

# Buying respectability : philanthropy and cultural dominance in 19th century Boston

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# BUYING RESPECTABILITY

## PHILANTHROPY AND CULTURAL DOMINANCE IN 19<sup>TH</sup>-CENTURY BOSTON

THOMAS ADAM

### PHILANTHROPY AND POWER

Philanthropy, understood as the provision of material and immaterial resources for the creation and maintenance of public institutions, has been an essential feature of 19th- and 20th-century urban cultures. Museums, art galleries, social housing projects, libraries and even universities and hospitals in American, Canadian and German cities are the result of private initiative and philanthropic engagement. 19th-century philanthropists provided the necessary means (money, buildings, and time) to establish a social and cultural infrastructure that proved essential for the functioning of modern urban societies.<sup>1</sup>

Philanthropic engagement, however, was hotly contested among potential philanthropists. Not everyone was invited to contribute towards philanthropic projects. Wealthy Jews in Toronto, for instance, were excluded from philanthropic projects of Toronto's bourgeoisie such as the Toronto Art Gallery, the Toronto General Hospital and the Royal Ontario Museum until World War I. And even during the 1920s, Sigmund Samuel was one of the few who were invited to participate in philanthropic projects.<sup>2</sup> And while Boston's Irish-Catholic population succeeded in claiming political dominance during the 1880s, it remained excluded from Boston's philanthropic establishment, which employed its philanthropic institutions as a counter government. Women recognized the potential of philanthropic engagement for integration into the public sphere and its definition early on.<sup>3</sup> More than half of all Leipzig philanthropists who provided funding for social housing projects between 1848 and 1918 were women.<sup>4</sup> In the case of New York City, the divisions between new and old money were so deep that it resulted in the construction of two different spheres of philanthropic engagement: the old elites established the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the new elites established the American Museum of Natural History. While both New York elite groups were kept apart in the realm of museums, they clashed over the control of the city's music culture. The Metropolitan Opera House, financed exclusively by new money, marks the defeat of the established bourgeoisie and the transition ■ 29

of power from the old to the new elites.<sup>5</sup> Philanthropy was clearly more than just giving to social, cultural and educational public institutions; it was a socio-economic tool that enabled individuals to claim power in the public sphere and to participate in the domination of urban societies. Philanthropy served as a tool of inclusion and exclusion and provided a basis for claiming and defining urban spaces and the public sphere of 19th and early 20th-century urban societies in the Atlantic realm. Within the Atlantic world, different models of philanthropic culture emerged. While in Boston and Toronto, for example, old elites employed philanthropy to maintain their dominating position by preventing new elites from participating in the philanthropic establishment, new elites in New York and Leipzig, for instance, succeeded in using philanthropy to integrate into the existing bourgeois circles.

Using the case of Boston, this article will argue that an established elite – the Brahmins – successfully employed philanthropy to preserve its claim to power even after this social class lost political control over the city. The Boston Brahmins, named by Oliver Wendell Holmes after the Hindu priestly class, were a group of upper-class families that claimed kinship to the earliest settlers of Massachusetts.<sup>6</sup> The Brahmin caste was an upper class with “a coherent sense of identity and a proud past”. Brahmin families prided themselves on family trees that stretched back to the 1620s and 1630s with ancestor who played an important part in the colonial past of North America. Also, they admired and imitated European aristocratic life.<sup>7</sup> Beginning in 1796, they bought up land on Beacon Hill where they built their family mansions. Harvard College played an important role in the education and reproduction of the Brahmin elite since it “had been attended, supported, directed and often staffed”<sup>8</sup> by the Brahmin families as of colonial times. They were prominent in trade and the legal, medical and educational professions.<sup>9</sup> A mercantile elite in origin, the Brahmins were able to adapt to industrialization. In the second half of the 19th century, Brahmins invested into textile industry and railroads.<sup>10</sup> Thomas H. O’Connor concluded that “many Bostonians found that manufacturing offered a steadier income than trade, and it provided more leisure to pursue political careers, patronize the arts, or engage in philanthropic and humanitarian enterprises. Members of the Boston Associates provided endowments to Harvard College and generously supported the Massachusetts General Hospital; they subsidized the Massachusetts Historical Society; they subscribed to the Boston Athenaeum and contributed to the construction of the Bunker Hill monument.”<sup>11</sup>



