of resources but also as a political actor in its own right—one whose choices, partnerships, and narratives actively shape the contours of today's social movements.

## 4. Foundations and Feminist Movements

The relationship between philanthropic foundations and feminist movements has evolved significantly over the past few decades, shaped by shifting political contexts, development agendas, and the growing visibility of gender justice on the global stage. From the 1970s onward, the Ford Foundation gradually shifted from domestic programs focused on women's rights toward international funding for gender equality and women's empowerment; the 1975 United Nations World Conference on Women also helped broaden this agenda from education, employment, and family planning toward a more explicit rights-based approach (Irvine & Halterman, 2016). Since the 1990s, prominent foundations such as the Ford Foundation and Open Society Foundations have emerged as key actors in the promotion of gender equality, reproductive rights, and the fight against gender-based violence. Their financial and strategic support has provided feminist movements with critical resources to scale up their advocacy, build institutional capacity, and influence public policy. However, this support has not come without controversy. While many recognize the role of philanthropic institutions in amplifying feminist voices (McCarthy, 2001), critical perspectives have drawn attention to the tensions inherent in these relationships—particularly the risk that foundation funding might impose donor-driven agendas, reinforce existing power hierarchies, or professionalize activism in ways that can weaken grassroots mobilization (Fraser, 2013).

As feminist movements engage with philanthropy, a more nuanced and politically conscious form of giving has emerged—feminist philanthropy—which not only seeks to fund gender justice initiatives, but also to transform underlying systems of inequality. In this context, the Global Women's Funding Movement coined the term "Woman Effect" to describe the powerful correlation between gender-inclusive approaches and broader societal transformation. More recently, this has evolved into what is now referred to as the "Feminist Effect." As Bofu-Tawamba et al. (2024, p. 2) explain:

> The Global Women's Funding Movement coined a term to explain this phenomenon—the "Woman Effect." Today, it may be called the "Feminist Effect." It is the correlation of transformational social healing and democracy strengthening that happens with gender-inclusive feminist approaches to critical issues and opportunities. For example, national security is moored to women's rights. The more significant the gender gap between the treatment of men and women in a society, the more likely a country is to be involved in war (Bofu-Tawamba et al., 2024, p. 2).

This perspective underscores the far-reaching implications of feminist frameworks—not only for women's rights, but for the very fabric of democratic societies, peacebuilding processes, and institutional legitimacy.

Philanthropic foundations have played an increasingly strategic role in this regard. Their contributions can be observed across several key dimensions. First, they have funded wide-ranging public awareness and advocacy campaigns, helping to reframe debates on gender equity and foster civic engagement (Johnson, 2017; Bofu-Tawamba et al., 2024). Second, they have supported legal and institutional reforms, particularly in contexts where grassroots movements have gained momentum but lack formal backing. Third, they have helped strengthen feminist movements at the local level, particularly in the Global South, where funding has enabled community-based organizations to mobilize, advocate, and build organizational resilience (Bofu-Tawamba et al., 2024).

This section explores the evolving relationship between feminist movements and philanthropic foundations by organizing the analysis into three interrelated parts:

- Part (1) offers a historical lens on women's philanthropy in Global North countries, tracing how early charitable practices evolved into strategic tools for advancing gender justice.
- Part (2) examines emerging trends in feminist philanthropy that challenge traditional models of power, funding, and impact, highlighting new approaches that emphasize intersectionality, accountability, and horizontal governance.
- Part (3) turns to the expanding horizons of feminist philanthropy, focusing on how it is evolving from an empowerment-based model to one that explicitly seeks structural and political transformation.

### 4.1. Historical insights into women's philanthropy in the Global North: Advancing gender equality and social justice

Historical analyses provide a crucial lens for understanding the evolution of philanthropic efforts and their significant impact on feminist and social justice movements. This section examines key scholarly works that trace the trajectory of women's philanthropy in the Global North, with a strong emphasis on the United States, where much of the literature originates.

The contributions of Barbara Berg (1978), Carol McCarthy (2001), Debra Mesch and Andrea Pactor (2014), and Joan Marie Johnson (2017) offer unique and complementary insights into this area of study.

While contemporary feminist philanthropy gained visibility in the 1970s—when activists deliberately created women's foundations and funds to direct resources toward organizations supporting women and girls (Atienza et al., 2009; Johnson, 2017; Gillespie, 2019)—its roots extend further back. Johnson (2017) reminds us that feminist philanthropy was central to landmark achievements such as women's suffrage, expanded access to higher education, and the legalization of birth control. To situate these more recent developments, Barbara Berg (1978) traces women's charitable activity in the 19th century, showing how antebellum philanthropic associations provided an early foundation for women's collective action. Berg argues that as early as the mid-1800s, women engaged in charitable organizations recognized the oppressive nature of their domestic confinement. Shocked by growing poverty and social problems in urban slums, these philanthropic women sought to improve the lives of poor and working-class women while carving out a public role for themselves. Berg contends that the 19th-century cult of domesticity confined women to the home, distancing them from the economic roles they had previously held in pre-industrial America. At the same time, by leveraging ideals of feminine virtues and domestic leadership, they created and sustained voluntary associations that not only provided an escape from the restrictive domestic sphere but also allowed them to influence society in new ways. Berg's analysis highlights how these women used charitable work to challenge social norms and expand their roles beyond traditional domestic confines, a theme also explored by Smith-Rosenberg (1985) in her portrayal of voluntary associations as transformative spaces for women.

McCarthy (2001)[2] adds another dimension by highlighting the historical role of religious institutions as conduits for women's philanthropy. She shows how Catholic, Islamic, Hindu, and Jewish traditions often granted women some degree of financial autonomy, enabling them to participate in charitable giving (McCarthy, 2003)[3]. Protestantism and English common law, though emphasizing different avenues, also encouraged women's involvement through both financial donations and volunteer work. McCarthy's work underscores the entrepreneurial nature of many women's philanthropic endeavours, which often went unrecognized. The role of religious institutions in shaping women's philanthropy is particularly noteworthy, as it has significant implications for understanding the nonprofit sector today, especially given the increasing competition between religious and secular organizations for resources. In the United States, the disestablishment of state churches in the late 18th century expanded the

[2] McCARTHY, K. D. (2001). Introduction. In K. D. McCarthy (Ed.), *Women, Philanthropy, and Civil Society* (pp. 1–8). Indiana University Press. http://www.jstor.org/stable/jj.5501025.3

[3] McCarthy, K. D. (2003). American creed: Philanthropy and the rise of civil society. Chicago: TheUniversity of Chicago Press

public roles of women, as they took on greater responsibility for financial and volunteer contributions to religious and philanthropic causes.

Timeline of women and philanthropy in the United States, adapted from Debra Mesch (2009).

| Year | Event |
|---|---|
| 1643 | Lady Ann Moulson (born Radcliffe) contributed £100 for scholarships at the new Harvard University. |
| 1797 | First female-controlled charity in the United States, Society for the Relief of Poor Women and Children, is established in New York. |
| 1820s & 1830s | Protestant women's group formed "cent" societies to raise money for mission work in the United States and around the globe. |
| 1837 | Mary Lyon founded Mount Holyoke College, the oldest school that was established from inception as an institution of higher education for women that is still an all-women's college. |
| 1840 | African American women founded the Manhattan Abolition Society in New York City when excluded by white women from the many anti-slavery societies that had formed. |
| 1863-1865 | Women organized Sanitary Fairs to support soldiers during the Civil War, raising more than half of the funds collected by the United States Sanitary Commission. |
| 1881 | Clara Barton founded the American Red Cross based on her experiences as a nurse during the Civil War and the Swiss-inspired global Red Cross network. |
| 1889 | Jane Addams founded Hull House in Chicago, the first "settlement" house to provide social and educational opportunities for working-class people. |
| 1890 | Jane Cunningham Croly established the General Federation of Women's Clubs to unite the many clubs operating independently around the country. |
| 1890 | Two women's suffrage organizations merged to form the National American Woman Suffrage Association, representing women at the local and state level. |
| 1907 | Margaret Olivia Slocum Sage established the Russell Sage Foundation with a $10 million gift. |
| 1920 | 19th Amendment ratified, giving women the right to vote after a 72-year struggle. |
| 1929 | Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, Lillie Bliss, and Mary Quinn Sullivan established Museum of Modern Art in New York City with Rockefeller's financial backing and collection. |
| 1964 | Wednesdays in Mississippi created by Dorothy Height, President of the National Council of Negro Women, and volunteer Polly Cowan; effort sent interracial teams to Mississippi. |
| 1966 | National Organization for Women (NOW) founded. |
| 1972 | Ms. Foundation for Women established as the first women's fund organized by women, led by women, and granting funds for women and girls. |
| 1985 | Women's Funding Network (WFN) established to strengthen community of women's funds; represents over 160 women's funds globally. |
| 1986 | Global Fund for Women founded; by 2012 it had allocated more than $100 million in grants. |
| 1988 | First women's philanthropy council in higher education was established at the University of Wisconsin. |
| 1990 | Women Donors Network was founded to support progressive change through collaboration and innovation. |
| 1997 | Women's Philanthropy Institute incorporated as a nonprofit; moved to the Indiana University Lilly Family School of Philanthropy in 2004. |

| | |
|---|---|
| Fin des années 1990 | Giving circles emerged as a form of participatory collective giving; today they encompass all races, ethnicities, religions, and ages. |
| 2004 | Women's Leadership Councils established by United Way Worldwide; raised over $1 billion in 12 years. |
| 2006 | Women Moving Millions established to raise million-dollar gifts from women for women and girls. |
| 2006 | Tiffany Circle Society of Women Leaders created by the American Red Cross to raise major gifts from women. |
| 2008 | NoVo Foundation partners with Nike Foundation on Girl Effect to improve health, education, and finances of adolescent girls living in poverty. |
| 2009 | Women's Philanthropy Institute awards first doctoral dissertation fellowship to support emerging scholars in women's philanthropy. |
| 2010 | United Nations Foundation launches Girl Up campaign to raise awareness and funds for adolescent girls in developing countries. |

