

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The market for social harms: A case study of Genevan philanthropy

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Abstract

This article explores a remaining black box in the criminological literature on public problems: the prioritisation of the problem in the public arena. The research uses the case study of Genevan philanthropy to address the prioritisation of harms by moral entrepreneurs. Employing a qualitative methodology, it describes the prioritisation process by using the ‘market for social harms’ metaphor. It argues that philanthropists select their harms according to a risk/benefit assessment, which stems from the business world. This valuation of harms is collective and dependent on the competition and co-operation between philanthropists. Finally, by detailing this metaphor, the study provides the key to obtaining a more general understanding of the prioritisation process.

KEYWORDS

market, moral entrepreneur, philanthropy, social harms

1 | INTRODUCTION

In his seminal work, *Outsiders*, Becker (1963) conceptualised the moral entrepreneur as a social actor who has the potential to take charge of – or *entreprenre* – social situations. Becker added the notion of ‘morality’ to the entrepreneur, which implies that action taken emanates from an often altruistic impulse that is aimed at improving society by imposing a value the entrepreneur

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considers to be beneficial to all its constituents. In line with Becker's work, criminology scholars have examined the construction, promotion and instrumentalisation of problems by moral entrepreneurs. From mugging (Hall et al., 1978) to public health issues (Bell, 2014), this vast body of literature explains how certain social situations are turned into public problems, promoted as such and dealt with publicly.¹

In parallel, the social harms perspective in criminology – or zemiology – involves the study of social situations that cause harm to a given population through a systemic point of view (Hillyard et al., 2004). Zemiologists emphasise that most of the harms they study are not publicly considered a public priority. They understand that harmful social situations often remain outside the mainstream public arena primarily due to state-corporation discrimination.

Both strands of literature inform us that problems are constructed and must be promoted if they are to exist publicly; they will not appear naturally. More importantly, both shed light on the existence of an order in priority among public problems. However, there remains a lack of work on how this 'priority order' arises; it seems to be locked in what could be described as an analytical black box, within which the internal complexities of problem selection and hierarchisation are obscured from scrutiny.

The aim of this article is to provide a first attempt at opening this black box. It does so through an empirical study of the action taken by one particular type of moral entrepreneur: the philanthropist. Philanthropists are moral entrepreneurs in that they claim to seek an improvement to society by supporting various responses to social problems, often following what they consider to be their own values. By selecting unrecognised social harms or established public problems, they participate, as this article posits, in a process of prioritising social harms. Unfortunately, the literature on philanthropy seldom addresses the ways philanthropists select the harms with which they deal (Krause, 2014). Conversely, these studies often take for granted the so-called preference of a philanthropist for specific causes (Reich, 2018).

To understand the mechanisms behind philanthropists' prioritisation of harms, this article studies the case of Geneva, Switzerland. The birthplace of the Red Cross still remains very active in a charitable sense, as can be seen by the high density of philanthropic foundations and the recent opening of a centre for philanthropy at the University of Geneva. Through a qualitative methodology (i.e., observations, interviews and documentary analyses), this investigation engages with various actors, including philanthropists, consultants and beneficiaries, to combine different understandings of the prioritisation processes. Drawing on a substantial and original corpus of data, I show that the prioritisation of harms results from a dynamic and collective process. To explain this process, I use the metaphor of the 'market for social harms'. This market is a place within which philanthropists prioritise public problems according to a risk/benefit assessment, which stems from the financial world. This market, created by and for philanthropists, is useful for accumulating symbolic, social and economic capital. It is shaped by multiple social interactions, such as concurrence and co-operation.

The article is structured as follows. The first part situates the study in the criminological literature on social problems and the philanthropy literature. The research field – Geneva – is then briefly presented followed by the research strategy used to investigate this 'prioritisation black box'. The following section then outlines the main results emanating from the data analysis and uses the 'market for social harms' metaphor to describe the prioritisation process. The final section highlights the contribution of such a metaphor to both literature on problems and on philanthropy before opening questions regarding the legitimisation vocation of such a market-like process.

2 | PUBLIC PROBLEMS, SOCIAL HARMS AND PHILANTHROPY

The subjectivist perspective regards public problems² as social constructions. Blumer (1971) argued that public problems are nothing more than social situations problematised through a collective process. Following decades of studying social problems, Best (2017) proposed a six-stage model of this collective process and its outcomes. The stages comprise: (i) claims-making (a moral entrepreneur designs a social situation as problematic); (ii) the claim reaching a broader audience through media coverage; (iii) public opinion beginning to focus on the condition identified by the moral entrepreneur; (iv) new ways to address the problem being created (policymaking); (v) new policies being implemented; and (vi) new arrangements creating expected or unexpected outcomes.

The criminological literature has, through various case studies, provided plenty of material to illustrate each of these stages. Becker (1963) illustrated how the promotion of values such as temperance, restraint and altruism eventually resulted in laws that prohibited the use of drugs (alcohol, opiates, cannabis, etc.) in the United States in the early 20th century. He showed that rather than merely making something visible and taking charge of what they consider to be public problems, moral entrepreneurs have the opportunity, through their activity, to operationalise their own values into legal norms. Becker stressed the importance of studying this phenomenon and its potential for social regulation, particularly in the definition of deviance. In line with this, Cohen (1972) studied how public coverage and people detaining political power could define social groups as deviants, and the public reaction to these groups. The outcomes of endeavours of this kind were also investigated by Goode & Ben-Yehuda (1994). They argued that the erection of public problems does not always leave institutional legacies (e.g., laws). However, these events are not trivial. They (re)affirm the 'moral universe' of the entrepreneurs by stating what type of behaviour is tolerated and what type is deviant. As Goode & Ben-Yehuda (1994) put it: 'Moral panics are a crucial element in the fabric of social change' (p.156).