## THE “PROPER BOSTONIANS” AND THEIR PHILANTHROPIES

19th-century Boston society saw the founding of several social and cultural philanthropic institutions – the Massachusetts General Hospital, the Boston Co-operative Building Company, the Athenaeum, the Boston Public Library, the Museum of Fine Arts and the Boston Symphony Orchestra – to name just a few. These institutions had been founded almost exclusively by Boston Brahmins who considered them an essential part of their grip on power in their city.<sup>12</sup> The creation of these institutions was not only a sign for the emergence of a powerful upper class but also represented this upper class’ claim to social and cultural domination. “The museum and the symphony”, as Betty G. Farrell rightfully points out, “were not simply the inevitable products of an expanding urban culture, but organizations specifically planned, directed, staffed, and attended by members of – and those with aspirations to membership among – the upper class.”<sup>13</sup> Turning Kathleen McCarthy’s argument about the empowering function of philanthropy for women onto its head,<sup>14</sup> it will be argued here that Boston’s Brahmins, facing the loss of control over their city to the newly arrived Irish immigrants, gave up claims to political offices since they felt still in charge of the city by controlling its social and cultural philanthropic infrastructure.<sup>15</sup> Philanthropy was, thus, not the first step on the road towards political empowerment; it was the last step on the road to obscurity. Philanthropy provided a “parallel power structure”, which Brahmin Unitarian families protected against intrusion from Irish Catholic families, who threatened the Brahmin’s way of life and their vision for society.

Facing urban decay and the emergence of slums, Martin Brimmer and Henry Ingersoll Bowditch recruited 163 individuals for their Boston Co-operative Building Company (BCBC) – all of them derived from old colonial families whose ancestors had arrived in the New World sometimes between 1620 and 1650. Many of them could trace their family tree back to signers of the Declaration of Independence (as for instance R. T. Paine Jr.) and famous governors from early colonial times (as for example William Endicott Jr.).<sup>16</sup> Robert F. Dalzell is certainly correct when he, looking at the case of Boston, stated that philanthropic projects “were regularly designed to involve as many people as possible”.<sup>17</sup> The Massachusetts General Hospital (MGH) relied on 312 subscribers for the period from 1828 to 1843, the BCBC on 163 shareholders, and the Museum of Fine Arts (MFA) counted 370 original subscribers in 1876, which increased to 1183 subscribers in 1895. Only a very small number of shareholders/subscribers chose to remain anonymous (none of the 312 original subscribers to the MGH; none of the shareholders of the BCBC; and only 9 out of 370 original subscribers to the MFA). Most made sure that their name was made public and published in annual reports. They certainly did not share “a passion for anonymity”, which ■ 31



Cleveland Amory claimed as characteristic for the philanthropic nature of “Proper Bostonians.”<sup>18</sup> Shareholder corporations, in which each interested individual buys shares with a limited dividend or subscribes to a certain annual membership fee without any prospect of receiving a dividend, provided the Brahmin class with the perfect business model for running philanthropic institutions.<sup>19</sup> This model had the important advantage that the boards of trustees were filled with philanthropists “who were committed either to providing financial support or to soliciting it from their peers [...]”.<sup>20</sup> It further assured the independence of museums, hospitals and social housing projects “from the pressures of the market” and from the interference of other social groups and classes as well as from the state.<sup>21</sup> Dalzell’s argument, however, needs modification since the number of the individuals engaged in Boston’s philanthropic institutions throughout the 19th century was limited to philanthropists of the right family background and social-economic standing. The large majority of the male stockholders of the BCBC (44 out of 57 for whom we have biographical information) had graduated from Harvard College and pursued careers as lawyers (Sidney Bartlett, John Lathrop), physicians (Henry Ingersoll Bowditch), merchants (John Lowell Gardner, Theodore Lyman), bankers (Henry Purkitt Kidder) and industrialists (Arthur Theodore Lyman and James L. Little [Pacific Mills]; Edwin Hale Abbot [Wisconsin Central Railroad]). They were born in Boston or its surrounding townships. They or their fathers and mothers had contributed to the construction of the MGH, the Boston Public Library (BPL) and had bought subscriptions to the MFA. In fact, it was the same group of individuals who had just one year earlier joined together to create the MFA. It is not a surprise then that the BCBC and the MFA boards shared the same president for many years: Martin Brimmer (1829–1896).