This timeline offers a strong historical foundation, but it stops short of the pivotal post-#MeToo era. Two recent milestones can therefore be added to extend the historical arc:

| | |
|---|---|
| 2017 | #MeToo goes global. Originally founded by activist Tarana Burke in 2006, the #MeToo movement explodes into public consciousness following sexual abuse revelations in Hollywood. In response, many women philanthropists begin funding legal aid, survivor support, and gender justice initiatives.[4] |
| 2018 | The Time's Up Legal Defense Fund was launched in January 2018 and is administered by the National Women's Law Center. The fund was created to support individuals facing workplace sexual harassment and retaliation, and it received significant financial contributions from prominent women in entertainment and philanthropy.[5] |

Building on these earlier historical insights, Johnson (2017)[6] provides a contemporary analysis of the long-term impact of women's philanthropy on social justice movements. Her research explores how the legacy of women's giving continues to shape modern philanthropic practices, particularly in organizations focused on gender equality and social justice. Johnson critically examines whether the historical patterns of women's philanthropy have effectively addressed systemic inequalities and identifies areas where future efforts could have a more significant impact. Johnson delves into the role of wealthy women in supporting activist causes, noting that female philanthropy was a form of political power at a time when women had limited formal political influence. She highlights the contributions of these women to suffrage organizations and birth-control advocates, showing how their financial support significantly shaped the trajectory of these causes. Despite their privilege, many of these philanthropists faced gender-based discrimination, which motivated them to use their wealth to promote gender equality and improve women's lives. Johnson also explores the dynamics of competition and cooperation among activist organizations seeking funding, emphasizing the

[4] https://www.library.hbs.edu/working-knowledge/has-metoo-changed-how-hollywood-hires
[5] https://nwlc.org/press-release/women-leaders-launch-times-up-campaign-to-eradicate-abuse-of-power-shift-leadership-imbalances-and-promote-equality/
[6] Johnson, J. M. (2017). Funding feminism: Monied women, philanthropy, and the women's movement, 1870–1967. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.

role of social networks in the suffrage movement. Wealthy women philanthropists played a pivotal role in creating pro-suffrage publications and using their influence to garner media attention for the cause. Ultimately, Johnson underscores the transformative impact of these women's financial contributions in furthering the suffrage movement and advancing gender equality.

### 4.2. Emerging trends in feminist philanthropy: Redefining power and promoting radical social change

In recent years, a dynamic and transformative wave has emerged within feminist philanthropy—one that actively challenges traditional funding paradigms and advances more inclusive, participatory, and community-driven methodologies. This evolving landscape marks a notable departure from earlier philanthropic practices, placing radical social transformation above incremental reform. According to Bofu-Tawamba et al. (2024), this contemporary iteration of feminist philanthropy is characterized by its commitment to developing funding mechanisms that are more attuned to the lived realities and self-defined priorities of marginalized communities. These endeavours are fundamentally focused on reshaping the philanthropic sector itself, critically examining the inherent power imbalances that have historically influenced funding allocations and instead elevating grassroots-led initiatives that foster greater inclusivity and empowerment.

These developments resonate with long-standing critiques of institutional philanthropy. Andrea Smith (2007), in her introduction to The Revolution Will Not Be Funded, highlights how the nonprofit industrial complex has historically constrained radical organizing by imposing bureaucratic requirements, donor agendas, and state-aligned frameworks. For Smith and the Incite! collective, feminist philanthropy that genuinely seeks structural change must remain vigilant against reproducing these dynamics lest it risks depoliticizing movements under the guise of professionalization.

The insights of Goss (2007)[7] on the role of foundations in shaping social movements, alongside the critical perspectives offered by Fraser (2013)[8] and Crenshaw (2015)[9], provide additional context for understanding these shifts. Foundations remain double-edged actors: while offering resources and legitimacy, they often delimit the range of acceptable demands.

Ball (1998) underscores the profound impact of Black women's feminist philanthropy, which has been a powerful force for social change. He notes with regret that historians have only recently begun to recognize the significance of their contributions, despite their long history

[7] Goss, K. A. (2007). Foundations of feminism: How philanthropic patrons shaped gender politics. Social Science Quarterly, 88(5), 1174–1191
[8] Fraser, N. (2013). Social justice in the age of identity politics: Redistribution, recognition, and participation. In Culture and economy after the cultural turn (pp. 126-149). Sage Publications
[9] Crenshaw, K. (2015). Why intersectionality can't wait. The Underserved Project

of activism and community service. Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, African American women established numerous associations aimed at providing essential services to their communities. These efforts were often organized through independent secular clubs and church auxiliaries, and at times they collaborated with racially diverse organizations such as the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), or worked alongside African American men in various movements.

Ball identifies two central themes in scholarship on Black women's philanthropy. The first highlights their role in advancing the African American community, often framed as Black Nationalist endeavours that prioritized racial uplift and community self-determination. The second centres on the gender restrictions these women confronted and the feminist implications of their work. Middle- and upper-class African American women, who identified themselves as "educated and cultured women of colour," sought to demonstrate the moral, intellectual, and material progress of African Americans to white society. Their philanthropy was therefore both service-oriented and deeply political, simultaneously contesting gendered exclusion and racial marginalization. Through these associations, Black women carved out leadership roles and created new spaces for civic participation, illustrating philanthropy as both resistance and agency. Goss (2007) extends this analysis by examining the relationship between philanthropic foundations and social change organizations in the U.S. women's movement between the 1960s and 1980s. She shows that foundations helped transform women's roles from societal caretakers to assertive claimants against the state. By providing resources and legitimacy, foundations empowered advocacy organizations to push for recognition of specific needs—battered women, lesbians, civic stewards—thereby segmenting U.S. womanhood into politically relevant subgroups. This segmentation enabled targeted policy gains but also narrowed collective demands, fragmenting the broader movement. In this process, professional grantmakers played an outsized role, fostering a hyperpluralistic political landscape characterized by multiple, sometimes competing, special-interest groups. While this support elevated marginalized voices, it also revealed the paradox of institutionalized philanthropy: foundations sustain social movements while constraining their more radical possibilities. Moreover, Goss underscores the critical yet often overlooked the role of professional grantmakers in shaping U.S. hyperpluralism. By supporting a diverse array of identity-based groups, foundations have fostered a political landscape characterized by multiple, sometimes competing, special interest groups. This support has been crucial in elevating the voices of marginalized communities, but it also highlights the tensions between institutionalized philanthropy and grassroots activism. Foundations, while providing necessary support, can sometimes inadvertently constrain the radical demands of social movements through their funding priorities and organizational requirements.

In *The Uprising of Women in Philanthropy*, Bofu-Tawamba et al. (2024) explore a transformative wave reshaping feminist philanthropy. The book highlights foundational principles such as trust-based philanthropy, participatory grantmaking, and a strong commitment to supporting grassroots organizations. Central to this shift is a call to decolonize philanthropy by challenging

white saviorism and redistributing power within the funding ecosystem. Rather than addressing only the symptoms of inequality, the authors argue for a systemic approach aimed at structural change.

Chapter 3, titled "Nothing About Us Without Us: Trust-Based Philanthropy," emphasizes the central role of intersectionality in both social justice and philanthropic practice. Drawing from Kimberlé Crenshaw's seminal concept (1989), the chapter illustrates how overlapping systems of oppression—race, gender, class, sexuality, and disability—interact to produce complex lived realities that philanthropy must engage with more intentionally. Crucially, the authors stress that the most effective movements are those led by people directly affected by the issues they seek to address. This focus aligns with insights from Irvine, Lang, and Montoya (2019), who demonstrate how intersectional challenges shape gendered mobilizations across different contexts. Their work underscores that effective advocacy not only requires attention to intersecting inequalities but also demands institutional frameworks that centre marginalized voices and avoid reproducing dominant hierarchies. Activists and feminist funders increasingly reject siloed, issue-specific funding models in favour of trust-based approaches that prioritize the knowledge and leadership of those with lived experience. Organizations such as GROOTS Kenya and Fondo Semillas exemplify this approach, designing inclusive funding strategies that respond to the multifaceted realities of their communities. Intersectionality, the authors argue, is not merely a theoretical lens but an essential tool for meaningful and lasting social change. It is precisely because of its power to expose systemic injustice and propose comprehensive solutions that intersectionality is under attack by right-wing forces. Without this lens, philanthropic initiatives risk reproducing fragmented and ineffective interventions. A compelling example of this approach in action is ELAS+, a pioneering feminist fund in Brazil. As one of the first women-led social justice funds in the country, ELAS+ was created to support women and LGBTQIA+ movements historically excluded from mainstream philanthropic structures.