This body of literature offers essential insights into the lives and legacies of public problems. However, as highlighted by Cohen (2011), the case studies put forth by these authors are often 'bad moral panics', referring to the fact that the 'moral outrage appears to be driven by conservative or reactionary forces' (p.39). Indeed, the research often condemns the 'misplaced' focus of a 'small-minded' moral entrepreneur.³ However, what can be observed regarding this literature is that social situations addressed by moral entrepreneurs – whether narrow-minded or strategic – are often taken for granted. But why does a moral entrepreneur select one problem for attention instead of another?⁴

This question becomes even more striking in the light of more recent zemiological research. The social harms perspective studies social situations that cause harms to a specific population from a systemic point of view. Here, the adjective 'social' refers to the fact that these situations could have been avoided if the society had been organised differently (Pemberton, 2015). Hillyard & Tombs (2004) proposed several categories of harms to facilitate their analysis: physical, economic, cultural insecurity-associated and emotional or psychological harms. However, these academically built categories reflect no prioritisation. A social harm is not necessarily a public problem. It is understood that harmful social situations often remain outside the mainstream public arena primarily because of discrimination by state-corporation discriminations (Hillyard et al., 2004; Pemberton, 2015). Certainly, for several reasons, social harms are often invisible. Legal codes do not typically criminalise them, and even if they are criminalised, identifying and sanctioning them remains difficult and uncommon. Political powers do not recognise them as they

affect groups of individuals with little or no political representation (e.g., people in the LGBTIQ community, women or members of racial minority groups). At times, it is also challenging to show how an individual or group is accountable for the harm (e.g., due to their high hierarchical position, access to legal counsel or symbolic power).

Finally, these two strands of literature enlighten us on the constituents and definitions of public problems and social harms. Case studies have provided a granular understanding of why a particular harm can be considered more salient at a given time and space. However, both lack a more general explanation of how social harms are prioritised in the public arena. In other words, stage zero of the process Best (2017) describes is missing: the harm selection that leads to the prioritisation.

Following Reich's (2018) pluralism normative argument, the social harms studied by the zemiological approach should typically be what philanthropists ought to address in their charitable activities. Indeed, because philanthropic foundations are not required to fulfil a commercial or electoral agenda, they can focus on other things, such as minority needs and experimental or controversial public goods that are not favoured by the government or businesses. Following Becker's (1963) definition, philanthropists can be considered moral entrepreneurs, for they desire to enhance society following their own values. However, to achieve this, they must select various social harms from quasi-infinite options. My argument in this article is that the case of philanthropy can help us to understand the prioritisation process of social harms.⁵

In the social sciences, although not defined by a consensus, philanthropy is generally understood as 'a private giving of time and valuables (e.g., money, securities or property) for public purposes' (Salamon, 2012, p.10). However, authors addressing philanthropy in the social sciences most often refer to the giving of resources (mostly financial) by individuals or by organisations with high socio-economic profiles, who are explicitly committed to supporting the public interest through large grants.⁶ The body of works on philanthropy is unique in that it originates from several disciplines⁷ and examines varied and fragmented aspects of the phenomenon.⁸ However, because these studies are often isolated from each other, they lack an overall view of the phenomenon. Over the past decade, studies in social sciences – mainly political science, sociology and philosophy – have filled this gap by considering philanthropy as constituting a social phenomenon. As such, philanthropists are no longer seen as figures cut off from the social world but as actors playing a role in their societies and affecting a range of areas. The first to be affected are the donor's recipients. Recipients and philanthropists are in actual fact situated in an asymmetrical power relationship in which the philanthropists can choose how, when and for how long the beneficiary will receive their resources (Bartley, 2018; Ducharme, 2012; Monier, 2018; Ostrander, 2007). Second, philanthropic activity seems to have broader and less apparent effects on the social representations of wealthy individuals in general.⁹ A rich person's sacrifice for the common good gives them a quasi-religious charisma and an exceptionality that justifies their accumulation of wealth in the first place (McGoey, Thiel & West, 2018), and their philanthropic actions become immune to criticism (Adloff, 2015). Finally, critical literature on philanthropy highlights the fact that philanthropy can be politically problematic as it has the potential to erode democracy. As Horvath & Powell (2016) and Reich (2018) point out, when badly practised, philanthropy represents a threat of becoming plutocratic through an appropriation of public issues. Interestingly, some scholars have analysed the disruptive aspect of philanthropy in a democratic society at the 'philanthropic choice level'. They focus on the arbitrary and undemocratic choice to fund one cause rather than another; this is a choice that favours the prioritisation of social problems preferred by individuals at a high socio-economic level to the detriment of the concerns of less influential and more vulnerable social groups (Cordelli, 2016; Ostrander, 2007).