Brimmer was the son of a former Boston mayor (1843/44) of the same name who came from one of the oldest and respectable families of the city. The Brimmer family could trace their origins back to Germany and France. They arrived in Massachusetts in about 1686 and established a famous merchant enterprise. Brimmer graduated from Harvard in 1849 and became a lawyer. He supported Henry Ingersoll Bowditch in his plan to provide healthy and affordable apartments for working-class families and at the same time became a driving force behind the founding of the MFA. Brimmer subsequently served as president of the MFA from 1870 and as president of the BCBC from 1872 until his death.<sup>22</sup> The first Board of Trustees and even the General Subscription List to the MFA reads as a *Who’s Who* of Boston’s exclusive Brahmin caste. Among the trustees were the Harvard president Charles William Elliot, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology founder William Barton Rogers, as well as Henry P. Kidder and William Endicott Jr. Both, Kidder and Endicott were to assure the “financial

32 ■ probity of the enterprise” since both were well-connected businessman. Endicott

(1826–1914) had left school at age 14 in order to become a clerk in his father's store in Beverly. Following in the footsteps of his forefathers, he became an influential merchant and banker. For nearly 40 years he was a member of the investment committee of the Suffolk Savings Bank, and for 17 years its president. He has been president of several western railroads, the most important one being the Burlington & Missouri River Railroad in Nebraska. When this railroad was consolidated with the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy Railroad in 1880 Endicott became the director of this new company and held this position for 22 years. Kidder (1823–1886) had left school early at age 15 in order to start his business career in various enterprises related to railroad construction and banking. After a short period in the office of the Boston and Worcester railroad, he entered the banking house of John E. Thayer & Brother. In 1858 he was made partner in that enterprise. Later on in life, he presided over the investment firm of Kidder, Peabody and Co.

## THE MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS

A look at the list of General Subscriptions to the MFA shows that Brahmin families took the lead in founding the museum and dominated the group of its financial supporters.<sup>23</sup> The list of General Subscriptions list contains 370 donations ranging from 25,000 to 100 dollars. The largest single amount, incidentally, came from Mrs. T. B. Lawrence (25,000 dollars). The majority of contributors (178) gave 100 dollars. Among the subscribers were manufacturers, lawyers, merchants, professors, bankers, and physicians. About half of them had graduated from Harvard College, and derived from “old colonial stock” families, which had arrived in North America during the 1620s and 1630s. Sydney Bartlett, for instance, was the descendant of Robert Bartlett, who came to this country on the ship “Ann” in 1623. Some of the subscribers even went further by claiming family trees that stretched back into England's medieval period. Nathan Appleton, for example, claimed to be the descendant of John Appleton, who had lived in the county of Suffolk in 1396 and Nathaniel J. Bradlee was somehow able to trace his family back to 1183.<sup>24</sup> Not much changed in the structure of the group of philanthropists who contributed regularly to the funds for the MFA. By 1895, more than two thirds of the museum association members claimed an ancestry that reached back to the 1620s and 1630s. Their pedigree has been described variously as “old colonial stock” and “unmixed New England ancestry”. Clearly, (family) history mattered to the Brahmins and set the Irish, who did not display a comparable interest in family trees and coats of arms, even further apart from the Brahmins who were proud of their English roots. Irish Catholics and Unitarian Brahmins were not ■ 33



