



VOLUNTARY ACTION HISTORY SEMINARS

VAHS seminar series at the Institute of Historical Research

SEMINAR ABSTRACT

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Some reflections on Philanthropy with special reference to Higher Education

Who gives and why? This seminar will examine some general considerations on philanthropy, its scope and history, leading to the conclusion that there is a universal propensity to give.

The seminar will consider two possible approaches: philosophical or anthropological. A philosophical approach would relate to moral issues; the idea of a duty to give – in the broadest terms to save lives, even to help a ‘distant stranger’. The limits of such a moral imperative, such as your own survival or the survival of those for whom you are responsible. An anthropological approach looks at forms of giving over the ages and in different societies. Each approach represents an individual rather than a collectivist motivation, and need not be exclusively monetary. This will involve some consideration of fundraising, the reciprocal activity to philanthropy. The gift relationship created by philanthropy is by definition altruistic, yet not all gifts are philanthropic (indeed, are any gifts philanthropic?).

The seminar will also consider the various motivations for giving, as in most cases there are a mixture of motives at play; some examples from the mediaeval period will help to explore this. Recent examples from the university world will explore ethical dimensions: Is ‘dirty’ money philanthropic? The seminar will conclude with a look at the motivation of contemporary philanthropists Bill Gates and Warren Buffet on the ‘Giving Pledge’, the impact of the State on philanthropy, and future trends.