Unfortunately, the literature on philanthropy does not provide much help with opening the black box of prioritisation. Many works discuss why philanthropists engage in philanthropic activities, but very few studies examine why they engage in specific projects (e.g., health or education). However, despite not answering this question directly, some works do provide interesting insights. Ostrower (1995), who studied New York's elite philanthropy, suggested that philanthropists often link their sympathies with what has happened in their own life. For instance, a philanthropist may donate to cancer research because they lost a loved one to the condition. Interestingly, Krause (2014) proposed a way to understand the relationship between donors and recipients through 'the good project'. She argued that recipients have to present their activities in a very specific manner: the project. The project becomes an assessable and comparable 'unit' that renders a donor's choice more convenient. She highlights how the framing of humanitarian relief as an aggregation of projects affects non-governmental organisation's (NGO's) activities on the field. With regard to prioritisation, this informs us that philanthropists must choose between different options and that recipients frame their activities according to the preferences of donors. However, the philanthropic choice – which leads to the prioritisation of harms – remains under-investigated; its social or economic mechanisms are unknown. It is also often taken for granted because it is uncomfortable to question something that is still widely seen as an individual liberty even by critical scholars, such as Rob Reich.¹⁰

3 | GENEVA AND ITS PHILANTHROPIC FOUNDATIONS

As the philanthropy literature mostly focuses on the charitable activities of the North American mega-rich – which are often over-mediatised – it tends to exceptionalise the phenomenon of philanthropy and obscure the impacts of what could be regarded as more modest philanthropy (Adloff, 2015). Following Barman (2017), this study attempts to give back to philanthropy its social and institutional anchoring. Thus, this Swiss case study concerns the charitable activities in Geneva – a location populated by many philanthropists and that boasts a long philanthropic history (David & Heiniger, 2019). Moreover, this study contributes to the empirical knowledge of philanthropy in Europe, which is still under-developed.¹¹

Historical studies of philanthropy in Geneva reveal a long tradition linked to private banks in particular, which goes back as early as to the 19th century (David, Heiniger & Bühlmann, 2016; Kuntz, 2019). As early as the end of the 19th century, there was an '*annuaire philanthropique*' listing more than 700 charitable organisations active in various fields (e.g., health, education, culture, welfare) (David, Heiniger & Bühlmann, 2016). It has been shown that these philanthropic organisations were bound together by shared members, leading to a division of philanthropic work (David & Heiniger, 2019; Ginalski & Heiniger, 2016). Today, the concentration of philanthropic organisations – foundations under private law – remains high at 25 foundations per 10,000 inhabitants (Eckhardt, Jakob & Von Schnurbein, 2020). Of these organisations, the canton of Geneva has the strongest and most stable growth in Switzerland, with an average of 39 foundations being established each year over the last decade. This trend is exceptional when compared with the declining growth of all the other cantons (Eckhardt, 2019). Institutions related to philanthropy have also emerged in Geneva in recent years. In 2012, SwissFoundations, an umbrella association of philanthropic foundations that presents itself as 'the voice of donor foundations in Switzerland' (SwissFoundations, 2021), moved to Geneva. Its main activities include organising networking

events between foundations, providing specialist advice to future or existing foundations, promoting the professionalisation of philanthropy and advocating the political and public recognition of foundations at the Swiss level. In 2017, the Research Centre for Philanthropy at the University of Geneva was founded under the auspices of a public-private partnership. The aim of this interdisciplinary centre is to 'support the international development and influence of the philanthropy sector in and around Geneva' through research, teaching and event organisation (*Centre en Philanthropie*, 2017). At the cantonal level, the state of Geneva also promotes philanthropy within the *Direction générale du développement économique, recherche et innovation (DGDERI)* by supporting the creation of public-private partnerships (*DGDERI*, 2017).

In this context, this research, which questions the processes of prioritising social problems through philanthropy, takes place in an ideal environment. This is because multiple actors within the city and canton of Geneva – state, academic and private – have shown an irrefutable interest and dynamism concerning philanthropy in both the past and the present.

The vast majority of works on philanthropy focus on institutionalised philanthropy (Adloff, 2009, 2015; Brulle, 2014) – that is, people who wish to engage in philanthropic activity and create legal instruments to do so. In the present case, the legal entities best suited to undertake philanthropic activities in Switzerland are foundations (Pfister, Lurà & Chenaux, 2017). When I mention philanthropists in the context of the present research, I am referring to individuals who are members of the boards of directors of public utility foundations that are totally or partially tax-exempt.¹² Swiss foundations consist of at least two bodies: the foundation board and the auditors. The foundation board is a supreme governing body specifically responsible for making decisions regarding the allocation of resources. Auditors of a foundation are responsible for accounting and for auditing. Other bodies may be formed according to the needs of the foundation (e.g., a scientific council). In this work, the focus is on the composition of a foundation's board, for it comprises those who have decision-making power regarding the selection of social harms, among other things.

Philanthropic foundations are not obliged to make their accounts public. As a result, there are no accessible figures. However, a cross-check between information from interviews and from the press leads me to estimate that donation budgets range from CHF10,000 per year to CHF20 million per year (Zumbach, 2019). These figures may be viewed as being low in comparison with the announced budgets of 'big philanthropy'.¹³ However, recipients are asked to diversify their sources of funding before applying for government grants. Thus, funding from a foundation, even if symbolic, becomes a necessary step to sourcing more important funding (*Secrétariat du Grand Conseil*, 2004). This fact alone means that philanthropic foundations are important actors of the associative scene, whether they are small or big donors.

Philanthropists do not act in isolation from society, nor in an exclusive relationship with the populations they target (recipients). According to Becker (1963), there are supporters or experts who can be called upon by the moral entrepreneur for help. Consequently, by their intervention, these third party actors can influence the process of prioritising problems. In this research, I have also chosen to focus on this particular type of actor, as they are an integral part of the Genevan philanthropic landscape. I will refer to any individual or organisation involved in or facilitating the philanthropic enterprise as an 'expert' (Lefèvre & Charbonneau, 2011). To better understand the entourages of philanthropists and their potential influence on how philanthropists prioritise problems, it is therefore necessary to situate them in their social interactions with other stakeholders (detailed below).