only separated by their economic inequality, but also by their very different value systems (attitudes towards English culture and their relationship towards history and its importance for legitimizing social and cultural dominance as well as the overwhelming Protestant nature of the Brahmins versus the Catholicism of the Irish). The original subscribers assured their further dominance over this organization by acquiring memberships for their wives, sons and daughters. Some families (such as Bowditch, Bradlee, Brimmer, Endicott, Kidder, Peabody, Warren, Woodbury etc.) were represented by three to ten members. While the number of philanthropists increased tremendously between 1876 to 1895 from 370 to 1183 individuals and although the social-political structure of Boston society was turned upside-down due to the large influx of Irish immigrants and the passing of political power from the old Brahmin families to the new Irish mass politicians, only one person with some Irish background could be found among the members of this museum association. The Businessman George E. McQuesten, however, was not one of the recent poor Irish newcomers. His father, William McQuesten, had emigrated from Scotland to Northern Ireland only shortly before 1700. In religion they were Scotch Presbyterian. When in 1719 they became dissatisfied with conditions in Coleraine, William McQuesten considered immigrating to Great Britain's North American colonies. Sometimes between 1735 and 1744 McQuesten settled in Litchfield, New Hampshire.<sup>25</sup> George E. McQuesten received his collegiate training from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology before he entered his father's enterprise and became one of the pioneers in the development of automobiles. His Irish or Scottish background aside, his integration into Brahmin society and its philanthropic projects was certainly helped by his marriage with Emma S. Sawyer who came from an old Brahmin family, which claimed ancestors among the earliest English settlers in Massachusetts.<sup>26</sup>

The exclusion of Irish Catholics is not unique to the MFA. One can rarely find Irish Catholic philanthropists among the supporters of the BCBC and the MGH. While Irish Catholics seemed to have been nearly entirely excluded from the philanthropic circle that assured the financial well-being of these philanthropic projects, recent Scottish and German (Jewish) immigrants found their way into the philanthropic establishment much faster.<sup>27</sup> There were at least three Germans who had come to the US after 1840, achieved economic success and were accepted among the exclusive group of donors for the MFA. One of them was the German Jew Abraham Shuman, who was born in Schneidemühl (Western Prussia) in May 1839 and came to the US with his parents when he was still a child. After having attended school in Newburg (NY) Shuman relocated to Boston in 1859 where he set up his own business. In 1869 he entered into partnership with John Phillips and founded a wholesale business in boy's clothing, which was the first



dren's clothing. This business venture made him the "wealthiest Jewish clothing manufacturer and retailer in Boston in the nineteenth century".<sup>28</sup> In 1876 Shuman's business was probably worth more than a quarter million dollars. Shuman was, however, not the only Jewish philanthropist accepted into the MFA membership organization. In 1895 Mrs. Louis D. Brandeis, the wife of the successful Boston lawyer Louis Brandeis, could be found among its members. Her membership is even more surprising since her husband, Louis D. Brandeis, has been considered "isolated from Brahmin life" by historians and contemporaries alike.<sup>29</sup> Brandeis, who was born in Louisville, Kentucky, derived from a German-speaking family from Prague, which emigrated to the US after the failed 1848 revolution. Educated in Dresden and at Harvard College, Brandeis graduated from Law School in 1877 and became one of the first Jewish attorneys in Boston and, in 1916, the first Jewish member of the Supreme Court of the United States. Up until 1900, only about one percent of the 1700 lawyers practicing in Boston had been Jewish. While much of the old Brahmin families shied away from engaging in business with Brandeis, Boston's leading Jewish merchants became his clients and made him almost a millionaire by 1905. The integration of Jews into the philanthropic establishment at a time when Irish Catholics were virtually excluded from these social circles seems even more surprising if one considers the proportion of the population that belonged to the Jewish religion (1845 about 40–100 families and 1895 20,000 Jews in a general population of 84,401 in 1842 and 448,477 in 1892 respectively).<sup>30</sup> Both Ellen Smith and William Braverman, however, argue that Boston's Jews advanced economically and socially faster than any other ethnically/religiously defined group in the city's past.<sup>31</sup> Braverman suggests that this was due to the geographical-economic origins of Boston's Jews. "Coming from urban settings and used to living in a capitalistic economy, the Jews' adjustment to Boston was difficult but not nearly as traumatic as for the Irish or Italians who were almost all agricultural workers."<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, Jews entered those sectors of the Boston economy (textile, boots and shoe industries) "that held future promise".<sup>33</sup>