The critical perspectives of Fraser (2013) and Crenshaw (2015) offer essential theoretical lenses for analyzing the aims and potential pitfalls of the emerging wave of feminist philanthropy. Nancy Fraser's work on social justice, particularly her 2013 publication, provides a profound critique of the adequacy of redistribution alone in achieving genuine equality. Fraser argues that social justice requires a combination of redistribution, recognition, and representation. Redistribution addresses economic inequalities, recognition tackles cultural injustices, and representation ensures political inclusion. Fraser's critique emphasizes that without addressing all three dimensions, efforts to achieve social justice may fall short. Central to Fraser's critique is her concept of parity of participation, which posits that true social justice is achieved when all individuals can participate as peers in social life. This requires not only economic redistribution but also cultural recognition and political representation. Fraser's work prompts an examination of whether contemporary feminist philanthropy adequately addresses the root causes of injustice and challenges dominant power structures beyond merely providing financial resources. Her critique urges feminist philanthropists to consider whether their

efforts are sufficiently comprehensive in addressing the multifaceted nature of social inequality. Kimberlé Crenshaw's foundational work on intersectionality, including her 2015 publication, underscores the importance of explicitly addressing the overlapping and intersecting forms of oppression faced by marginalized communities. Crenshaw's critique highlights the need for feminist philanthropy to fund initiatives that recognize and respond to the unique experiences of individuals based on their race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and other social identities. This approach ensures that the complexities of multiple forms of discrimination are considered in philanthropic efforts. Together, Fraser and Crenshaw's perspectives provide a robust framework for understanding the challenges and opportunities within feminist philanthropy. They emphasize the need for a comprehensive approach that goes beyond financial support to include cultural and political dimensions of social justice. This emerging wave of feminist philanthropy must strive to address the root causes of inequality and empower marginalized communities by recognizing their diverse experiences and ensuring their active participation in decision-making processes.

### 4.3. The new horizons of feminist philanthropy: from empowerment to social reform

Recent scholarship continues to refine our understanding of feminist philanthropy by interrogating both its potential and its pitfalls. This evolving field highlights the need for more inclusive, participatory, and radical approaches to funding feminist initiatives.

Marsha Shapiro (2005)[10] presents a nuanced critique of feminist funding, arguing that while philanthropic resources can empower feminist initiatives, they may also impose constraints that limit their transformative ambition. Shapiro acknowledges that philanthropic resources have the potential to significantly empower feminist initiatives by providing much-needed visibility and critical support. These resources can help amplify the voices of feminist movements, enabling them to reach wider audiences and exert greater influence on public policy and societal norms. However, Shapiro also highlights a fundamental tension inherent in this relationship: the conditions attached to funding. According to Shapiro, while funding can be a powerful enabler, it often comes with strings attached. These conditions can include specific reporting requirements, predefined outcomes, and alignment with the funders' priorities. Such stipulations can inadvertently steer feminist movements away from their original, radical objectives, pushing them toward more moderate or palatable goals that align with the funders' interests. This dynamic can dilute the transformative ambition of feminist initiatives, limiting their ability to challenge deeply entrenched power structures and advocate for radical social change. Shapiro advocates for a more sensitive approach to feminist funding—one that honours the autonomy and revolutionary spirit of feminist movements. She argues that funders should adopt a more flexible and supportive stance, allowing feminist organizations to set their own agendas and pursue their goals without undue interference. One

[10] Shapiro, M. (2005). The other hand: A critical look at feminist funding. In E. Clift (Ed.), Women, philanthropy, and social change: Visions for a just society. University Press of New England.

of Shapiro's key recommendations is the provision of unrestricted funding. Unlike project-specific grants, unrestricted funding allows organizations to allocate resources where they are most needed, whether for operational costs, capacity building, or strategic initiatives. This type of funding is crucial for the sustainability and effectiveness of feminist movements, as it provides the financial stability needed to respond to emerging challenges and opportunities.

Similarly, Sabine Lang (1997), in her work "The NGOization of Feminism: Institutionalization and Institution Building within the German Women's Movements," provides a critical examination of the institutionalization of feminist movements within non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Lang argues that the institutionalization of feminist movements within NGOs can lead to the depoliticization of feminist agendas. This process, which she terms "NGOization," involves the transformation of grassroots feminist activism into more formal, bureaucratic entities. It is now often used to describe a form of postfeminist politics that is co-opted by the mainstream, leading to depoliticization and deradicalization. While this shift can provide stability and access to resources, it also risks diluting the inherently radical nature of feminist activism. Lang warns that as feminist movements become embedded within established institutional structures, they may lose their ability to challenge and disrupt the status quo effectively. Her work calls for a reinvigoration of grassroots organizing, emphasizing that feminist movements must remain closely connected to the social justice issues they seek to address. In her 2023 article, Lang deepens her argument by emphasizing that some major philanthropic foundations, endowed with financial resources that sometimes surpass those of entire states, exert significant influence over civil society priorities. These foundations often set the agenda unilaterally—selecting which causes to fund, which strategies to pursue, and even which organizational forms to adopt—outside democratic and representative decision-making processes. At the international level, philanthropic aid is frequently criticized for reinforcing hierarchical and paternalistic dynamics between the Global North and South. This critique echoes broader concerns about NGOization, which is seen as perpetuating dependency and standardized intervention models that are poorly suited to local realities and often dismissive of Indigenous knowledge systems. Some foundations, such as the Ford Foundation, have begun to shift their practices in response to feminist critiques. They are gradually moving away from short-term, project-based funding models. The Black Feminist Fund, for instance, advocates for long-term, structural, and substantial support that enables feminist movements to sustain their struggles over time—a sharp departure from the fragmented micro-funding typical of NGOization. Still, such progressive initiatives remain limited. The majority of the philanthropic sector continues to reproduce mechanisms that depoliticize feminist action, narrowing engagement to institutional, compartmentalized efforts that are often disconnected from grassroots or more radical transformative movements.

Additional insights on philanthropy and women's empowerment reveal the transformative potential of NGO projects and the critical importance of rethinking funding models to promote systemic change. Ghenwa Al Hakim et al. (2022) explore women's empowerment

through the lens of NGO projects, drawing attention to the diverse interpretations of empowerment present in the literature. Their article, "Women's Empowerment as an Outcome of NGO Projects: Is the Current Approach Sustainable?" demonstrates that true empowerment extends well beyond individual capacity building: it is about granting women a voice, challenging entrenched power structures, and initiating collective action to dismantle systemic inequalities. They argue that empowerment should be conceptualized as a process that transcends personal development and becomes a tool for transforming social, legal, and economic systems that perpetuate gender disparities. Françoise Girard (2019) further enriches this discussion in "Philanthropy for the Women's Movement, Not Just 'Empowerment.'" Girard argues that the philanthropic community's focus on short-term, project-specific funding aimed at "women's empowerment" often fails to address the deeper, systemic issues that perpetuate gender inequality. Instead, she advocates for long-term, flexible funding that directly supports women's rights organizations engaged in broader social, legal, and political reforms.

Girard highlights that while many philanthropists are vocal about achieving gender equality, their funding practices often do not align with this goal. She points out that women's and girls' groups received only 1.6 percent of U.S.-based charitable giving by individuals, foundations, and corporations in 2016. Moreover, the share of U.S. foundation funding for general operating support to foreign groups advocating for gender equality dropped dramatically from 30 percent to 15 percent between 2002 and 2013. This trend has severe consequences, as project-based service delivery grants can leave activists without the time and resources to push for broader systemic change. Girard emphasizes that real empowerment begins when women come together to reflect on the social norms that keep them as second-class citizens. This process of consciousness-raising and mobilization happens within women's movements worldwide and is essential for driving change on women's rights. She argues that without spaces for women's groups to collaborate, strategize, and build coalitions, the women's movement remains fractured and unable to effectively mobilize for change. To achieve genuine gender equality, Girard calls for philanthropists to provide long-term, general operating support to women's rights organizations. This type of funding allows these organizations to work collaboratively to transform the social, legal, and political systems of patriarchal oppression. Girard contends that such financial autonomy supports not only the immediate operational needs of feminist groups but also their broader ambitions to overhaul societal structures that restrict women's rights. By strategically infusing resources directly into the women's movement, philanthropists can empower organizations to engage in transformative work, moving them beyond mere survival toward proactive, systemic change. Girard's insights underscore the need for a paradigm shift in philanthropic practices. She advocates for a model of philanthropy that prioritizes the long-term sustainability and autonomy of women's rights organizations, enabling them to drive comprehensive structural reforms. This approach holds the promise of fostering sustainable progress and more equitable

social structures, ensuring that the transformative potential of women's empowerment is fully realized.

Jill A. Irvine and Nicole Halterman (2016) contribute to the conversation by addressing a concerning trend in the decline of general operating support for women's rights organizations. In Funding Empowerment: U.S. Foundations and Global Gender Equality, they argue that reliance on donor-imposed priorities restricts the capacity of feminist organizations to operate autonomously and respond effectively to evolving challenges. They identify five potentially demobilizing effects of funding practices on women's empowerment. First, donor practices can lead to the professionalization of women's groups, a process termed "NGOization" by Sabine Lang (1997). This professionalization focuses on grant requirements and discrete, fundable projects, which can sap the time and energy of activists, fracture civil society as groups compete for funds, and depoliticize women's movements. Second, funding practices often direct women's organizations toward service delivery rather than political advocacy. Third, rather than listening to the voices and needs of local activists, donors often impose agendas devised from afar, with little or no consultation with the organizations they wish to assist. Fourth, donors often fund discrete projects with limited, quantifiable outcomes instead of supporting the broader and messier work of politics. Finally, donor practices often emphasize individual solutions rather than collective action. Irvine and Halterman therefore call for a renewed commitment to unrestricted funding that sustains core organizational functions and protects feminist organizations' autonomy.