4 | RESEARCH STRATEGY

The aim of this research is to describe and understand the as yet obscure process of the prioritisation of harms in the public arena by philanthropists. To do this, I used a semi-inductive method to develop a framework of references to interpret this process (Blais & Martineau, 2006). I based my work on ethnographic data that were collected and analysed in a qualitative way. This ethnographic approach, which shares similarities with grounded theory, has a pronounced iterative character. Data collection tools were constantly refined during the field research thanks to the continuous analysis of data (Glaser & Strauss, 2009). A thematic analysis of a corpus of collected data allowed me to learn more about the meanings of the actors' roles and interactions, provided by the actors themselves, and how these emerge, evolve and influence their selection of social harms (Beaud & Weber, 2010; De Sardan, 1995). From these data, I developed the metaphor of the market for social harms to decipher the prioritisation process. My aim is to provide interpretative keys to understanding the order of problems.

I collected data from 2019 to the beginning of 2020.¹⁴ I used three tools: observation, interviews and a documentary analysis. Observation was used at 14 events organised by and/or for philanthropists. These included conferences, seminars, working meetings, formal meetings and networking events. The first observations are considered exploratory because they mainly allowed me to familiarise myself with a specific language and to make a map of 'who is who' and how philanthropy generally operates in Geneva. This first engagement also allowed for semi-directive interviews to be prepared. Further observations were considered more in the analysis as it was then possible to better understand the subtleties of the field and to focus on more precise questions while drawing links within the interview material. The final observations had a validating purpose. These took place at the end of the data collection and have helped to validate and refine the results.

Semi-structured interviews (each lasting around one hour) were conducted to allow for a deepened understanding of the varied aspects revealed by the observations. They also served to clarify unfamiliar codes of conduct that could not be interpreted through observation alone. The richness of the interviews is mainly due to the intergroup aspect of the sample (Pires, 1997). The cross-group view of philanthropy mobilised in this study helped to improve my understanding of the perceptions different actors have of their own actions and those of other stakeholders when selecting specific social harms. The recruitment process was twofold. First, the more publicly active foundations were contacted through a formal written request. Also, contacts were made during observations. A snowball effect permitted me to finally contact 33 individuals from the following three categories:

- Philanthropists (P): Thirteen Board members or directors of philanthropic foundations were interviewed (nine men and four women).¹⁵ The condition was that the interviewees were involved both in the decision-making process of funded projects and in the governance of their foundations.
- Experts (E): Ten experts (seven men and three women) were interviewed: academics; lawyers specialised in philanthropy; civil servants involved with philanthropy; asset managers; and consultants in philanthropy.
- Recipients (R): Ten individuals or associations representatives (three men and seven women) that had been given financial resources from philanthropic foundations that were active in Geneva.

As the interviews were confidential and anonymous,¹⁶ the respondents were designated a letter and number (e.g., R3 for recipient number 3).

A twofold complementary documentary analysis was conducted. First, a journalistic watch took place on two Genevan newspapers (i.e., *Le Temps* and *La Tribune de Genève*) as well as on the leading Swiss French-speaking news website, RTSinfo. Articles discussing Genevan or Swiss philanthropy were then put aside for analysis (n = 54). Articles conveying testimonials from philanthropists were particularly interesting in this case as they facilitated an understanding of how philanthropists publicly justify their activities. Second, documents produced by philanthropists were gathered. The documents included brochures (n = 11), activity reports (n = 6) and websites (n = 10). Accomplishing this allowed for a better understanding of the self-presentation of philanthropy. These data were also useful for cross-checking facts and figures that were presented during the interviews.

All of the data were typed and summarised for analysis. A thematic analysis with a strong iterative character was conducted (Blais & Martineau, 2006). Through multiple (re)readings and coding, categories related to the selection of problems emerged from the collected data. Interestingly, the crossing of the different sources of data allowed for the observation of one phenomenon through various windows (e.g., how the choices of philanthropists are perceived by themselves and by the recipients). Contrasts in the representations of the different actors thus provided insights on the information circuits and asymmetry.

Once more, it must be emphasised that a prioritisation model is not being proposed. Rather, the aim is to offer the keys to understanding a process that has thus far received little investigation through a detailed description. Although the data were abundant, they represent a very particular case study that highlights the specificities of Geneva and its financial and philanthropic history. Moreover, this captures a still image of one specific time from which one must be careful not to generalise.

5 | THE MARKET FOR SOCIAL HARMS

Based on the collected and analysed data, this section argues that the prioritisation of social harms occurs through a collective process that takes place in what is described here as the constituting of a market. This process emanates from the commodification of harms. As Krause (2014) observed in the case of humanitarian relief, harms tend to be regarded by donors as comparable and assessable in an increasingly standardised way. This section will detail why the metaphor of philanthropic activity as a market is considered and how it operates.

The interviewed philanthropists, who were typically coming from the world of business and finance, tended to transpose their professional methods and vocabulary to their philanthropic activities. They also believed their methods to be (the most) effective. For instance, the president of one philanthropic foundation referred to the way in which his business know-how informs him regarding how he best carries out his philanthropic actions:

I know how to run a business very well ..., so I know what is necessary to do to reach a particular goal, whether financially or in terms of human structures. Some associations do not accept this kind of approach at all. Well, that's their problem!
(P11)¹⁷

This is not surprising due to the fact that the strategies of philanthropists are often greatly inspired by the world of entrepreneurship and finance (McGoey, Thiel & West, 2018).¹⁸

However, this goes beyond transferring business practices to philanthropy. This article proposes that the philanthropic sector operates with market-like dynamics because the people active in philanthropy seem to behave as if they were truly in a market. Thus, Geneva's philanthropic activity can be regarded as a market for social harms – a place where the financial investments of philanthropists in a variety of different harms are negotiated and exchanged. The purpose of participating in this market is to accumulate different forms of capital. In so doing, donors attempt to generate economic, reputational or social benefits.