## LOSING CONTROL OF THE CITY?

The overwhelming Brahmin's dominance in philanthropy was contrasted by their declining social, political and economic dominance within their city. Until the middle of the 19th century, the Brahmin families' hold on power remained unchallenged. With the steady and increasing flow of Irish immigrants after 1845 Boston's population not only increased significantly but also shifted in favor of the new arrivals. Of the two and a half million Irish who left their country between 1835 ■ 35

and 1865, a very large number went to Boston. In 1847 alone, about 37,000 Irish arrived in Boston.<sup>34</sup> As a result the city's population grew from 76,475 in 1842 to 133,563 in 1862.<sup>35</sup> As early as 1850, Irish immigrants constituted more than one third of the city's population.<sup>36</sup> For the old Brahmin Unitarian families this influx of poor and Catholic Irish immigrants contributed, as Martin Green points out, on the one hand to an immense economic growth and great prosperity for the old elites but on the other hand it also meant "the decay of the communal hopes of earlier times" for "a city of small tradesmen and craftsmen, with an upper class of merchant princes", a city without slums and crime.<sup>37</sup> After 1845, slums emerged in the city, diseases such as smallpox and cholera returned. Drunkenness, crime and prostitution spread. In the eyes of the old Brahmin families, the poor Irish farmers represented an enormous social, cultural, religious and political threat to the status quo. Although the Puritans' dislike for Catholics had disappeared by the beginning of the 19th century, religious intolerance, according to Oscar Handlin, quickly reemerged in Boston in the two decades after the 1830s. "The economic, physical, and intellectual development of the town accentuated the division between the Irish and the rest of the population and engendered fear of a foreign group whose appalling slums had already destroyed the beauty of a fine city and whose appalling ideas threatened the fondest conceptions of universal progress, of grand reform, and a regenerated mankind."<sup>38</sup> Compared with other American cities, which experienced the influx of large numbers of European immigrants in the second half of the 19th century, the situation in Boston was, according to William V. Shannon, somehow unique. While immigration was a general phenomenon of American society, in the case of Boston "the Irish erupted on the scene in the 1840s in large numbers, and for the next forty years they were the only alien, immigrant group in Boston's midst".<sup>39</sup>

The arrival of the Irish challenged the dominant position of the Brahmins and they reacted to this challenge in various ways.<sup>40</sup> Facing the emergence of an urban working class, that as early as 1850 was predominantly Irish (about 45 percent),<sup>41</sup> Brahmins broadened their philanthropic activities to include charitable, welfare and social housing projects. Between 1810 and 1840 about 30 benevolent institutions were founded – the most important institution being the MGH (1821). Over the years, Brahmins would make sure that they had an exclusive and absolute control over their hospital.<sup>42</sup> Several of the subscribers' names or their sons and daughters' names reappear among the members of the BCBC and the MFA. The Brahmin's control of the hospital extended, as Green shows, even beyond financial aspects. "Five families, the Warrens, the Jacksons, the Bigelows, the Shattucks, and the Cabots, have supplied the majority of the physicians and surgeons, have transmitted a corporate responsibility for the hospital, a genuine family vocation, from generation to generation."<sup>43</sup> Dr. Shattuck and Dr. Warren, who were



on staff at the hospital in 1947, represented “the fifth and sixth generations of their respective families [...]”<sup>44</sup>