"Philanthrocapitalist ideas and practices have championed women as effective entrepreneurs and agents of change, even as they neglect the organizing and activism that have created new opportunities for them" (Arutyunova & Clark, 2013; Miller et al., 2013; McGoey, 2015). According to this critique, instead of funding women's organizations to work for transformative change, philanthrocapitalist aid can diminish and demobilize their work. These potential movement-weakening outcomes of foundation funding are deeply problematic because almost all scholarly work on the conditions necessary to bring about real and enduring change points to the central role of women's organizing and women's movements.

The collective contributions of Al Hakim et al., Girard, and Irvine and Halterman offer a compelling argument for a reimagined philanthropic landscape—one that prioritizes not only the immediate, practical needs of women's rights organizations but also the broader, systemic transformations necessary for genuine women's empowerment. By shifting the focus from isolated capacity building to strategies that promote comprehensive structural reform, these scholars advocate for a model of philanthropy that supports autonomous and resilient feminist movements. In essence, philanthropic practices, if aligned with these principles, can help foster sustainable progress and more equitable social structures, ensuring that the transformative potential of women's empowerment is fully realized.

This relationship becomes even more significant in political contexts marked by the rise of conservative and right-wing governments[11]. Anti-feminist agendas often target reproductive rights, gender-sensitive public policies, LGBTQIA+ rights, and the legitimacy of intersectional approaches. In such contexts, feminist organizations may become more dependent on philanthropic support to maintain advocacy, legal defence, public education, and grassroots mobilization. Yet this dependence also heightens the risks identified throughout this section: funders may prefer less confrontational strategies, avoid politically sensitive causes, or redirect support toward empowerment language rather than structural feminist struggle. The role of foundations is therefore not simply to fund women's initiatives, but to decide whether they are willing to support feminist movements when their claims become politically contested.

[11] Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. (2025). The new global struggle over gender, rights, and family values. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.
CIVICUS. (2025). Gender rights: Backlash, resistance and persistence. In 2025 State of Civil Society Report.

## 5. Philanthropic foundations and racial justice movements

### 5.1. The wealth gap and the need for resources

In the United States and across the Western world, the condition of racialized populations remains a pressing issue of concern and protest, particularly because of the wealth gap between racialized and white populations. This gap is a key factor in the precarious living conditions of racialized groups in America, revealing racial inequality rooted in material living conditions. According to Collins et al. (2016), the wealth gap for Black and Latino populations in the United States grew from $280,000 in 1983 to over $500,000 in 2013. This represents an increase of nearly 80% over 30 years, pointing to a process of impoverishment and racial differentiation that, particularly for Black communities, has its origins in segregation and even earlier. More than a simple demonstration of differences in wealth accumulation between white and racialized households, the wealth gap is the result of a cycle of impoverishment and racial injustice that systematically prevents Black and Latino populations from achieving financial security.

However, this gap between white populations and racialized populations extends beyond financial capital. In the United States, educational institutions primarily serving Black populations are also rooted in the legacy of segregation and have suffered from chronic underfunding for decades. These institutions lack critical resources, affecting their ability to provide a quality learning environment. This chronic underfunding is often due to inadequate public funding of the education system—an issue not unrelated to the persistent wealth gap experienced by racialized populations. According to Anderson (2016), the underfunding of education in majority-racialized institutions creates a deficit in training and skill development necessary to access the labour market—an issue that became particularly evident in the 1960s, during the Cold War. "That economy was primed for those who had had the benefit of years of good schools and, in particular, for whites who had a well-funded public school system that went all the way through the twelfth grade and graduated the lion's share of them as college-ready" (Anderson 2016, 86). The wealth gap is therefore also a gap in state support that directly affects the educational conditions of racialized people. As a result, racialized communities often find it more difficult than white populations to acquire the knowledge and skills needed to navigate the market and adapt to economic changes. This educational disparity cannot be separated from the «wealth gap» discussed by Chuck Collins et al., which is why Anderson's concept of the educational deficit as a cycle is so relevant here. This deficit creates conditions that perpetuate racial injustice. By failing to provide adequate support to racialized communities, the segregated education system has long deprived them of the competencies and knowledge necessary to thrive in an economy designed around white institutions. While education is not the only cause of the wealth gap, it has contributed to it and has helped reproduce an unequal educational system rooted in injustice and lack of resources, in a context where private funding dominates American education.

Ultimately, the "wealth gap" is a gap in capital in all its forms. The data presented by Chuck Collins et al. (2016), which focuses on Black and Latino populations but also provides similar figures for Asian and Indigenous populations, illustrates the financial disparity between white populations and racialized populations. At the same time, the educational conditions outlined by Anderson (2016) reveal the systemic construction of a deficit in the transmission and acquisition of the social and cultural capital needed to navigate white institutions. This is clearly evident in the educational experience of Black Americans, but a similar pattern can be seen in Canada through the residential school system for Indigenous peoples, which—through different practices and outcomes—also led to a systemic and deficient transmission of cultural and social capital necessary for the flourishing of Indigenous communities within Canadian society. This multidimensional capital gap ultimately affects racialized populations in numerous ways. As Stewart III et al. (2021) argue, racialized households in the U.S. are more likely to face precarious conditions—not only financially and educationally, but also in terms of housing, health, and food security. Robert Lynch (2021) further argues that it is imperative to address the problems that both cause and result from this capital gap. Because while the wealth gap reflects a race-based inequality, it also represents a missed opportunity for American society, undermining its economic competitiveness. According to Lynch, racial inequalities mean that "talent and skill are not being fully recognized and put to their greatest use, let alone fairly rewarded. This results in a misallocation of our nation's most precious resource—its people" (Lynch 2021, 8). Addressing racial inequalities and injustices is therefore not only a moral imperative, but also an economically sound strategy that would increase national wealth and productivity, ultimately benefiting the entire population. By working to close the wealth gap between white populations and racialized populations—through massive investments in institutions and public infrastructure such as the education system, unemployment insurance, healthcare, or elder care—we would collectively increase productivity and wages for both racialized and white populations.

However, even though the long-term gains of collective investment in correcting the harms of the wealth gap are evident, they require substantial resources upfront. According to Darity Jr. (2021)[12], the public investments necessary to close the U.S. wealth gap would amount to around $11.2 trillion—a figure that alone implies that "incremental measures will not be sufficient to address the enormous racial wealth disparity" (2021, 1). Comparing the scale of necessary resources to those mobilized during the COVID-19 pandemic, Darity Jr. argues that a full-scale mobilization of state resources is required.

This is where philanthropic actors come into play in the fight against racial injustice. Given the vast amount of resources needed to address the wealth gap, the complexity of its reproduction, and the social and economic benefits of repairing this gap, philanthropic actors must act as resource mobilizers within communities.

[12] Darity Jr., William. 2021. « The True Cost of Closing the Racial Wealth Gap ». The New York Times, 30 avril 2021, sect. Business. https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/30/business/racial-wealth-gap.html.

To do so, philanthropic foundations possess a primary lever of power: their ability to directly support racialized populations. With significant financial means at their disposal, philanthropic actors can, to a certain extent, compensate for the chronic underfunding of majority-racialized institutions. Philanthropy thus has the opportunity—and the responsibility—to help repair racial injustices by directly supporting communities and the cultural, educational, and economic institutions that, through their lack of resources, contribute to the reproduction of unequal capital transmission in the Bourdieusian sense. This is the most traditional role through which philanthropic foundations can contribute to "repair," in Villanueva's (2021) terms.

While they can certainly play a role in addressing racial injustices by directing their support toward repairing and narrowing the wealth gap, philanthropic actors must also adopt a reflective stance on their investment practices—Villanueva's second level of intervention (2021). According to him, foundations must align their investments with their mission. To achieve this, they must first recognize the hypocrisy of maintaining an investment portfolio that perpetuates the very inequalities they claim to address. Referring to a philanthropic posture, Villanueva argues that philanthropy should not rely "on whistleblowers and independent activists to keep the bulk of their assets from causing harm[.] Not only should those assets be transparent, they should be 100 percent aligned with the mission of the foundation" (2021, 289). Although divestment movements have succeeded in highlighting this philanthropic hypocrisy, they should not lead to the withdrawal of investments, but rather to their redirection. This redirection must include "total transparency around where our assets are invested and those assets must be 100 percent mission-aligned, meaning not just do-no-harm but invested in decolonization, in order to heal divides and restore balance" (2021, 296). In this way, philanthropic actors have the opportunity to be conscious and values-driven investors. In the context of racial justice, this includes investing in initiatives led by and for racialized people.

Ultimately, the role of foundations in achieving racial justice can be understood as a dual financial action, where their support and their investments must be aligned. Foundations must act as resource mobilizers, providing what would otherwise be inaccessible to racialized communities. Yet, through this support, foundations must also reflect on their historical roles and correct their practices. This includes better support for protest movements and a growing awareness of the whiteness of power.

### 5.2. Activism, State racism and anti-racist practices

The fight against racial injustice necessarily involves grassroots movements. The Civil Rights Movement in the United States, Black Lives Matter (BLM), and Idle No More are all part of the broader landscape of contestation against racial injustice in the West. However, as Dorsey,

Bradach, and Kim (2020)[13] show, movements led by racialized populations receive significantly less financial support than others. Focusing on movements and organizations highlighting Black leadership, they find that "on average the revenues of the Black-led organizations are 24 percent smaller than the revenues of their white-led counterparts" (2020, 11). These figures underscore the chronic lack of resources faced by Black and racialized institutions, even within social movements and in their ability to mobilize resources. Whether this is due to the wealth gap or to a lack of interest from philanthropic actors, the authors argue that "it is impossible for us to address the biggest challenges that face our country as long as this vital segment of leaders continues to be underfunded" (2020, 14). This same reality of underfunding is also documented by Gilmore (2007)[14] in her analysis of activist organizations led by Black communities. If the lack of resources within racial justice movements is real, and if philanthropic foundations have the means to assume once again the role of resource mobilizers, then it is essential that they question how they fund these movements.