A market organises the meeting of supply and demand for products (Hamon & Jacquillat, 2013). For its participants, the perceived advantage of such a structure is mainly the lowering of transaction costs. Indeed, all essential elements for the exchange are gathered in one place (i.e., sellers, buyers, products and information). Thus, the market for social harms is populated by beneficiaries (sellers) proposing that their activities be funded (products) by donors (buyers). Information that facilitates transactions is generated either by philanthropists themselves or by experts, such as philanthropy advisors.

However, the market cannot be reduced to the decision making of rational actors seeking only optimal transactions. Granovetter (1985) suggested that markets are not devoid of social relations at all; in fact, they take place in social networks that influence their functioning and outcomes. Additionally, cultural socio-economists argue that cultures constrain and enable markets (Velthuis, 2007). In other words, markets are shaped by collective representations and norms as well as representations of the self (Wherry, 2014). These conceptions of the market permit the construction of the 'market for social harms' metaphor. Philanthropists in Geneva are no exception to the rule; they do not act in isolation from the social and cultural world, even less so from their peers. Indeed, this study shows that interactions between members of philanthropic foundations are frequent and take place within a network of actors that occur in Genevan society. Drawing inspiration from the market's 'three problems of coordination'¹⁹ highlighted by Beckert (2007, 2009), this article focuses on the interactions that take place in the market, which can be categorised into three broad types: valuation; co-operation; and competition.

5.1 | Valuation

As in any market, not every product has the same value. As highlighted by Beckert (2007, 2009), valuation is not merely a technical process in which goods are ranked according to their ability to fulfil a need. It is fundamentally social in two aspects: first, it depends on what is perceived as worthy in the society or social group in which the market takes place; and second, a product can be evaluated according to its contribution to the buyer's position on the social ladder. The latter aspect was designated the 'conspicuous consumption' by Veblen (1899) and is the one addressed in this article.

In the present case, harms appear to be assessed on a risk/benefit basis. This assessment is subjective and is performed by philanthropists, sometimes with the help of consultants. Here, risk and benefit refer to the potential loss or accumulation of capital, respectively. Bourdieu's (1979, 1980) definition of capital is very helpful here. Capital is a resource that enables its owner to access or obtain social advantages. Bourdieu identified four types of capital: economic (financial wealth); cultural (skills, degrees or titles); social (exploitable social networks); and symbolic (combinations of former capital that receive special recognition in the society). The following paragraphs illustrate what could be understood as an accumulation or loss of capital in the Genevan context through two field situations.

P1 was a philanthropist working in finance as well as an amateur writer who was interested in academic literature. He decided to set up bursaries and prizes for university students. In the process of creating and attributing various grants, he had access to an important network of intellectuals. He then benefitted from them and their skills in many ways (e.g., repeated meetings with renowned professors, philosophers or writers and opportunities to have his work read by, and receive feedback from, important publishers). Thanks to his acquaintances, he eventually became a professional writer who benefits from an intellectual 'aura'. By participating in philanthropy, he accumulated cultural, social and symbolic capital, all three aiding his own career. At the end of the interview, he said: 'I created the foundation out of pure selfish pleasure, and it brought me a hundred times more than I could give'.

In 2016, a public-private partnership involving an important Genevan philanthropist failed following a cantonal vote (Zimmermann, 2016). This partnership was aimed towards the renovation of a museum of art and history. The philanthropist who was supposed to contribute the largest amount of money was not well received by the population. Suspicion arose with regard to several factors: the source of the funds (oil business); the philanthropist's willingness to place his own collections in the museum; and the architectural mandate being given to a firm known for its exorbitant prices and budget overruns. Faced with the will of the people, the philanthropist withdrew from the partnership. As such, the project never came to completion. Despite this current research being conducted three years later, the philanthropists interviewed were still reluctant to talk about this incident. They uneasily referred to it as something 'not very simple'. The disgraced philanthropist saw his reputation among the public – and particularly his peers – as being damaged due to his 'folie des grandeurs'.

These two vignettes illustrate what is at stake for philanthropists when they choose to invest in a particular problem. Philanthropists use several strategies to ensure low-risk investments. The first strategy is to choose an investment that is considered to be low risk in itself. The second option is to mobilise resources that are both internal and external to the market to lower the risk (e.g., gathering information). Regarding the first option, there are investments that are not particularly innovative but are certain to yield profits, even if modest. Two recurrent types of safe investments were observed: blue chips and labels.

Blue chip²⁰ problems are not particularly innovative but are considered stable and provide moderate but safe benefits in the long run. They often involve funding for medical research, but this can apply to any well-established association that is deemed stable and effective.²¹ E1 stated that 'it's true that there are associations that are completely blue chip, as they say, that have a long-standing reputation, and I think that it's not a problem for these associations to raise funds'.

This expert referred to blue-chip entities as having a reassuring reputation in the eyes of investors. This phenomenon is also perceived by the beneficiaries. Indeed, some are aware of their own good reputation in this market and can therefore claim the title of being a 'safe investment'. R4, the communication manager of an association that helps children and young migrants, commented: 'We are recognised as being of public utility ... yeah, since it's been 20 years, we've made our proofs and we really have nothing more to prove, but really nothing more to prove!'. Here, it is mainly the longevity of the association that plays the role of a guarantee. In the same interview, R4 admitted that fundraising, although tedious and always uncertain, is by no means as difficult for her association as it is for newcomers to the market.