Besides providing social welfare to the new immigrants, the Brahmin class employed economic and political strategies to counter the growing Irish influence and to isolate their financial fortunes against the dangers presented by a capitalist economy. The Brahmins emerged as an economic elite engaged in overseas commerce, banking, and real estate. During the mercantile crisis of the early 1800s they established themselves in cotton manufacturing.<sup>45</sup> However, by the second half of the 19th century Brahmin family founders had developed a distaste for industrial developments and grew reluctant of risking their acquired fortunes in the new industries. The invention of the trust fund was, as Fredric J. Stimpson observed, the end to Brahmin economic dominance. In his memoirs, Stimpson concluded: “Somewhere about 1830, [the Massachusetts courts] decided that a man could tie his children’s inheritance up either by deed or will, so that he could not spend or risk his principal or, indeed, embark in any business. Immense wealth had been accumulated in Boston in the first 60 years of the republic, but instead of trusting their sons and sending them out at their own risks with all their argosies upon life’s seas, as they themselves had done, they distrusted their abilities and had them all trustee’d. No new enterprise could be undertaken by them for under court decision they had no capital to risk.”<sup>46</sup> Sometimes after 1830 “older families began to sterilize their capital by tying it up in trust funds, which tended to prolong these families in power because their wealth was less easily dissipated”.<sup>47</sup> Instead of trusting their heirs, Boston merchants put their entire fortunes into such trust funds thus assuring that their sons could not spend or risk the entire inheritance. They were condemned to live off the interest rate accumulated and to abstain from risky investments into business opportunities. This resulted in an economic situation in which subsequent Brahmin generations lived off the economic success of their forebears and became Back Bay gentlemen (named after the new residential area of choice for Brahmin families that was created through the landfill project of a swamp area west of Beacon Hill)<sup>48</sup> who reinvested their dividends and lived off the income from this reinvested capital. Although this was not a uniquely Bostonian development, Shannon argues that in the case of Boston “it was also a response to and an insulating vacuum against the pressures of the ever-growing numbers of Irish who threatened the old values and old ways”.<sup>49</sup>

From the founding of the MGH to the creation of the MFA, Brahmins moved away from close collaboration with the city government, which was controlled by the Brahmin class up to the 1880s. Both the founding of the MGH and of the BPL happened in collaboration between the city council and private philanthropy. In the case of the hospital, private subscriptions between 1811 and 1843 ■ 37



amounted to 150,000 dollars while the city provided the necessary land (valued at 40,000 dollars) for the side of the building.<sup>50</sup> In the case of the library, it was the donation of 50,000 dollars by Joshua Bates in 1852 that sparked close private-public collaboration.<sup>51</sup> Already in 1848 did the Massachusetts General Court, according to John Koren, pass “an enabling act, authorizing the city to establish and maintain a public library for the use of the inhabitants, but with the proviso ‘that no appropriation for the library shall exceed the sum of \$ 5000 in any one year’”.<sup>52</sup> Two years later, in August 1850, the library received its first financial gift (1000 dollars), which was raised by citizens as a testimonial gift to the former mayor of Boston, Josiah Quincy, Jr. In January 1851 the city council appropriated another 1000 dollars for library purposes.<sup>53</sup> Koren reminds us that this court decision constitutes “the first statute ever passed authorizing the establishment and maintenance of a public library as a municipal institution supported by taxation”.<sup>54</sup> In contrast to the way the hospital (1821) and the library (1852) had been founded, Brahmins created the BCBC (1871) and the MFA (1870) without any support from the city government. Although the museum was from its inception conceived of as a public institution open to the general population (the museum was to be open free of charge at least four times a month), the museum board neither asked for financial support from the city government nor did it receive municipal funding.<sup>55</sup> The emerging divide between city government and private philanthropy seems to suggest that during the 1870s the Brahmin class grew skeptical that they could continue to dominate the city government. It also proves that the Brahmin class was still economically strong enough to finance a tight network of social, educational and cultural public institutions without recourse to city and state government. Although the MFA went through 20 meager years in which it was not able to acquire new art, it could rely on bequests and an organization of annual subscribers.<sup>56</sup> The Brahmin’s retreat from political power was, however, not as voluntary or easy as Paul Dimaggio and Ronald Story want to make us believe. It is certainly true that the Brahmins recognized that philanthropy provided an opportunity to establish a “counter-government” in the city and thus allowed them to “maintain some control over the community even as they lost their command of its political institutions”.<sup>57</sup> Before the Brahmins, however, were willing to give up their hold onto political power, they considered other options such as restrictions on the right to vote.