As early as 1999, McAdam[15] raised concerns about the funding of large philanthropic institutions involved in the racial justice movement. Since the beginning of their involvement, the way foundations have been conceptualized in relation to these movements has followed a "resource mobilization model," which suggests that the grassroots base of social movements—here, racialized populations—lacks sufficient financial, social, and political resources to effectively foster a sustainable social movement. Thus, the masses are seen as "incapable of exerting pressure on [their] own behalf, [and] must wait [for] facilitative action on the part of external sponsors" (1999, 25). This framing casts racialized populations as passive, waiting for help from white populations, and also misrepresents the actual role that philanthropic actors have played in supporting grassroots movements. As McAdam also states, "we are left to conclude that elite funding sources (foundations, government agencies, etc.) are willing, even aggressive, sponsors of social insurgency" (1999, 27), when in fact, their funding often leads to co-optation and the eventual decline of protest movements.

This is precisely what Jenkins and Eckert (1986)[16] set out to demonstrate. They argue that philanthropic support has more often than not been a reactionary and harmful actor for racial justice movements. In analyzing several protest movements emerging from Black communities in the United States, they observed that philanthropic support and the professionalization of activist organizations that often follows may not "sustain the movement and may actually have accelerated movement decay" (1986, 819). They explain this

[13] Dorsey, Cheryl, Jeffrey Bradach, et Peter Kim. 2020. « Racial Equity and Philanthropy ». Echoing Green &The Bridgespan Group. https://www.bridgespan.org/insights/disparities-nonprofit-funding-for-leaders-of-color.
[14] Gilmore, Ruth Wilson. 2007. Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California. University of California Press.
[15] McAdam, Doug. 1999. Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930-1970. University of Chicago Press.
[16] Jenkins, J. Craig, et Craig M. Eckert. 1986. « Channeling Black Insurgency: Elite Patronage and Professional Social Movement Organizations in the Development of the Black Movement ». American Sociological Review 51 (6): 812 29. https://doi.org/10.2307/2095369.

counterintuitive conclusion by highlighting two things: first, philanthropic involvement tends to come with a delay—philanthropic engagement typically grew seven to eight years after the peak of activist action. Second, philanthropic actors tend to support reformist and moderate figures and organizations within racial justice movements. As the authors remind us, "Private foundations are, after all, institutionalized agencies of [the] capitalist class and, as such, will generally be politically cautious in their support for social reform" (1986, 819). This reveals that the support offered by philanthropic institutions to racial justice movements remains shaped by class and racial interests, promoting the preservation of white capitalist institutions. This observation of philanthropy's reactionary role toward racial justice movements highlights the need for philanthropic actors to ground their actions in critical reflection. While they do indeed have the resources to act as investors and mobilizers for communities, they cannot create systemic change without first supporting grassroots activism and engaging in critical reflection on their class and racial interests.

It is therefore crucial to examine the role and practices of philanthropy toward racialized populations and racial justice movements through the lens of racial interests, racism, and antiracism. Looking at philanthropy from this angle, Jung et al. (2023)[17] come to the same conclusion as Jenkins and Eckert: the role of foundations "has often been limited in the sense that the efforts against racial discrimination have failed to tackle the fundamental structures of the social economy" (2023, 2). Reflecting on the wealth gap and the systemic cycle that perpetuates it, it becomes increasingly clear that resource distribution alone cannot shift racial dynamics without being accompanied by efforts that address the structural dimensions of racial injustice. Material conditions are only part of the issue. Jung et al. (2023) argue that philanthropic support practices that do not aim to challenge the structural foundations of racial injustice fall into the logic of Whiteness, resulting in an assimilationist message where an explicitly antiracist discourse should be centred. Philanthropic actors, while improving the material conditions of Black and racialized communities, fail to challenge—and sometimes even reinforce—the structures of institutional racism when they do not question them.

Philanthropy's role in supporting racial justice movements must therefore include a reassessment of the white and capitalist institutions that are, in the first place, responsible for the injustices they claim to address. One cannot ignore the role of the American state in creating this so-called capital gap between white populations and racialized populations through expropriation policies (Hernandez 2022), unequal treatment (Bilmes and Brooks 2022), and chronic underfunding of institutions serving predominantly racialized communities (Anderson 2016). And if, as we've seen, philanthropy can act as an investor and a mobilizer of resources for racialized communities, thereby helping to strengthen their material conditions, this must go hand in hand with challenging the very system that produces racial

[17] Jung, Seoeun, Angela Eikenberry, Kathryn Webb Farley, et Lori Brainard. 2023. « How Do Foundations Support (Anti-)Racism? A Critical Race Theory Perspective on Philanthropy and Racial Equity ». Journal of Philanthropy and Marketing 28 (4): e1744. https://doi.org/10.1002/nvsm.1744.

injustice. Foundations must thus take on not only the role of resource mobilizer and investor, but also that of a critical agent of change within institutions.

The link with conservative and right-wing governments is particularly visible in the field of racial justice. In recent years, attacks on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion initiatives, critical race theory, voting rights, migrant justice, and anti-racist education have created a more hostile environment for racial justice movements.[18] Under these conditions, philanthropic foundations can play a protective role by supporting Black-led, Indigenous-led, and racialized organizations through long-term, flexible, and trust-based funding. However, the same political pressures may also push foundations to become more cautious[19], to depoliticize their language, or to support only moderate and institutionally acceptable forms of anti-racism. This reinforces one of the central tensions of the report: philanthropy can help sustain racial justice movements, but it can also reproduce the very structures of control, whiteness, and respectability that these movements seek to challenge.

[18] ACLU. (2024). Anti-DEI efforts are the latest attack on racial equity and free speech. American Civil Liberties Union. https://www.aclu.org/news/free-speech/anti-dei-efforts-are-the-latest-attack-on-racial-equity-and-free-speech

[19] ABFE & Candid. (2025). Holding the line: Black-led nonprofits and race-explicit work amid backlash. ABFE: A Philanthropic Partnership for Black Communities. https://www.abfe.org/resources/nonprofits-and-philanthropy/holding-line-black-led-nonprofits-and-race-explicit-work-amid-backlash

## 6. Philanthropic foundations and climate justice movements

Among the many causes in which philanthropy is involved and around which a sense of urgency to act prevails, the environmental cause stands out in particular. Although philanthropy has been involved for several decades in the fight against climate change, it is clear that it still has a long way to go before it can position environmental issues as one of its flagship causes. As highlighted by Roeyer et al. (2020), global philanthropic funding dedicated to the fight against climate change does not exceed 2%, amounting to approximately 5 to 9 billion USD. They argue that "Philanthropy alone cannot end the climate crisis, but it can play an essential role in catalyzing the trillions of dollars of public sector and private sector funding needed to transition toward a low-carbon global economy" (Roeyer et al. (2020), 2). Thus, it becomes evident that philanthropy has a role to play in the fight against climate change, with the potential to mobilize significant resources—provided that efforts are made to close the funding gap that the environmental cause faces compared to other supported causes. To achieve this, Dorsey (2020) explains that radical changes are necessary. For this key figure in environmental philanthropy, it is clear that "we are the last generation of philanthropy to comprehend the scale of the problem that may still be able to do something in time. Philanthropy must declare a climate emergency" (2). While philanthropy does have the resources to drive real change in favour of the climate cause, it must stop acting tentatively. Philanthropy must unite "to devise a unified response" (2) and ultimately lead "governments, corporations, and financial institutions to act in time" (3). Dorsey makes it clear that, first, the climate situation is critical, and philanthropy must grasp the urgency of the crisis. Second, he highlights the influential and leading role philanthropy must assume by stepping up to support ecological initiatives. This initial look at philanthropy's role in environmental justice movements already reveals some key characteristics of philanthropic engagement. First, it involves examining how philanthropy supports the environmental cause through the distribution of its resources and the recipients of those resources. Second, it also involves understanding how philanthropy acts—or can act—as an agent of innovation and change by supporting progressive climate justice movements.

### 6.1. Large-scale actions

One of the dimensions of foundations' engagement with the cause of climate justice takes place within a perspective that considers international involvement and is concentrated around large organizations capable of acting on large-scale issues. Often criticized for this, we observe that major philanthropic actors involved in the climate justice cause tend to support larger and more established organizations in international roles (Jenkins et al., 2017; Roeyer et al., 2020). While they do indeed often neglect smaller organizations in favour of larger actors, this is primarily due to a pursuit of expertise required for international action on climate change. As Delfin and Tang (2007) explain: "for example, international grants require foreign connection; and atmosphere grants, embracing such topics as climate change and greenhouse gases, require

a high degree of technical expertise which mainstream nationals have but others generally do not possess." (2182). It is therefore a matter of resources and expertise necessary to address such broad issues.

However, the role of foundations in supporting climate justice goes beyond funding experienced international organizations. Because climate action requires intervention at multiple levels, philanthropic action also extends to the foundations' ability to engage with institutional and economic environments. Indeed, philanthropic actors are capable of acting as "non-state governance actors" (Gruby et al., 2021, p. 6[20]), enabling them to influence governance and institutional priorities in order to act as central organizing bodies for climate justice.