Another observed method for a philanthropist to be reassured is through labelling. Flan-dreau & Flores (2009) highlighted the importance of the reputation of merchant bankers in English financial markets during the early 19th century, who guided the investment strategies of

particular bondholders in information-scarce environments. In the context of the current study, similar mechanisms seem to exist as foundations refer to the activity others take to know how safe an investment is. Just as the name of Nathan Rothschild alone implied the quality of an investment in the 19th century, the names of some philanthropists provide their peers with a reliability from which it can be considered safe to invest. P8 commented: 'If I see an association coming and I see that they are supported by the [X] Foundation, it's like a label. So, an association that is supported by the [X] Foundation – that's enough for me!'. In this case, it is clear that if a beneficiary is financed by a particular foundation, it serves as a guarantee. Indeed, the X Foundation is deemed to have very high standards when selecting its recipients, but it also achieves results in the projects it finances.

When investment information is insufficient to assess the risk of financially supporting an association or project, philanthropists may call on outside experts for counsel. The services provided by consultants who are specialised in philanthropy, similar to the services provided by financial analysts in markets, can be sought to reduce risk. These advisors can be found in specialised consulting firms or as part of services offered by private banks to their philanthropic clients. In both cases, their task is to guide philanthropists in their charitable activities while promising them an outcome that corresponds to their wishes. Certainly, as is typical in other sales professions, they will propose an anamnesis of the philanthropist's 'needs' to determine with them the best way to allocate their resources according to their philanthropic desires and goals. In other words, the advisor's job is to 'match' the philanthropist's affinities with projects and associations that could satisfy them. E3, a philanthropy advisor, told me the following:

... we do the diagnosis as a team, we evaluate. Do they want to create their own [philanthropic] structure? Do they want a beneficiary who is going to be totally different? I got a call from a banker because her client, who is 85 years old, is without an heir and is therefore wondering about the future of her estate. She still has some ideas, but they weren't so clear. I try to have criteria: Should there be a geographical criterion? What is the amount? I will need anything that will allow me to refine a selection that is suitable for the philanthropist.

What is particularly striking is the focus on the needs of the philanthropist, which could potentially be to the detriment of the recipient. As with any service, the client must be satisfied with it, which requires a sense of being 'proactive'. In the words of E1: 'We believe that one of the important elements of philanthropy today is that people [philanthropists] are more proactive than reactive. People actually like to seek out what they are interested in rather than reacting to proposals'. In turn, a philanthropist has to find out what they want to do, regardless of the needs of potential recipients. This echoes Cordelli's (2021) criticism that philanthropists use recipients as a mere means of self-realisation.

However, philanthropists' actual methods for selecting beneficiary entities remain unclear. Advisors are reluctant to disclose their practices in a precise manner. They claim this to be opacity, as do counsellors who consider themselves as having a 'secret formula' to assessing potential recipients:

I would say that we have a methodology that is proven in terms of axes with indicators. We didn't choose to publicise it, we considered it to be our trade secret, like the pastry chef who doesn't want to give his recipe, but the cake is good. (E1)

These intermediaries, therefore, also participate in the problem prioritisation process by advising philanthropists to invest in certain philanthropic entities rather than others on the basis of a philanthropic risk reduction calculation.

5.2 | Co-operation

The second risk reduction strategy observed engaged internal market resources and involves co-operation. Co-operation arises in a market to lower the inherent risk of exchange, especially in cases of information asymmetry (Beckert, 2007, 2009). Despite real competition existing (as detailed below), several examples of co-operation can be observed in this market for social harms. Indeed, philanthropists share privileged information and sometimes go as far as making joint investments in certain projects. The sharing of information takes place within a network. There is a multitude of formal and informal opportunities for philanthropists to meet and share experiences. This was explained by P12, who was very enthusiastic because he felt that these exchanges strengthen the sector:

There are still a lot of things happening [in Switzerland and Geneva], there are still a lot of exchange platforms. This seminar is held every year in Lausanne. There is another organised by SwissFoundations, the symposium of foundations. There are a lot of platforms like this There is a whole series of working groups from different regions on specific themes: social integration, international development, . . . asset management, transparency, governance, all these subjects. There are plenty of platforms where people have the capacity, the possibility to work together, to share ideas, to share doubts, to share problems.

Philanthropists regard these gatherings as being stimulating. In addition to obtaining practical information on the philanthropic activity or governance of a foundation, they enable philanthropists to situate themselves in relation to others in the network. This information allows philanthropists to build collective knowledge about 'good' and 'bad' public problems. During the observations, a number of informal conversations were seen where philanthropists advised each other on their respective activities, particularly with regard to the choice of recipient or the problem that needed to be addressed. However, it is also beyond these events that philanthropists activate their networks to obtain information on recipients or good practices:

I know very well, if I decide to propose this project, I know that there are at least three foundations to which the recipient association should send a file that I can also recommend. I very often contact a foundation and say, 'Here we put 10,000 [CHF] over three years with such associations, you're going to receive a request from them, in any case know that they've convinced us and that they really seem to be doing a good job'. (P8)

Here, P8 wishes to encourage his peers to invest in a project that he himself supports. In this example, risk reduction goes in both directions. First, the risk for P8's peers is lowered because they are guaranteed that this association does 'a good job'. Second, P8 reduces the risk of investment because it spreads over other foundations. Occasionally, this can even lead to an effective and formalised collaboration. In one particular case, on the initiative of a few philanthropists,

nine foundations joined forces to address the problem of the arrival of a large number of unaccompanied minor migrants in Geneva. The organisation between the philanthropists went so far as to subdivide the problem into several tasks, thus enabling each foundation to manage one of them:

In other words, we are no longer acting in the same way today. Today, we are going to seek other foundations. In 2016, we carried out a project on juvenile immigrants. In the space of ten days, we raised about half a million with nine foundations. (P2)

Co-operation between philanthropists therefore comprises the exchange of information as well as the effective collaboration through joint investments (even if the latter seems to remain exceptional). Finally, the fact that philanthropists are constantly interacting through formal and informal gatherings allows them to position themselves in the field and leads us to the competitive aspects of the market.