Brahmin families successfully dominated Boston’s political life up until the 1860s. They served as mayors, aldermen, common councilors and overseers of the poor.<sup>58</sup> They remained indifferent to the Irish immigrants as long as they did not present a political danger. As Handlin pointed out, Irish voters were a small minority and “politically impotent” before 1845. “In 1834 the Irish claimed

38 ■ no more than 200 voters in all Suffolk County, and in 1839, no more than 500,

while in 1845 less than one-sixth of the adult male foreigners in Boston were citizens.”<sup>59</sup> This changed dramatically with the increase of Irish voters and their determination to play a role in Boston’s politics. In the mid-1850s ideas about the exclusion of paupers from voting and a literacy requirement were discussed. After Massachusetts had abolished all property qualifications connected with voting rights in 1820, it still kept a provision (third amendment) according to which every male citizen who has reached the age of 21 was eligible to vote in municipal and state election unless they were “paupers and persons under guardianship”.<sup>60</sup> In 1857 the Massachusetts legislature passed a further amendment according to which “[n]o person should have the right to vote, or be eligible to office, under the Constitution of this Commonwealth, who shall not be able to read the Constitution in the English language and write his name [...]”.<sup>61</sup> In 1859 another amendment prevented foreigners from voting for two years after their naturalization. Although this legislation did not single out the Irish and rather affected all foreigners, it was absolutely clear, as Handlin argues, that it “was directed primarily against the Irish”.<sup>62</sup> Probably influenced by the public discourse in New York City about limiting the right to participate in municipal elections to citizens of some financial means and the growing number of Irish Catholic immigrants in the second half of the 19th century, the idea of further restricting the right to vote was heatedly discussed in the Massachusetts legislature at the end of the 1870s. It was already a common practice that municipal administrations engaged in “omitting from the voting-lists the names of all persons”,<sup>63</sup> who received public assistance. The legislators, however, wanted to go a step further. In 1878, members of the state legislature discussed a law that would have obliged boards of registration to submit “a list of all male persons over 21 years of age, who have within the year received public aid and assistance”<sup>64</sup> to the mayors and aldermen of said town so that they could effectively be excluded from participating in local elections. Only after all these political venues were exhausted, did the Brahmins decide to leave the political power to the Irish and to retreat in the already existing sphere of their philanthropic organizations, which allowed the old elites to yield significant power over their city. When Hugh O’Brien became the city’s first Irish mayor in 1884, the Brahmin class had made their peace with loosing control of City Hall since they continued to maintain control over the boards of nearly all philanthropic institutions.<sup>65</sup>

Sitting on the boards of the MFA, they decided about what art was to be displayed and employed in the education of the masses. The control over the BCBC allowed them to define who was eligible to live in social housing and by controlling the construction of social housing apartments they even had their hands in the definition of what constituted a family. Although one has to be careful in evaluating the real power of such boards, which included ten to 20 trustees who represented a