Foundations have the potential—many already do—to be agents in defining and imposing institutional governance that advances climate justice. In support of this idea, Betsill et al. (2021) argue that philanthropic foundations are "agents of environmental governance, where an agent is an authoritative actor with the resources and capacity to influence and steer environmental governance systems" (p. 2). They thus contend that philanthropic actors possess the power to act and influence social, political, and economic systems, particularly through their practices. These actors are therefore able to use their status and resources to promote a large-scale model of environmental governance. This agency notably operates through grantmaking, the primary mechanism by which governance is influenced. Accordingly, Betsill et al. (2021) argue that the collective coordination of philanthropic organizations' grantmaking strategies allows these actors to create networks and platforms for environmental action. These networks and platforms then help shape the field of climate justice, its objectives, and its methods, by including philanthropic resource recipients and other stakeholders in the cause.

Through their philanthropic practices, foundations are able to shape the objectives and practices of the field, ultimately influencing the movement's agenda. With their substantial resources, philanthropy demonstrates "agenda-setting capabilities" that are able "to foster collaboration among diverse publics [and] can mitigate the deficiencies in traditional hierarchical [systems]" (Delfin and Tang, 2006, p. 421). These capabilities allow philanthropic actors to play a crucial role in many international initiatives or even in areas historically driven by state power—particularly when the state withdraws. The importance of this philanthropic role is especially evident in the U.S. context, where "federal authorities place a low priority for conservation and [where] severe fiscal imbalances focus state governments' attention on other concerns" (Delfin and Tang, 2006, p. 423). Philanthropic foundations thus continue to support and advance the climate justice cause, even when those in power do not. In this way,

[20] Gruby, R. L., Enrici, A., Betsill, M., Le Cornu, E., Basurto, X., & Co-Designers, R. (2021). Opening the black box of conservation philanthropy: A co-produced research agenda on private foundations in marine conservation. Marine Policy, 132, 104645.

philanthropy helps keep the climate agenda in the spotlight, playing a role in disseminating and shaping social, economic, and scientific priorities that allow the climate justice movement to escape the constraints of institutional funding.

Moreover, the role of philanthropy in supporting climate justice is also that of a convener. Positioned at the centre of a broad ecosystem of action and mobilization, philanthropic actors become pivotal to the development of social movements, including the climate justice movement. Even though the relationship between philanthropic funding and the health of social movements has sometimes been ambiguous, Carmichael et al. (2012)[21] observe that *"foundation growth and giving contribute to social movement founding and development"* (p. 427), adding that the growth of foundations should contribute to increased funding for environmental advocacy organizations. This finding suggests that foundations play a growth and support role for the climate cause.

Thus, for Kramer and Larson (2015)[22], it is clear that philanthropy's role in fostering a climate justice movement equal to the urgency of the crisis is that of a convener. It is by *"working together, and by supporting the local, national, and international organizations focused on curbing climate change"* that philanthropy can support a just and bold ecological transition. In doing so, philanthropy is able to provide a range of actors involved in the struggle with its capacity to take risks and invest in the long term. In the same vein, Colting-Stol (2020)[23] states that *"foundations have a capacity to convene a diverse and wide range of stakeholders with resources and investments in societal change. This convening power is an important tool for addressing the complexity and far-reaching impacts of climate change"* (p. 20). Thus, philanthropy's role in climate justice is also one of bringing together actors around common goals and platforms.

We can therefore understand philanthropy as a mechanism that, through the distribution of private resources, is able to promote a certain type of governance and climate priorities in a way that influences the field and its institutions. In another 2007 article, Delfin and Tang present philanthropic funding as a tool capable of propelling a climate discourse intended for the general public within institutional forums. However, they also note that this same capacity to advance the movement's agenda and priorities tends to exclude more radical initiatives and/or those rooted in community-based struggles for climate justice. This is precisely what distinguishes the large-scale action of foundations from their more community-oriented interventions in climate justice. While philanthropy does play a role in promoting practices, objectives, governance models, and partnerships that influence the cause at an institutional

[21] Carmichael, J. T., Jenkins, J. C., & Brulle, R. J. (2012). Building Environmentalism: The Founding of Environmental Movement Organizations in the United States, 1900–2000. The Sociological Quarterly, 53(3), 422–453. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1533-8525.2012.01242.x

[22] Kramer, Larry, and Carol Larson. 2015. "Foundations Must Move Fast To Fight Climate Change." The Chronicle of Philanthropy, 20 April. http://www.foundations-20.org/focusclimate philanthropy/

[23] Colting-Stol, J. (2020, April). Foundations and climate action: Exploratory research. PhiLab. https://philab.uqam.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Foundations-Climate-Exploratory-Research-.docx.pdf

level, it also extends to supporting organizations rooted in community-based struggles for climate justice. Thus, philanthropic action also aligns with a logic of "challenging the usual power dynamics in grantor-grantee relationships to shift toward more participatory, grantee-led, community-focused and grassroots approaches" (Colting-Stol, 2020, p. 18).

### 6.2. Grassroots and Movement Building

Philanthropy, as an actor within the climate justice movement, has focused significantly on its role with institutions and the broader orientations of the movement. As we have just seen, the private resources it holds enable it to support the climate cause in multiple ways, though often in a manner that tends to favour large, mainstream organizations. Many have pointed out this concentration of philanthropic activity around organizations and priorities that are less radical. According to Gunther (2018)[24], this mainstream orientation of foundations has *"failed to build a robust, broad-based political movement for climate action"* by neglecting the grassroots organizations and initiatives at the core of the climate justice movement. Gunther thus laments the underinvestment by philanthropic actors in grassroots organizations. Ramirez et al. (2022[25]) similarly observe that "*from 2007 to 2009 only 15% of environmental grant dollars were dedicated to marginalized communities, and only 11% were classified as 'social justice' grants"* (34).

This underrepresentation of grassroots efforts within philanthropic support creates issues beyond a mere lack of resources. As Ramirez et al. (2022) argue, "*The philanthropic sector also plays an integral role in environmental decision-making in the United States. In addition to grantmaking, foundations with environmental portfolios provide access to politically powerful institutions and other resources to support environmental policymaking at local, state, and national levels*" (34). This means that by being excluded from philanthropic support, grassroots groups are cut off from the access to institutions that philanthropy provides through its convening role, in addition to suffering from a resource deficit. Ultimately, this leads to the marginalization of mobilization groups proposing more radical engagement rooted in already marginalized communities. Furthermore, this marginalization raises concerns about a disconnect between philanthropic actors and the core issues of climate justice, especially those affecting primarily racialized communities (Baptista and Perovich 2020[26]). Therefore, it is reasonable to believe that everyone benefits from building bridges and lasting relationships between philanthropic actors and grassroots movements.

Through greater engagement with grassroots movements, philanthropic actors can build from the ground up, thereby strengthening the foundation of the climate justice movement while

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[24] Gunther, Mark. 2018. "The Failure of Climate Philanthropy." Nonprofit Chronicles, 1 March. https://nonprofitchronicles. com/2018/03/01/the-failure-of-climate- philanthropy/.

[25] Ramirez, J. S., Baptista, A. I., Greenberg, M., Perovich, A., Yulsman, A., Lopez, A., & Rosenberg, A. (2022). Grassroots Environmental Justice Work and Philanthropy: Challenges and Opportunities. *The Foundation Review, 14*(1). https://doi.org/10.9707/1944-5660.1601

[26] Baptista, Ana Isabel, and Adrienne Perovich. 2020. Environmental Justice and Philanthropy: Challenges and Opportunities for Alignment. New York: Tishman Environment and Design Center.

staying connected to the concerns of marginalized groups. In this regard, McCarthy (2004[27]) highlights philanthropic initiatives in which foundations and activists pool their expertise and capacities: *"For several years, activist/funders coordinated efforts to shift the EGA [Environmental Grantmakers Association] retreat agenda to one which focuses more heavily on environmental justice and less heavily on traditional environmental issues*" (261). This work aims to promote an approach that allows philanthropists and activists to unite their efforts in dismantling traditional approaches to ecology. McCarthy thus illustrates how philanthropic actions typically aimed at large-scale practices can be adapted to include initiatives rooted in activism, allowing foundations to incorporate grassroots organizations into their practices.

Scholars emphasize that resource distribution has a direct impact on movement capacity. Faber and McCarthy (2005) demonstrate that "access to material and nonmaterial resources significantly impacts the degree to which a movement is able to successfully mobilize constituencies and grow into a force for social change" (p. 181). By supporting grassroots organizations, foundations help movements expand their constituencies, enhance organizational resilience, and strengthen leadership. Delfin and Tang (2008) add that foundation support can "strengthen organizational capacity [by] improving nonprofits' finances, personnel, and structure" (p. 608). They further argue that philanthropy should prioritize capacity-building over narrow social impact metrics, selectively helping to reduce negative side effects of change and legitimizing grassroots activism in the process (p. 620). While risks of co-optation exist, their survey suggests that "foundation funding tends to lead to grantees' capacity enhancement rather than toward their co-optation" (p. 605).

Recent scholarship reinforces these critiques and points to structural reorientations needed in climate philanthropy. Holmes (2015) warns that the rise of "philanthrocapitalism" in environmental and biodiversity funding risks subordinating social justice goals to market-oriented logic. Bassey, Odendahl, and Northrop (2016) highlight that even after the Paris Agreement, foundation spending patterns have remained narrow, with a disproportionate focus on technical solutions rather than justice-centred grassroots action. Desanlis et al. (2021), in their analysis of global climate mitigation philanthropy, show persistent imbalances in where funds are directed, with only a small share reaching frontline communities most vulnerable to climate impacts. Morena (2016, 2021) goes further, demonstrating how philanthropic foundations have shaped an "international climate regime" compatible with U.S. political and economic interests—raising concerns that philanthropy's geopolitical orientation may crowd out more radical, justice-based approaches to climate action.