5.3 | Competition

High-risk investments are perceived to bring in more capital. This is mainly due to the fact that risk-taking and innovation itself are highly valued within the business world and, in turn, the philanthropic network. This can be seen in the topics addressed and the names of various philanthropic gatherings, such as 'Beyond the Comfort Zone', 'Rethinking Philanthropy' and 'Foundation for Future'. Moreover, some philanthropists understand the primary role of philanthropy as taking the kinds of risks the public sector cannot afford to take:

One of the added values of the philanthropic sector is to be the venture capital of society. It can do things that are subsidiary to public actors, so it is an opportunity, but it is also a responsibility [-] we must do it. (P13)

These innovations can be based on donations (e.g., the number or the conditionalities of them), action (e.g., the use of technology to solve a problem or the reactivity to a social situation) or the field (e.g., social harms considered trending or new). The benefits of this type of investment are generally significant, for philanthropists will, if successful, be considered pioneers. One respondent summarised this by stating that the legitimacy of the philanthropist lies in their activity as a 'pathfinder':

Today, the State functions with good efficiency, well, globally good, so what could motivate a philanthropic action, if not to explore areas in which the State is not an actor? If we did the same thing as the State does, it would not be legitimate, so we have to do something else, something else that makes sense, but that is not yet taken care of by the public authorities. This has been the case for most major philanthropists, in Geneva in particular. (E4)

Once risk-taking is rewarded, it induces a certain competition between philanthropists. Competition in this context can be understood as the permanent will to distinguish oneself from others by doing more or better by investing in projects considered innovative, by participating in the development of projects or by following hot-topic harms by venturing into areas where little investment

has yet been made. All of these investments are risky but are potentially rewarding. My data show a particular interest in exclusivity and innovation within foundations. When an innovative project is set up and succeeds, the philanthropist generally takes pride in it, as P5 expressed in relation to a large-scale Genevan project concerning youth reinsertion:

And this is the first time that this has happened in Switzerland! A project with such a large amount of money. And for once it started in Geneva! And Zurich, I think, tried to replicate it, but I don't know if it worked or not. (P5)

In addition, she pointed out that another Swiss city had tried to do something similar, but as it was a 'reproduction' and not an innovation, the perceived value of the project was lower. Beyond personal satisfaction, the philanthropist who succeeds in innovating sees themselves as being propelled forward as a leader among their peers:

On some projects, we are a bit like a start-up's partners in terms of innovation ... if we have to think about our image, it allows us to say ... that we are the original partner or the principal partner. (P6)

This suggests that the preferred method for philanthropists is to be involved in the conception phase of a project. In so doing, they can shape and put their name to it. This also allows a philanthropist to continue to earn reputation capital even after they cease funding the project; it allows them to retain the title of the 'original partner' even if they financially withdraw later on. The desire of philanthropists to be present at the time of innovation in particular is clearly perceived and often criticised by beneficiaries, who see themselves as being refused funding for projects under the pretext that they are not innovative. R4 commented on the difficulty of finding funds for already existing social programmes that promote the social inclusion of people of the LGBT+ community, stating: 'So, it gets annoying, and the foundations don't want to fund a whole programme. Well, unless it's a programme we're launching, that's okay. It's easier for them to fund something new'.

Philanthropists therefore regularly review their areas of activity to remain up to date. Those who are quickest to adapt to the changing world and current events potentially become market leaders. For example, at the time of the survey, climate strikes were in high intensity. As social meanings play a part in determining value (Alexander, 2011), this was strongly reflected in the objectives of many foundations. Indeed, as highlighted by P12, it has become indispensable for a foundation, regardless of its background, to deal with issues related to global warming. Anyone who turns their back on climate issues lacks credibility in the eyes of their peers:

But today we cannot, if we are a philanthropic foundation, turn our backs on the climate issue. You can't do that! But for us it's complicated, and I'm not hiding it from you, if you take [our company], which trades in oil, gas and coal, it's complicated. (P12)

To summarise, competition between philanthropists creates a search for opportunities where they can make a difference in society according to their peers. Thus, the prioritisation of social harms by Genevan philanthropists comprises a collective process made up of complex dynamics, where several actors interact with one another, including philanthropists, consultants and recipients. The metaphor of the market for social harms provides keys to understanding and

interpreting the mechanisms at play in this process. In turn, a risk/benefit valuation of different harms depends on the competitive and co-operative social interactions found among philanthropists.

6 | CONCLUSION

This article has offered the 'market for social harms' metaphor, which allows me to describe the process of the prioritisation of social harms that has hitherto received little investigation. Through a study of Genevan philanthropy, it has been observed that this process is driven by market-like social interactions, namely, valuation, competition and co-operation. Indeed, social harms are selected on the basis of a risk/benefit assessment (valuation) that is mainly carried out by philanthropists through the dynamics of distinction (competition) and information sharing (co-operation). For philanthropists, the main outcome of this market is the accumulation of different types of capital: economic, cultural, social and symbolic. For the society in which philanthropists operate, this results in a process of prioritising public problems.

