
The billionaire philanthropy scam

Is Bill Gates a monster or a messiah? A saint or a serial philanthropist? A hero of the poor or a lackey of big pharma?

By Linsey McGoey (text) and Michelle Rohn (illustration), 03.06.2021



For decades, much of the world revered Gates for his commitment to giving his massive fortune away. But in recent weeks, eye-popping revelations in the wake of Bill and Melinda's divorce announcement have accomplished what earlier investigative reports into the Gates Foundation's troubling practices failed to do. They have pierced the myth of Saint Bill

and made it possible to ask important questions that were until recently dismissed as almost conspiratorial.

Questions like, Is it right for one man to wield so much economic and political power? Why do we assume that people who made their fortunes in a particular area, like software, have expertise in other fields, like global health or education? Is Bill's attitude to intellectual property rights «monstrous», as one media report called his stance, or science based?

About the author

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Concerns over Bill and Melinda's management of the Gates Foundation were sparked by critical attention to the foundation's role in the distribution of Covid-19 vaccines.

Take the case of pharma company Astra Zeneca, which partnered with the University of Oxford in April 2020 to roll out a vaccine developed by Oxford researchers. Initially, Oxford released a statement, available on its website, saying that «associated products and services to address the Covid-19 pandemic» would be offered through «non-exclusive, royalty-free licences».

But later the university changed its mind. As indicated by «Fortune» magazine, Oxford – after widely reported talks with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation – reversed course. It signed an exclusive vaccine deal with Astra Zeneca that gave the pharmaceutical giant sole rights and no guarantee of low prices.

Astra Zeneca initially promised that it would distribute the vaccine on a «no profits» basis in poor nations, but this promise is not legally binding: the company is legally able to flout it whenever they choose to. Already there is evidence of price gouging that could have been avoided if Oxford has gone through with its plan to offer its vaccine to the world on a non-exclusive basis.

Many poor and middle-income nations, including Bangladesh, South Africa and Uganda, are paying more for the Oxford-Astra Zeneca vaccine than EU countries. Uganda is paying three times the cost in Europe. Rather than helping improve access to life-saving vaccines, the deal that the Gates Foundation brokered between Oxford and Astra Zeneca is undermining the global right to health.

It is not the first time that the Gates Foundation has privileged the corporate clout and profits of western pharmaceutical companies at the expense of the world's neediest people. A few years ago, I published a book, «No Such Thing as a Free Gift: The Gates Foundation and the Price of Philanthropy», that exposed problems of democratic non-accountability and corporate conflict of interests at the heart of billionaire philanthropy.

When it comes to global health and development, the vast majority of the Gates Foundation's money is channelled to western researchers and to wealthy pharmaceutical companies based in the US and Europe, something that compounds inequality between the global north and global south.

Gates has long privileged a «charity» model of global health over a «justice» model, calling on big pharma companies to voluntarily set prices for drugs low, out of their own good will, rather than conceding that governments should demand price cuts. Gates has even showered non-repayable grants on big pharma, using tax-privileged gifts to enrich the world's most profitable pharma companies.

This outpouring of charity for wealthy pharma companies is questionable at a time when the same companies are known to rip off customers by charging grossly inflated prices for life-saving drugs and vaccines. US congresswoman Katie Porter, a long-standing critic of price gouging by big pharma, pointed out recently that big pharma already spends a miserly amount on research and development, preferring instead to manipulate the market rather than to engage in innovative drug research. And yet still Gates is willing to reward big pharma through his foundation rather than to condemn exploitative business tactics.

You'd have to be blind today not to recognize that big pharma's business model prioritizes the interests of shareholders over patients. Gates appears to be stubbornly – even strategically – blind to this reality, dogmatically insisting that charity alone can fix a broken system of global health – perhaps because he doesn't want to admit that his fortune was built upon the same model of monopolist exploitation that big pharma has perfected today.

Gates's charity approach to global health and development is not helping to lower the costs of prescription drugs or vaccines. Today, diabetes and cancer treatments are scandalously over-priced in the the US and elsewhere, and the overall cost of vaccination and immunization programmes in poor nations has also skyrocketed in recent decades.

Médecins Sans Frontières has pointed out that while global vaccination rates have improved since 2000, with overall rates doubling, the cost of basic vaccine packages in developing countries has grown 68-fold, jacked up by the public-private corporate «partnership» approach championed by the Gates Foundation.

At a time when demand for Covid-19 vaccines is far outstripping supply, the Gates Foundation's support for companies like Astra Zeneca should not even be called «charity». It is more like theft, using philanthropic clout to help private companies corner the market for new discoveries and thwarting more widespread public access. It is governments and their taxpayers who have subsidized the vast majority of the basic vaccine research that produced the Covid-19 vaccines, while a handful of private companies are poised to earn massive windfalls while people needlessly die. That is theft. It's also a case of what Friedrich Engels once described as «social murder», defined as the relegation of vulnerable workers to «such a position that they inevitably meet a too early and an unnatural death».

