

The Bezos Earth Fund and the charity of the oligarchs

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30 December 2020

Amidst an unprecedented transfer of wealth from the working class to the billionaires this year, sections of the bourgeoisie have decided to “donate” a small fraction of these ill-gotten gains to philanthropic causes.

These donations have been prominently covered in the American media as though the billionaires have been visited by the Spirits of Christmas, like Ebenezer Scrooge in Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol*, and decided to rededicate their lives to universal love and the welfare of their poorer brethren.

In reality, these two phenomena—increasing social inequality alongside the increasing social role of “charitable” handouts from the super-rich—are closely intertwined. Without extreme levels of social inequality, with vast fortunes piling up in the coffers of the tiny few while tens of millions sink into poverty, it would not be necessary to rely on the largesse of the billionaires to “donate” the funds back to society that are necessary to meet critical social needs.

Last month, the initial disbursement of grants took place for the Bezos Earth Fund, named after and financed by the world’s wealthiest individual, Jeff Bezos, who presides over the Amazon conglomerate, which has a total market capitalization of \$1.5 trillion.

In February 2020, Bezos announced the launch of his climate change initiative on Instagram, writing: “Today, I’m thrilled to announce I am launching the Bezos Earth Fund... Climate change is the biggest threat to our planet. I want to work alongside others both to amplify known ways and to explore new ways of fighting the devastating impact of climate change on this planet we all share... I’m committing \$10 billion to start and will begin issuing grants this summer.”

The donations by Bezos towards climate change have been supplemented by his \$100 million donation to Feeding America’s COVID-19 response fund in March. These sums, however, pale in comparison to the wealth which Bezos has accumulated this year alone, more than \$70 billion.

A similar trend is reflected among the other American oligarchs. Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey is now worth \$12.7 billion, a massive jump from his wealth of \$2.6 billion in April. He pledged \$1 billion for COVID-19 relief, or about 10 percent of his earnings this year. Microsoft founder Bill Gates donated at least \$350 million to COVID-19 relief through the Bill and Melinda Gates foundation. However, he has seen his wealth balloon from \$98 billion in April to \$120.1 billion at present, according to statistics maintained by *Forbes*. Meanwhile, Bezos’s ex-wife, Mackenzie Scott, was reported to have donated \$6 billion to charitable causes.

The pandemic has dealt an incalculable blow to the vast majority of humanity. According to the non-profit Save the Children, 5.25 billion people were substantially poorer in November than they were in January. The United Nations’ World Food Program issued a report in April that stated “an additional 130 million people could be pushed to the brink of starvation by the end of 2020. That’s a total of 265 million people.”

The charitable activities of the oligarchs have to be understood in this context. From March to June 2020, 209 billionaires gave away \$7.2

billion in funds and equipment for COVID-19 assistance, with Pricewaterhouse Coopers researchers suggesting “this is the greatest amount billionaires have given in a short space of time ever, even after allowing for inflation.” This is barely one percent of the more than \$600 billion which US billionaires alone gained between May and June of this year. These billionaires have gained over \$1 trillion over the course of the entire year.

The pandemic has accelerated the processes of monopolization and concentration of wealth already well apparent before the mass outbreak of the virus in February. The state response to the pandemic forced countless small businesses to shut their doors and lay off workers. Around the world, massive growth in unemployment and lack of government assistance is leading workers to pursue low-wage and strenuous jobs for survival despite the direct risk of infection and death. As part of this trend, Amazon itself saw extremely rapid growth in its workforce, from 798,000 at the end of 2019 to over 1.4 million today.

The increased demand for home delivery in the midst of an unmitigated commercial catastrophe for its brick-and-mortar competitors sent Amazon’s stock price soaring, and Bezos’s own net worth climbed to roughly \$186.7 billion.

While refusing to take effective action to combat the spread of the coronavirus and secure the livelihoods of the vast majority, governments the world over placed vast financial resources at the disposal of the ultra-rich through trillion dollar fiscal bailouts like the CARES Act, together with several trillion dollars of monetary bailouts through central banks. Meanwhile, the capitalists refused to halt non-essential production, sacrificing workers’ health and lives in the pursuit of profits and accelerating the spread of the deadly pandemic. It is from these social crimes that the billionaires have accumulated the fortunes from which they now dispense their charitable donations.

The sheer scale of the hypocrisy of billionaire “charity” during the pandemic calls to mind what Frederich Engels wrote about capitalist philanthropy in *The Conditions of the Working Class in England* (1845):

What? The wealthy English fail to remember the poor? They who have founded philanthropic institutions, such as no other country can boast of! Philanthropic institutions forsooth! As though you rendered the proletarians a service in first sucking out their very life-blood and then practicing your self-complacent, Pharisaic philanthropy upon them, placing yourselves before the world as mighty benefactors of humanity when you give back to the plundered victims the hundredth part of what belongs to them! Charity which degrades him who gives more than him who takes; charity which treads the downtrodden still deeper in the dust, which demands that the degraded, the pariah cast out by society, shall first surrender the last that remains to him, his very claim to manhood, shall first beg for mercy before your mercy deigns to

press, in the shape of an alms, the brand of degradation upon his brow.