Thus, philanthropy has an equally important role to play in supporting activist and grassroots organizations within the climate justice movement. By focusing for too long on large-scale action, philanthropy has allowed a resource gap to persist at the base of the movement,

[27] McCarthy, D. (2004). Environmental justice grantmaking: elites and activists collaborate to transform philanthropy. Sociological Inquiry, 74(2), 250-270. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-682x.2004.00089.x

sometimes marginalizing grassroots priorities and the populations most affected by climate injustice. Philanthropy therefore has a responsibility to reassess the allocation of its resources by strengthening the capacities of activist organizations and building the relationships necessary for their participation in the broader struggle.

The question of conservative and right-wing governments is also central to climate justice movements. When governments roll back environmental protections, weaken climate regulations, criminalize protest, or support fossil fuel expansion, climate movements face increased political and legal pressure[28]. In this context, foundations can provide essential resources for legal defence, community organizing, Indigenous land defence, public communication, and movement infrastructure. At the same time, climate philanthropy remains marked by a deep contradiction: many foundations seek to fund ecological transition while their endowments may still be tied to extractive or market-based economic logic[29]. The challenge, then, is not only whether foundations fund climate justice movements, but whether they are willing to support the more confrontational, anti-extractive, and systemic dimensions of climate justice when these movements directly challenge dominant economic and political interests.

### 6.3. Frontline struggles, Indigenous land defence, and the limits of technocratic climate philanthropy

A further dimension that deserves attention concerns the place of frontline communities and Indigenous land defenders within climate philanthropy. Climate justice movements do not only seek to reduce greenhouse gas emissions; they also challenge the unequal distribution of climate vulnerability, environmental harm, and political power. In this sense, climate justice differs from more technocratic approaches to climate action, which often prioritize carbon reduction, technological innovation, market mechanisms, or policy reform without fully addressing the social and territorial inequalities produced by extractive economies. As Whyte (2017) argues, Indigenous climate change studies offer critical and decolonizing approaches to climate change by foregrounding Indigenous futures, responsibilities, sovereignty, and relationships to land. Frontline communities, including Indigenous nations, racialized communities, low-income populations, and communities directly exposed to pollution or fossil fuel infrastructure, are therefore not simply "beneficiaries" of climate action. They are political actors whose struggles often define what climate justice means in practice.

This distinction is important for understanding the role of philanthropy. Large foundations often favour interventions that are measurable, scalable, and compatible with institutional policy frameworks. These interventions can be useful, particularly when they support research, litigation, public communication, or international climate negotiations. ClimateWorks Foundation (2024), for example, emphasizes the role of philanthropy in accelerating climate solutions, mobilizing additional funding, and supporting bold climate action. However, the

[28] Climate Rights International. (2024). Western democracies: Stop crackdowns on climate protesters. Climate Rights International. https://cri.org/western-democracies-stop-crackdowns-climate-protesters/
29 Liu, F.& Monier, A. (2024). Funding climate action but financing environmental destruction? Philanthropic foundations and fossil fuel investments. Journal of Philanthropy and Marketing.

same philanthropic emphasis on scale, strategy, and measurable results may also privilege technical expertise over lived experience, and policy solutions over confrontational organizing. As a result, climate philanthropy can reproduce a gap between professionalized environmental organizations and the communities most directly affected by ecological degradation. When philanthropic support flows primarily to large organizations, it risks reinforcing a division of labour in which frontline communities provide moral legitimacy while better-resourced institutions control strategy, language, and access to decision-making spaces.

Indigenous land defence illustrates this tension especially clearly. Indigenous movements have played a central role in resisting pipelines, mining projects, deforestation, carbon offset schemes, and other forms of extractive development. The report Indigenous Resistance Against Carbon shows that Indigenous resistance across Turtle Island has challenged fossil fuel expansion through legal action, direct action, procedural delays, territorial defence, and grassroots mobilization (Oil Change International, Indigenous Environmental Network, & Indigenous Climate Action, 2021). These struggles are not limited to environmental protection in a narrow sense; they also involve sovereignty, territorial rights, intergenerational responsibility, and the defence of non-market relations to land and water. For this reason, Indigenous climate justice movements often challenge the very economic logic that many philanthropic endowments remain tied to. Supporting these movements therefore requires more than occasional grants or symbolic inclusion. It requires long-term, flexible, and movement-led funding that respects Indigenous governance, self-determination, and the political nature of land defence.

This is where the limits of conventional climate philanthropy become visible. Foundations may be willing to fund climate solutions when these solutions appear consensual, technical, or market-compatible. They may be less willing to support movements that oppose fossil fuel expansion, contest state-backed infrastructure projects, or directly challenge corporate power. Yet these more confrontational struggles are often central to climate justice. They are the spaces where questions of race, class, colonialism, land, and ecological transition intersect most clearly. Liu and Monier (2024) show that climate philanthropy is marked by a form of hybridity: some foundations fund climate action while remaining financially connected, through their endowments or investment strategies, to the economic systems that contribute to climate destruction. This contradiction makes it difficult to separate grantmaking from investment practices. If foundations avoid anti-extractive struggles because they are politically sensitive, they risk narrowing climate action to a depoliticized agenda focused on emissions management rather than social transformation.

A justice-oriented approach to climate philanthropy would therefore require a shift in both funding practices and political posture. This means increasing direct support to frontline organizations, reducing administrative burdens, funding organizing rather than only projects, and recognizing that conflict is not a failure of climate action but often one of its necessary forms. It also means accepting that the most transformative climate movements may not speak the language of consensus, innovation, or institutional partnership. They may instead speak the language of refusal, repair, sovereignty, and anti-extractivism. For foundations, the central question is whether they are prepared to support climate justice when it moves beyond policy alignment and becomes a challenge to dominant economic and political interests.

### 6.4. Climate philanthropy, fossil fuel capital, and political backlash

Climate philanthropy is also marked by a structural contradiction between the resources it distributes and the origins or uses of the capital it manages. Many foundations seek to accelerate ecological transition, yet their endowments may remain invested in fossil fuels, extractive industries, or market-based financial instruments that contribute to the very crisis they aim to address. Liu and Monier (2024) describe this tension as a form of hybridity within climate philanthropy: foundations may fund climate action through their grantmaking while simultaneously financing climate destruction through their investment portfolios. This contradiction is not merely ethical; it is political. It raises the question of whether climate philanthropy can genuinely support transformative climate justice while remaining financially embedded in the economic systems that produce environmental degradation.

This tension is particularly important because climate justice movements often challenge both state policy and private capital. They do not only ask for cleaner technologies or better regulations; they ask who benefits from extraction, who bears environmental harm, who controls land and resources, and who has the power to define the transition. From this perspective, the foundation's grantmaking strategy cannot be separated from its investment strategy. If a foundation funds climate advocacy while its endowment continues to benefit from fossil fuel expansion, the movement may receive support on one side while facing harm on the other. This is why divestment, mission-aligned investment, and transparency around foundation assets have become increasingly important questions in debates on climate philanthropy. The Ford Foundation's decision to end new fossil fuel-related investments in its endowment illustrates how some large foundations have begun to respond to these critiques by attempting to better align their investments with their mission and values (Ford Foundation, 2021).

The political context further sharpens this contradiction. In contexts marked by conservative or right-wing governments, climate movements often face regulatory rollbacks, attacks on environmental protections, and increased repression of protest. Climate Rights International (2024) documents how democratic countries have increasingly used harsh legal and policing responses against climate protesters, including arrests, pretrial detention, severe sentencing, and the use of broad public-order offences. Berglund (2025) similarly argues that the criminalization and repression of climate and environmental activism have intensified globally in recent years, driven by both state and corporate actors. Under these conditions, foundations may become especially important sources of support for legal defence, community organizing, public communication, and movement infrastructure. However, these same contexts can also make foundations more risk-averse. Fear of a political backlash, regulatory scrutiny, reputational controversy, or donor discomfort may encourage funders to prioritize moderate climate initiatives over more disruptive forms of organizing.

The result is a form of selective support: foundations may support climate action, but not necessarily the forms of climate justice that challenge fossil fuel interests most directly. ClimateWorks Foundation (2024) shows that climate philanthropy has grown and can play an important role in accelerating climate action, yet it also notes persistent funding gaps. These gaps matter politically. If funding is concentrated in technocratic, policy-oriented, or market-compatible approaches, while frontline organizing, land defence, legal defence, and anti-

extractive struggles remain underfunded, philanthropy may unintentionally narrow the scope of climate justice. In this sense, the question is not only how much climate philanthropy is growing, but what kinds of climate politics it makes possible.

