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Philanthropy and Power Supplement
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How We Got Here
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HOW WE GOT HERE

Nearly two decades after our founding, the Chorus Foundation and our allies take stock on what we have learned about philanthropy, power, and creating a better world.

BY FARHAD EBRAHIMI

This supplement has been almost two decades in the making. The Chorus Foundation was created in 2006 as a vehicle to fully redistribute all the wealth under my direct control. True to that intention, Chorus and our sibling action fund are now closing out our final year of grantmaking.

This is a very exciting time for us. But this moment is about much more than Chorus. We have come into our own as part of a much larger ecosystem of philanthropic and grassroots organizations. This supplement is our effort to showcase both the thinking and some of the thinkers whose impact has proven transformative for us. In that sense, this supplement belongs to all of us.

We understand that basic questions about power—what is it, who has it, and how can it be shifted—are central to every social issue and social sector. We have unfortunately also seen how power, in its many forms, is taken as a given or even obscured entirely. This is, of course, by design. If we can't see power for what it is, and we can't ask why power operates the way it does, then we will find ourselves subject to the power of others, rather than becoming the agents of our own power. That is precisely how the status quo perpetuates itself.

Despite an unrelenting belief in our own exceptionalism, the philanthropic sector is no different. In fact, philanthropy offers a pernicious example of how power can be everywhere without being named or questioned. Not only does philanthropy hold tremendous power—to allocate resources, to set agendas, even to dictate strategy—but there also exists an ecosystem of power and power dynamics within the philanthropic sector itself.

As a result, power has become the primary lens through which we at Chorus view our own work. Admittedly, it took us time to get here. The story of that journey is essentially the story of this supplement.

ABOUT ME

Before we dive in, it only seems fair that, as the living donor, I share a bit about myself. The story of the Chorus Foundation begins with a successful tech entrepreneur, but that entrepreneur was not me. It was my father, who achieved enormous success in the desktop-publishing industry in the mid-1980s. My introduction to philanthropy was as a next-generation member of a high-net-wealth family.

For what it's worth, I'm the family's radical lefty straight out of central casting. That said, my views have been deeply informed by my family history in the sense that both my parents are refugees. My father is Iranian and my mother is Cuban, and their stories have profoundly shaped my personal and political development.

My parents talked about politics all the time when I was growing up, even yelling at the TV while we watched the news. You might say they had strong feelings about US foreign policy. In retrospect, this was a form of political education for me. One theme became crystal clear: the value of community self-determination. My parents described their refugee experiences in terms of displacement and the loss of home, but also as examples of what can happen when community self-determination is undermined. Multiple interventions by the United States and other forces contributed to the fraying of community self-determination in both Iran and Cuba.

I don't think I can overstate how formative these messages from my parents were for me. Their stories helped me make sense of my own experiences as an Iranian American and helped launch my own line of political inquiry. Like any good teenager or young adult, I harangued my parents: *Why didn't we talk about race more? Why didn't we ever talk about class or capitalism? As a high-net-wealth family, what was our relationship to community self-determination now that our refugee days were behind us?*

Meanwhile, family money loomed in the background. My father put a significant percentage of his shares in one of his most successful enterprises in my name, even though I wasn't even a teenager at the time. By my mid-20s, the wealth under my direct control was worth well over \$50 million. I had yet to reckon with any of it—in fact, I had been avoiding the subject entirely.

THE BIRTH OF THE CHORUS FOUNDATION

After a great deal of personal reflection and following many conversations with working-class friends and mentors, I decided to create my own private foundation. My plan was to create the appropriate vehicle to give away all the wealth under my direct control during my lifetime.

I had never felt that the money was mine. In my organizing experience, this feeling is common among next-gen members of high-net-wealth families. But I would like to be clear that my decision resulted from a process of intentional political education. I had been taught to interrogate the circumstances that allowed my family to accumulate so much money in the first place. While I love my parents and believe that my father worked hard and deserves to be compensated for that work, no individual should accumulate so much wealth. You don't get this rich without benefiting from a system that keeps other people poor.

I promised myself that I would initiate a wealth-redistribution project by the time I turned 30. I was able to beat that self-imposed deadline by a few years but lacked a clear framework, ideological or otherwise, for how to think about philanthropy as a project.

And so began the Chorus Foundation 17 years ago, somewhat conventionally. First, the elephant in the room: This was a private foundation, and surely we could dedicate another article to unpacking the meanings of that particular convention (as some already have). I was a living donor, surrounded by the usual advice that living donors receive: Pick an issue, select a measurable outcome, develop your strategy to “move the needle,” and treat your grantees like service providers to implement that strategy.