But the “pharisaic philanthropy” of British capitalism in Engels’ day, which was scathingly portrayed in *Oliver Twist* and other works by Charles Dickens, pales in comparison to the present. In more recent times, philanthropies and charities have been transformed in many cases to resemble business operations in themselves: adopting organizational structures resembling that of venture capital groups, recruiting business managers to leadership positions, and courting venture capitalists as investors [5].

In many cases, what are presented as “philanthropic” organizations function as little more than adjunct vehicles for the prosecution of the interests of their mega-rich donors. This is known within the nonprofit sector as “venture philanthropy.”

In 2007, The *World Socialist Web Site* reported a study by the *Los Angeles Times* which found that the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the largest “charitable” organization in the world, had 41 percent of its holdings invested in corporations whose policies “countered its charitable goals,” as well as holdings in over 60 of the highest-polluting companies in the US. A separate report referenced in the article found that the foundation’s healthcare work may have “diverted medical staff from overseeing births and battling childhood diseases” due to the more lucrative pay for the Foundation’s high-profile initiatives battling infectious diseases.

Under its charitable auspices, this foundation has waged unrelenting warfare against public education in the United States, investing millions in private charter schools and pro-charter lobbyists. The Clinton Foundation is another infamous example of bourgeois philanthropy in practice. A particularly devastating memo in the tranche of emails published by WikiLeaks in 2016 “detailed a circle of enrichment,” according to the *Washington Post*, in which a top aide “raised money for the Clinton Foundation from top-tier corporations such as Dow Chemical and Coca-Cola that were clients of his firm ... while pressing many of those same donors to provide personal income to the former president.”

In November, Bezos announced the initial disbursement of the \$10 billion fund: \$791 million dollars went towards 16 groups, with the largest grants going to the most “established” environmental charities. The Nature Conservancy, the Environmental Defense Fund (EDF), the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) and the World Wildlife Fund each received \$100 million with 11 other groups receiving grants between \$5 and \$50 million each.

The funds so far, according to the large non-profits receiving grants, will go to creating “mangrove development and seaweed farms,” launching satellites that track greenhouse gas emissions, reducing the “carbon footprint of farming practices in Northwest India,” and funding lobbyists to “build the political will for climate policies.”

While the funds disbursed by Bezos may find their way into the hands of scientists and specialists who will use them to the best of their abilities, the fact that so much important scientific research relies so heavily on billionaire oligarchs parting with a small portion of their fortunes is not a healthy social phenomenon.

Moreover, it is important to note that the EDF calls for “market-based” solutions to climate change and will use Bezos’ money to “build confidence in carbon-credits,” which are credits that allow companies to pollute and further function as speculative assets. The NRDC will use the \$100 million to “build the political will for climate policies” by funding lobbyists and campaigners to push through market reforms.

Bezos has also gifted \$43 million to efforts to promote identity politics in the form of funding to the Solutions Project, which gives grants to fund “local and state policy work” through the use of “a frontline leadership of

color, with at least 80 percent going to organizations led by women.” In this way, Bezos’s charitable gifts will be used to divert public attention towards questions of race and gender identity and away from the fundamental class division of society, a diversion which has long been deliberately promoted by the corporate media and the Democratic Party in the interests of oligarchs like Bezos.

It is worth noting that Amazon itself is a significant world polluter. Its total environmental impact increased over 15 percent from 2018 to 2019 due to rising sales, according to its own reports. This was a record year in sales for the company, which means its impact on pollution has most likely significantly increased.

Meanwhile, the Thomas Reuters foundation recently reported that the emission reductions goals set by governments around the world in the Paris Accords in 2015, based in part on carbon credits, is set to fail. A major reason for this is that cement, steel and agricultural production were suggested to be curbed, but due to the profit motive, production has instead increased, contributing to a rise in global temperatures. The 2017 Carbon Majors Report showed that 70 percent of all greenhouse gases released from 1988 to 2015 came from just 100 major companies.

Charity and philanthropic patronage are aristocratic forms. They are a symptom of an unequal society in which resources have pooled to an irrational degree at one pole of society. It was Andrew Carnegie, a class-conscious representative of the American bourgeoisie, who pointed to the social role of charity in bolstering capitalist rule in *The Gospel of Wealth* (1889): “We accept and welcome therefore...great inequality of environment, the concentration of business, industrial and commercial, in the hands of a few, and the law of competition between these, as being not only beneficial, but essential for the future progress of the race.”

He posed the question, “What is the proper mode of administering wealth after the laws upon which civilization is founded have thrown it into the hands of the few?” The answer: the “men of wealth” have a duty of “becoming the mere agent and trustee for his poorer brethren, bringing to their service his superior wisdom, experience and ability to administer, doing for them better than they would or could do for themselves.”

In similar fashion, the charitable donations of Bezos are designed to promote illusions in the “social responsibility” of the oligarchs. Such donations function to placate hostility against the rapacious activities of the capitalist class as a whole, which has refused to curb its profit drive even as its activities jeopardize the stability of the planet’s climate and have contributed to the runaway spread of a pandemic that was otherwise entirely preventable.

In order to combat climate change, fight infectious diseases, and cure other social ills, it is necessary not to rely on the relatively small scraps donated by the oligarchs, to be used as the oligarchs dictate according to their own individual whims and prerogatives, but by the expropriation of all of the ill-gotten wealth of the capitalist class by the working class, to be utilized democratically and scientifically to meet social needs worldwide.



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