The comparison across feminist, racial justice, and climate justice movements reveals a set of recurring tensions in the relationship between foundations and progressive movements. While the specific issues differ across fields, foundations repeatedly appear as both resource providers and political actors whose funding choices can either strengthen movement autonomy or reinforce forms of institutional control.

| Field | Key resources provided by foundations | Risks of co-optation | Autonomy strategies developed by movements | Political pressures under conservative/right-wing governments |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Feminist movements** | Funding for advocacy, legal defence, public education, reproductive rights, LGBTQIA+ rights, grassroots organizing, and feminist infrastructure. | Professionalization, donor-driven agendas, depoliticization, preference for "empowerment" language over structural feminist struggle. | Trust-based funding, participatory grantmaking, feminist funds, movement-led agendas, unrestricted support, intersectional organizing. | Attacks on reproductive rights, anti-gender politics, opposition to LGBTQIA+ rights, delegitimization of intersectionality and gender-sensitive policies. |
| **Racial justice movements** | Support for Black-led, Indigenous-led and racialized organizations; community organizing; legal advocacy; leadership development; reparative investment. | Moderation of anti-racist claims, pressure to soften race-explicit language, reproduction of whiteness, respectability politics, funder control. | Community-controlled institutions, reparative funding models, mission-aligned investment, refusal of conditional funding, coalition building. | Backlash against DEI, critical race theory, voting rights, migrant justice, anti-racist education, and race-explicit organizing. |
| **Climate justice movements** | Resources for legal defence, Indigenous land defence, public communication, community organizing, research, and movement infrastructure. | Preference for technocratic or market-based climate solutions, avoidance of anti-extractive politics, contradictions between grants and foundation investments. | Divestment campaigns, frontline-led organizing, Indigenous leadership, grassroots climate justice networks, movement autonomy from corporate climate agendas. | Rollbacks of environmental protections, weakening of climate regulations, criminalization of protest, support for fossil fuel expansion. |

This synthesis shows that the central issue is not simply whether foundations support progressive movements, but under what conditions they do so. Across the three fields, the same question emerges: can philanthropy provide resources without narrowing the political imagination, strategies, and disruptive capacity of the movements it claims to support?

## 7. Discussion: Tensions Between Foundations and Progressive Movements

This discussion section synthesizes insights from the literature to examine the paradoxical role of foundations as both allies and constraints for progressive social movements. While philanthropic support has often been indispensable for sustaining organizations and amplifying advocacy, it also carries risks of co-optation, depoliticization, and fragmentation. These tensions become particularly pronounced in polarized political environments and in the face of restrictive policies enacted by right-wing governments. The following subsections explore three interconnected challenges: the balancing act between militancy and institutional recognition, the political dangers of operating under hostile regimes, and the NGO-ization of movements that risks distancing them from grassroots mobilization.

### 7.1. Activism, Militancy, and the Risk of Institutional Sanction

One recurring dilemma is the tension between militant activism and the need to preserve an organization's legal and financial status. In several contexts, groups that adopt confrontational tactics risk losing their charitable number or tax-exempt status, which are essential for attracting foundation funding. This dynamic forces a strategic choice: remain radical but precarious, or moderate tactics in order to safeguard legal recognition and philanthropic support. For many organizations, this trade-off directly shapes their repertoire of contention, often pushing them toward institutional advocacy rather than disruptive action.

### 7.2. Political Risks in Polarized Contexts

Under conservative or authoritarian-leaning governments, such as the Trump administration in the United States, the political risks for foundations become more acute. Increased surveillance of protest movements, restrictions on civic space, and political attacks on so-called "woke" agendas generate a chilling effect. In these settings, foundations may retreat to "safe" programming, prioritizing technocratic or service-oriented initiatives over more politicized forms of mobilization. The danger is twofold: movements lose crucial funding at precisely the moment they most need it, and foundations risk complicity in the silencing of dissent.

### 7.3. NGO-ization and the Transformation of Movements

Lang (1997, 2023) and others have described the NGO-ization of social movements—a process through which activism becomes institutionalized into professionalized NGOs, governed by strict rules of funding, reporting, and accountability. While this shift has enabled some feminist organizations to gain policy influence (for example, by participating in drafting laws or serving on advisory bodies), it has also changed how the movements act, speak, and organize.

Professionalized NGOs often prioritize donor relations, produce polished reports, and maintain reputational safeguards in order to secure funding. This comes at the cost of street-

level mobilization and contentious politics. In feminist movements, this dynamic has created a divide between "official" feminist NGOs that work closely with institutions and grassroots mobilizations such as #MeToo or Black Lives Matter, which rely less on foundation funding and more on collective, decentralized action. This separation risks weakening the overall strength of feminism by fragmenting its constituencies and dampening its disruptive capacity.

### 7.4. A Fragile Balance

Taken together, these dynamics highlight the fragile balance foundations must navigate. Their support can legitimize and scale movements, but their constraints can also depoliticize and fragment them. The challenge is to design funding approaches that:

- Protect movements from the loss of status or legal sanction when engaging in protest;
- Remain politically committed even under hostile governments;
- Avoid professionalizing activism to the point of disconnecting it from grassroots mobilization.

For feminist, racial justice, and climate justice movements alike, the key question is whether foundations can move beyond transactional funding to power-sharing partnerships that preserve radical voices, sustain organizational capacity, and strengthen ties between NGOs and popular mobilizations.

## 8. Conclusion

This literature review has examined the intricate dynamics between grantmaking foundations and progressive social movements, revealing a relationship characterized by fundamental contradictions rather than simple alliances or opposition. Across feminist movements, racial justice organizing, and climate activism, the evidence demonstrates that foundations function as political actors whose influence extends far beyond monetary transactions: they shape organizational forms, strategic priorities, and the very possibilities for transformative change.

### 8.1. Key Empirical Findings

The cross-movement analysis reveals consistent patterns. In feminist philanthropy, the evolution from 19th-century charitable associations to contemporary intersectional funding shows both progress and persistent limitations. While initiatives such as ELAS+ in Brazil and trust-based philanthropy models represent important innovations, the concentration of resources in professionalized NGOs continues to marginalize grassroots voices. The decline in general operating support—from 30% to 15% between 2002 and 2013 for international gender equality work—illustrates how funding practices actively constrain movement autonomy.

In racial justice movements, the 24% revenue gap between Black-led and white-led organizations reflects structural inequalities that philanthropy simultaneously addresses and

reproduces. The historical pattern identified by Jenkins and Eckert—where foundation support often arrives years after peak mobilization and favours moderate over radical voices—remains evident in contemporary responses to movements such as Black Lives Matter.

Climate justice organizing reveals perhaps the starkest contradictions. Despite representing only 2% of global philanthropic giving, environmental philanthropy is heavily concentrated in large, mainstream organizations, leaving frontline communities systematically underfunded. The finding that only 15% of environmental grants reached marginalized communities between 2007 and 2009 underscores a persistent disconnect between philanthropic priorities and climate justice principles.

### 8.2. Theoretical Contributions

This review contributes to social movement theory by highlighting how resource dependency produces what can be described as philanthropic intermediation—a process whereby foundations mediate between movements and broader political systems, simultaneously amplifying and constraining radical possibilities. The concept of NGO-ization proves particularly useful across all three domains, showing how professionalization can distance movements from grassroots bases while providing institutional legitimacy.

The evidence also complicates simple co-optation narratives. Rather than straightforward capture, the relationship between foundations and movements is marked by mutual adaptation, strategic accommodation, and creative resistance. Movements are not passive recipients: they actively develop autonomy strategies—from resource pooling to conditional funding refusal—that challenge philanthropic constraints.

### 8.3. Political Implications in Context

The current political moment makes these findings especially urgent. As conservative and right-wing governments implement restrictive policies across North America, Latin America, and Europe, the stakes of foundation–movement relationships intensify. The documented retreat from social justice funding following the 2020 racial justice protests—despite initial commitments—illustrates how political backlash can quickly reverse philanthropic engagement.

The Johnson Center's identification of declining DEI support and the rise of "philanthrocapitalism" under figures such as the Gates Foundation point to broader transformations that may further constrain radical movements. In this context, Hong and Mersha's observation about philanthropy's paradoxical role—funding progressive initiatives while simultaneously supporting systems that perpetuate inequality—becomes especially pertinent.

### 8.4. Limitations and Future Directions

This review acknowledges several limitations. The geographic concentration on North American cases limits generalizability, particularly given the distinct philanthropic landscapes of Europe, Latin America, and the Global South. The temporal scope, while contemporary, would benefit from deeper historical comparisons of foundation–movement relationships across different political eras.

Methodologically, the review relied primarily on published academic sources. Future research would benefit from ethnographic work with foundation program officers and movement leaders, as well as empirical analysis of how these relationships function during periods of acute repression. Comparative case studies could illuminate the varied strategies foundations and movements adopt under hostile regimes, climate emergencies, or democratic backsliding.

### 8.5. Practical Implications

For foundation practitioners, the evidence suggests several actionable directions. Trust-based philanthropy and participatory grantmaking in feminist contexts point toward more democratic models of funding. The benefits of general operating support over project-specific grants argue for structural reform in grantmaking practices. Most critically, aligning investment portfolios with stated missions—as Villanueva and others have argued in the racial justice context—requires foundations to confront the contradictions between their endowment practices and social justice goals.

For movement organizations, the analysis suggests the importance of diversifying funding sources and maintaining structures that preserve radical capacities. Examples of resource pooling and horizontal redistribution models demonstrate alternative economic arrangements that can reduce dependence on institutional philanthropy while safeguarding autonomy.

### 8.6. Final Reflections

Rather than resolving the tensions between philanthropy and movements, this review reveals their intractable nature under current economic arrangements. The concentration of wealth that enables large-scale philanthropy derives from the same systems that generate the inequalities movements seek to confront. This contradiction cannot be fully addressed through better grantmaking practices alone, though such reforms remain important.

The central question moving forward is not whether foundations will continue to shape progressive movements—they will—but whether these relationships can evolve to support rather than constrain transformative possibilities. The evidence suggests this depends partly on foundation innovation but more fundamentally on movements' capacity to maintain autonomous organizing spaces and radical visions alongside engagement with institutional funders.

As democratic institutions face mounting challenges globally, the role of philanthropy in either sustaining or constraining transformative movements is more consequential than ever. Future research must examine how foundation–movement dynamics unfold under acute repression, climate crisis, and political polarization—contexts where getting these relationships right will determine not just the vitality of movements, but the prospects for democratic renewal itself.

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