This advice did not resonate with me, and yet initially, I believed that I didn't have other choices. Looking for a place to start, I picked my issue: climate change. It was hardly the only issue I cared about, but I had been told that philanthropy could only effectively tackle one problem at a time.

As we developed our strategy at Chorus, we set out to learn what other climate funders were up to. The results were mixed at best, with large sums going to top-down strategies that did not deliver. I'd be lying if I said that we didn't make some mistakes of our own!

But we were lucky to show up on a few finely tuned radars. I stood out just a bit as the only punk kid at a funder conference, wearing my faded David Bowie shirt. Whether that helped is unclear, but our radical peers in philanthropy found us, welcomed us, and took us under their wing. In particular, I would like to recognize New World Foundation, Solidago Foundation, and staff and member leaders from both Resource Generation and EDGE Funders Alliance for their early mentorship. Instead

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of chasing the latest fads in climate philanthropy, our new friends encouraged us to connect directly with leaders from the grassroots organizing sector. Since I was raised to value community self-determination, this recommendation resonated with me. It simply made sense. We learned a great deal more, not surprisingly, from frontline BIPOC and working-class leadership than we ever did from our (predominantly white, privileged, and disconnected) peers in climate philanthropy.

I want to acknowledge the Center for Story-based Strategy, Climate Justice Alliance; Grassroots Global Justice Alliance; and Movement Generation Justice & Ecology Project for all the ways they invested in our leadership, not only as grant makers, but also as organizers in their own right. We are incredibly grateful that **Michelle Mascarenhas (former codirector at Movement Generation)** contributed an article to this supplement describing how these relationship-building, leadership development, and organizing efforts felt from the grassroots perspective.

Owing in large part to the political education we received from these organizations—and from place-based organizations such as Asian Pacific Environmental Network, Kentuckians For The Commonwealth, and Western Organization of Resource Councils—we saw that the fundamental challenge presented by the climate crisis wasn't about policy, technology, or science. Rather, it was about power. Moved by this clarity, we finally shed our initial issue focus on climate, and adopted an overall framework around building and shifting multiple forms of power for community self-determination.

LET'S TALK ABOUT POWER

When we use the term “power,” what do we really mean? At the Chorus Foundation, our understanding of power has been sharpened by engaging in our work, and it will continue to be sharpened long after Chorus closes its doors. This is not a theoretical conversation but a commitment to accompany the people and organizations that are building and shifting power in new ways.

Power, as it turns out, is not a monolithic concept but instead a complex ecosystem that takes different forms and includes a web of relationships and interactions. There is no one right way to create a taxonomy in this vast ecosystem, but for Chorus, it has been helpful to name political, economic, and cultural power as the three forms that we are most interested in. It has also been helpful to acknowledge that, alongside their intersections and interactions, each form of power describes an ecosystem in its own right. In the spirit of that complexity, this supplement includes two articles that explore political, economic, and cultural power, weaving together various topics and perspectives in an effort to broaden our shared understanding of what the word power can mean.

When we say “power” without any qualifier, we often refer to political power. Loosely speaking, we understand political power as the ability to influence or control collective decision-making. For this supplement, we are pleased to feature articles by **Vivian Yi Huang (Asian Pacific Environmental Network)**, **Lisa Owens (The Hyams Foundation)**, and **Mónica Córdova (Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organizing)** that explore political power as both a case study and a concept.

As funders, the most basic form of power we hold is economic. We would like to highlight the understanding of economic power shared by **Aaron Tanaka from the Center for Economic Democracy** in a key contribution to this supplement: Economic power is the degree to which an individual or group controls valued assets and resources, including

the decisions that surround their use. We are also incredibly excited to share an article by **Nwamaka Agbo** from the **Kataly Foundation** that explores economic power as it applies to philanthropy's approach to investment and integrated capital.

Cultural power is arguably the least discussed and most pervasive form of power. Our understanding of what "politics" or "economics" means is shaped by culture! This supplement features two articles on cultural power authored by **Alexis Frasz (Helicon)** and **Aisha Shillingford (Intelligent Mischief)**. Informed by their collective wisdom, we understand cultural power as *the capacity of a group to shape what it believes, values, does, and creates in ways that align with its worldview and preferred way of being.*

WHAT A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF POWER WOULD MEAN FOR PHILANTHROPY

These understandings of power distilled the Chorus Foundation's focus on multi-issue organizations and efforts to build and shift power in communities that have historically had power wielded against them: Black folks, Indigenous peoples, immigrants and refugees of color, and working-class folks more broadly.