This analysis offers keys to understanding the processes that lead to the selection of particular social harms that reach and remain on the public stage. As such, this article offers a contribution to the literature on social problems, which has mainly focused on the processes of the problematisation of social situations, typically through isolated case studies. This case study joins this literature by highlighting the fact that Genevan philanthropists – understood here as particular moral entrepreneurs – see themselves as being altruistic despite the fact that they regard problems in terms of what they can yield. I further argue that moral entrepreneurs also create and promote problems in a collective dynamic that brings them social benefits. This collective dynamic, illustrated here in the form of a market, is undeniably made up of practices transferred by its actors from the world of business and finance. In sum, this could mean that one effect of philanthropy is to colonise domains such as culture, education, welfare, and health with market logics.

The case study also contributes to the literature on philanthropy. First, it applies the concept of the 'good project' (Krause, 2014) to the field of philanthropy, which has thus far been specifically devoted to the world of humanitarian aid. Second, this work is in line with research that seeks to consider philanthropy, not as an activity practised by isolated individuals, but as the result of actors integrated into and influenced by their social and institutional surroundings. Also, the article suggests that philanthropists constantly interact with one another and that their choices and actions depend to a large extent on the activities of their peers. Moreover, these interactions constitute an ecosystem where goals and limits are designed by the philanthropists themselves.

However, it would be valuable to understand in greater detail the implications of such an ecosystem, of which the market for social harms seems to operate as one of the main legitimisation devices. Indeed, by acting according to the 'laws of the market' – considered natural and beneficial by many respondents – philanthropic moral entrepreneurs legitimise their choices, their activities and, above all, the inequalities that allowed them to become philanthropists in the first place.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹See, for example, Altheide, 1997; Cefaï, 2016; Cohen & Brooks, 2014; Del Rosso, 2015; Jenkins, 1994; Lipsky & Smith, 1989.
- ²Following Gusfield (1984), I prefer the term ‘public problems’ to social problems because we are here interested in problems that are of public concern, whether they could be considered ‘social’ or not.
- ³In a less politicised way, Best (2017) argued that studying ‘ridiculous’ or ‘exaggerated’ problems (such as UFO abductions or satanic rituals) is appealing because it has the advantage of giving a better perception of the social construction process in itself.
- ⁴I consider here the moral enterprise by the elite in a top-down perspective. However, I do not deny the existence and agency of other groups of individuals through bottom-up actions. See, for instance, Shearing & Wood (2003) on the self-direction of poor communities and Roux (2020) on the concept of demodynamy.
- ⁵In the remainder of this article, I will use the term ‘social harms’ to refer to the various causes in which philanthropists invest. The article is interested in studying the prioritisation of harmful social situations whether they are already regarded as public problems or not. For the sake of argument, I consider the category of ‘public problems’ to be embedded in that of ‘social harm’. Of course, I am aware that not all public problems are actually harmful, but I believe that those addressed by philanthropists should be.
- ⁶‘Mass philanthropy’ (i.e., the multitude of small-scale donations given by more modest households) is here excluded (Zunz, 2014).
- ⁷This includes disciplines such as sociology, psychology, philosophy, political sciences, history, law, economics, business and management.
- ⁸For example, individual motivation of the donor (Elster, 2011), legal and tax frameworks that constrain or encourage philanthropy (Lideikyte Huber, 2018) or different philanthropic strategies that are practised (Anheier & Leat, 2006).
- ⁹Understood here as ‘a form of knowledge, socially elaborated and shared, with a practical aim and contributing to the construction of a reality common to a social group’ (Jodelet, 2003, p.53, author’s translation).
- ¹⁰The alleged liberty of the discretionary choice of the philanthropist (‘I do what I want with my money’) has been strongly criticised by some authors, including Cordelli (2016) and McGoey (2015).
- ¹¹For research regarding European philanthropy, see Germany (Adloff, 2009), Switzerland (Lambelet, 2014), France (Monier, 2018) and the United Kingdom (Paquette, 2011).
- ¹²The foundation is defined by Articles 80–89 of the Swiss Civil Code and by Article 56 (lit. g of the loi sur l’impôt fédérale direct [LIFD]) dated 14 December 1990.
- ¹³The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (nd) received \$5.1 billion in donations in 2019.
- ¹⁴Thus, it has to be considered a ‘pre-pandemic study’.
- ¹⁵The proportions of male and female philanthropists correspond to average Swiss figures. The latest report on Swiss foundations shows that 27.9% of the members of foundation boards are women.
- ¹⁶A consent form was signed by each participant.
- ¹⁷All quotes have been translated from French by the author.
- ¹⁸In particular, a philanthropist ‘must-read’ article by Porter & Kramer (2006) in the *Harvard Business Review* discussed how the private entrepreneurial sector can have a social-benefactor role through its for-profit activities; they also explain the benefits of transposing the business methods of those for-profit activities to non-profit activities.
- ¹⁹Beckert (2007) referred to valuation, co-operation and competition as problems in the sense that they are analytic entry points that are useful for understanding market stability through a socio-economic lens.

²⁰I borrow this term that was employed by one respondent during their interview. It is used in finance to refer to companies that are stable and well established. Their acquisition constitutes a low-risk investment (see <https://www.investopedia.com/terms/b/bluechip.asp> [Accessed 12 February 2021]).

²¹Typically the Red Cross, as in this case.

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