In October 2020, South Africa and India formally called for a patent waiver that would enable more global manufacturing of Covid-19 vaccines. Experts at the World Health Organization (WHO) and elsewhere backed the waiver, insisting that it would help to boost global vaccine production.

But last month, Bill Gates personally attacked the idea of the patent waiver while speaking with Britain's Sky News. In the same vein, back in January, Melinda Gates defended the Foundation's support for Astra Zeneca's sweetheart deal with Oxford in an interview with «Washington Post». It's not just Bill who backs market-led, pro-industry development solutions. Melinda, too, has long had the same technocratic, entrepreneurial, pro-market ap-

proach as Bill. And by «entrepreneurial», I mean placing the burden of rising from poverty on exploited women globally in ways that obscures their capitalist exploitation and makes global «development» seem as simple as attending the right «lean in» webinar.

In early May, US president Joe Biden announced US support for the patent waiver proposal. Finally, after this, the Gates Foundation did an about-face, announcing that it, too, backed the idea of a «narrow» waiver. Better late than never, and yet surely an organization claiming «every life has equal value» should not have been one of the last holdouts when it came to a no-brainer idea to improve vaccine equity, an idea that was backed by over 100 poor and middle-income nations across the world before the Gates Foundation finally got on board.

Even today, Gates has not yet personally conceded that the vaccine waiver is a necessary step forward to help boost global production. His stubbornness on patents leads to a larger question. Whose side is he on? Is he on the side of health leaders like the WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus who have publicly campaigned for the waiver and who see health as a universal human right? Or is Gates mostly out for himself and the interests of big business?

It's impossible to say for certain. None of us can read his mind, but reports following his divorce announcement have unearthed troubling clues to his own character and to an almost megalomaniacal desire for global adoration.

The «New York Times» reported examples of mismanagement and treatment of employees by Gates, including an affair with a subordinate that led to his forced retirement from the Microsoft board. The «Times» also reported that two women have claimed that he made sexual advances towards them while they were his employees, in one case at Microsoft and in the other at the Gates Foundation.

Why didn't his forced decision to step down from the Microsoft board come to light sooner? Why didn't the press pay more attention earlier, when global health activists pointed out for decades that he was too cosy with big pharma and that it might be biasing his policy suggestions when it comes to patents on drugs?

Although many of the wild conspiracies circulating around Gates's personal desire to control global populations through microchips lack any evidence base, it's also true that growing public mistrust of him signals something that is rational. And that is to realize that too much concentrated wealth threatens principles of democracy and equality before the law by creating an aura of untouchability around people like Gates.

Gates might have appeared saintly for circling the world flinging gifts about like some sort of multi-seasonal Santa Claus in chinos, but his public persona appears to have veiled harsh realities about abuses of power.

It also reveals unsettling realities about the general societal tendency to «buy» the public image of «great» men and women. We need to face a reality about ourselves: we seem to want to project our hopes for a more just society upon singular saviour figures. In capitalist societies, the capitalist super-rich are far too often treated with the same reverence and awe extended in religious eras and regions towards saints, or towards royalty when feudal kings and queens reigned supreme.

We have a shared desire to hope that some people are imbued with the exceptional characteristics needed to emancipate humanity, to drive us towards a more civilized future, to free us from human greed or oppression.

Ironically, often the people worshipped in such situations really *are* exceptional, but not in the way that their followers hope. They are exceptionally gifted at making their desire for power seem beneficial for others when really it benefits themselves.

In an academic article, my co-author Darren Thiel and I coined a new concept to describe this taking-through-giving: «charismatic violence». By this, we mean that large-scale gift giving on the magnitude of the Gates Foundation is seen by many people as almost a sacred act, worthy of charismatic love and devotion – and yet this devotion can have dark and even violent consequences (think of the aforementioned problem of «social murder»), helping to entrench and to legitimate underlying structures of economic inequality and exploitation.

Back in 2015, when I published my book on the Gates Foundation, I pointed out that the global patent system was broken – and it remains broken. The Covid-19 pandemic has exposed its weaknesses. My larger point is that «big philanthropy» in general threatens democracy by giving too much power over policy making to a select group of self-serving, super-rich men and women.

We don't need charity kings or queens. We don't need a self-anointed aristocratic class, dropping financial crumbs on the public while expecting veneration and obsequious press treatment in return. We need economic justice and an end to the charismatic violence of the philanthropy overlords.

«Der Wohltäterschwindel eines Multimilliardärs»: [Hier gehts zur deutschen Übersetzung](#).