Twitter Thread by Rob Reich

Rob Reich
@robreich

The stunning announcement of >$6B in philanthropic donations in one year by @mackenziescott deserves wider

Fine piece by @nkulish in the @nytimes that addresses some of the key issues.

https://t.co/UCvUCT9rru

But this should be just the start.

Important first to put the $6B total in context. Total grantmaking in 2019 by @darrenwalker at the @FordFoundation was ~$350M. Total at @Hewlett_Found was ~$450M.

So @mackenziescott is ~15x some of the largest and most discussed foundations.

To the best of my knowledge, what we know about her philanthropy stems from a total of two posts on @Medium.

No address. No website. No known staff. We don't even know much about the entities she's using -- DAFs, LLCs, private foundation?

https://t.co/y4kLry4XOT

What's interesting about her philanthropy?

*Proves it's not that difficult to give away a billion dollars.
*No strings attached giving - all general operating support over multiple years
*No reporting requirements, AFAIK

The anti-paternalist, non-technocratic approach is a refreshing counterpoint to prevailing trends. Nevertheless, her arrival as one of the largest and most important philanthropists means that she is wielding considerable power. And that power deserves our scrutiny.

Big philanthropy is the conversion of private assets into public influence. It is an exercise of power by the wealthy. It is a plutocratic element in a democratic setting.

Her preferences, and hers alone, determine a flow of $6b into American civil society.

And apparently there's much more to come.

Despite the astonishing ~6B in giving, she's almost certainly far wealthier at the end of 2020 than she was at the start. Amazon stock's value has soared.

True, she's under no legal obligation to be transparent. But that's a failure of our public policies. And of our expectations of philanthropists.

Directing scrutiny at philanthropists need not mean a default skepticism of their aspirations. It means that we citizens deserve the opportunity to assess the goals and strategies of big philanthropy.

One reason is that philanthropy with tax breaks. We subsidize @mackenziescott's DAF via forgone tax revenue.

Contrary to popular opinion, philanthropy is not the exercise of liberty to give away your own money. It's a tax-subsidized exercise of liberty.

But the more fundamental reason is that she enjoys $6B of funding power, with much more to come, as a signatory of the Giving Pledge.

One of the great chroniclers of such power is @AnandWrites. Any random dip into his timeline will afford a good example.

Here's the latest: https://t.co/tQ0aYrq59z

> "Doctors say they've received calls from their well-off clients asking if they can have early access to the extremely limited supply of vaccine doses in exchange for a financial contribution to a hospital or charity."
>
> How noble, these donors. https://t.co/DLnjm8UY56
>
> — Anand Giridharadas (@AnandWrites) December 21, 2020

And beyond all these questions of philanthropy, there are even more foundational concerns about whether anyone should have a fortune of $30+ billion dollars in the first place.

Attitudes about philanthropy are changing. @mackenziescott is providing an example about how to do it differently. And public attitudes are changing too, moving beyond default gratitude for any charitable impulse.

Let 2021 bring more journalism and broader discussion of all kinds of philanthropy.

People to follow: @Philanthropy @InsidePhilanthr @AnandWrites @nkulish @SSIReview @HistPhil @Philliteracy @p2173