Our grantees do not only talk about "climate solutions" or "climate justice." Today, they talk about a "just transition." We have seen climate organizations, including mainstream climate philanthropy, begin to address the need for "systems change." But systems, as it turns out, change all the time, and "systemic change" can be dangerous if it doesn't center both equity and power. As we've learned from our friends at Movement Generation, "Transition is inevitable. Justice is not."

These understandings of power not only informed *what we funded* but also *how we funded*. Funders, especially individual donors like me, retain enormous power, and we have seen that philanthropy generally does not wield that power equitably. Philanthropy and the ways we give can present one of the greatest obstacles to transformative work. It is entirely possible to fund the right things in the wrong way. In fact, it's quite common.

Staying in character as a radical lefty, I maintain that philanthropy, conventionally defined, requires the extraction and enclosure of wealth and power to exist. It continues to function according to extractive and exploitative structures, even in how the money is given away. But a more interesting question for us to consider is: What would it look like to do things differently? Revisiting our journey at Chorus, we can see a clear path through the following stages: *holding power accountably to sharing power equitably to handing over power entirely*, with each step contributing the necessary preconditions for the next.

When we talk about holding power accountably, we might start with what is now called "trust-based" philanthropy. It includes making long-term, unrestricted commitments, and for Chorus, "long term" means 8-10 years. Trust-based philanthropy also refers to building open, honest, and vulnerable relationships with grantees and community members. But for us, this was only an initial step to building trust to share power equitably.

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When we talk about sharing power equitably, we might begin with "participatory" philanthropy, which includes codesigning tactics, strategies, and processes with grantees and community leaders, or building the processes and structures for democratized decision-making when it comes to how resources are allocated. We are fortunate to feature an article on power sharing in this supplement, a contribution by **Sadaf Rassoul Cameron** and **Arianne Shaffer** from the **Kindle Project**, which has far-reaching experience in this space. For Chorus, we should be clear that sharing power was a step that allowed community members to "exercise their muscles" before we handed over power to them entirely.

When we talk about handing power over entirely, what does that look like? For Chorus, it has meant spending down our entire endowment in the last 10 years. As part of that spend down, we have made grants available for organizational endowments, land acquisition, community loan funds, and more. Most important, it has meant supporting the creation of alternative infrastructure, held by the community, for resource allocation that will outlive the foundation. To be clear: We believe in "spend-down" philanthropy but we don't believe in it as a panacea. It should be a strategic question, not a cult. I am incredibly honored to have coauthored an article with **Ash-Lee Henderson** from the **Highlander Center** on this very subject.

THE ROLE OF PRIVATE PHILANTHROPY IN A JUST TRANSITION

As a private family foundation, we see Chorus as a transitional form, at best. If we seek to support transformational work, then we must remain open to transformation ourselves. We think of this as a "just transition" for the philanthropic sector, and we are greatly indebted to the work of Justice Funders for helping to expand and sharpen that thinking. We are also indebted to **Lorenzo Herrera y Lozano** from **Justice Funders** for his contribution to this supplement, in which he outlines the types of (re)generative leadership at our organizations, including philanthropic organizations, that will be required for a truly just transition.

One thing is already clear: A just transition for the philanthropic sector will require confronting the conditions that produce wealth inequality and that allow for private philanthropy in the first place. For some, this assertion might seem frustrating, possibly upsetting. But we believe in this idea unequivocally, and so we must ask ourselves: If another world is possible—a better world that is equitable and just—what would philanthropy look like? Would it be philanthropy as we currently understand it? Or can we allow ourselves to dream of a radically different approach to resource allocation?

In many ways, I think of myself as an abolitionist. Most readers will be familiar with this term in the context of slavery, police, or prisons. As an abolitionist, I no longer think along the lines of "good" policing versus "bad" policing. Instead, the question for me is: Why is some form of policing our default solution? I adopt a similar stance with respect to private philanthropy. Conversations about "good" vs. "bad" philanthropy can be pragmatic in the context of transitional forms such as Chorus, but I remain most interested in helping build a world where resources and power are never extracted and consolidated in the first place. I believe this would represent liberation, not just for our grantees but for all of us, including other donors and members of high-net-wealth families like me. □

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