100 to more than 1000 subscribers/shareholders with individual visions for their city and the communal life, one should not underestimate the power these social-cultural institutions represent. By keeping the housing company and museum disconnected from the city government, its boards had exclusive control over the institutions, the artistic directions and the treatment of visitors.<sup>66</sup> As Robert Dalzell reminds us, control over philanthropic institutions gave the Brahmins “the power to set standards”.<sup>67</sup> Museums, in particular, were, according to Neil Harris, an element of social policy.<sup>68</sup> Museum makers, curators, donors and organizers of exhibitions decided which art and artifacts were put on display. They were, for instance, in a position to make public their wish for which artistic tradition was supposed to be revered by an audience. Museums, from their inception, shared the social mission of schools, libraries, and universities, but as Harris reminds us, the latter “were, in a sense, far less authoritarian”.<sup>69</sup> While one could argue in a classroom if one disagreed with the professor’s opinion and while one was free in the selection of books to choose from the library, “the ordinary museum-goer was hostage, in a sense, to the taste, standards, and goals of the specialists organizing the display”.<sup>70</sup>

## COMPETING ELITES: A COMPARISON OF BOSTON AND NEW YORK

Frederic Cople Jaher’s assessment that the Brahmins “were not exclusively a political elite” but that their political hegemony was only one “facet of the comprehensive leadership that the group exerted in Boston”<sup>71</sup> needs to be revised; the Brahmins were certainly an economic, political, social and philanthropic elite but they were first an economic elite, which proceeded to claim political power in Boston and thereafter transformed itself into a social class that invested part of its fortune into philanthropy. After the Brahmins lost economic dominance to the new non-Brahmin industrial elite, they could hold onto political power until they were challenged by the Irish majority. This challenge transformed the Brahmin elite into a philanthropic class that exchanged political for cultural dominance. Boston, thus, represents a conservative model of philanthropy – while in cities such as New York and Leipzig, for instance, new elites successfully employed philanthropy on a large scale to claim membership in the established elites, Boston’s Brahmins successfully used philanthropy to prevent the integration of newcomers (here Irish Catholics).<sup>72</sup> Philanthropy fulfilled the function of preserving old social structures, to prevent intermingling of social groups, and thus to allow the Brahmins to cling to whatever power was left for them.<sup>73</sup> In contrast to cities

40 ■ like New York, Toronto and Leipzig, however, ethnic, religious and class lines



in Boston were almost congruent.<sup>74</sup> The Irish majority, “who had the political power”, as Shannon points out, “felt themselves distinctly separated from the minority who had the economic power, and the separation was not only along economic lines, as it would be elsewhere, but also along nationality, religious, and cultural lines”.<sup>75</sup>

The virtual absence of Irish among Boston’s philanthropic establishment could be explained in two ways. One could argue that the Irish did not have the necessary financial means to become active in philanthropic pursuits. Both Stephan Thernstrom and William Shannon show that Boston’s Irish “made very slow progress into the middle and upper class”.<sup>76</sup> Only 40 percent of American-born children of Irish immigrants in Boston reached, according to Thernstrom, middle-class positions at the end of their careers. Political power did not bring equal economic opportunities for the Irish majority. Only one quarter of Yankee youths but about two-thirds of the Irish youths were employed as manual laborers at the end of their professional life. Furthermore, second-generation Irish were, as Thernstrom demonstrates, “less successful than other second-generation newcomers from groups that were politically much weaker. Eleven in 20 of the native-born sons of immigrants of British or West European (predominantly German and Scandinavian) descent ended their career in middle-class occupations, but fewer than 8 in 20 of the Irish.”<sup>77</sup> And Handlin observed that the “mass of Irishmen continued to occupy the low places in society they had earlier held”.<sup>78</sup> This economic disadvantage could be seen even at the level of political leadership. Investigating the economic background of Boston’s city council members, Ernest S. Griffith observed that: “In 1875 all of the aldermen owned property, the total assessed value of which was \$ 769,600, and sixty-one out of the seventy-four members of the common council owned property totaling \$ 1,530,800. In 1892 sixty-two out of eighty-seven councilmen owned no visible property. By 1904 the total assessed valuation of property owned by both aldermen and councilmen totalled [sic] only \$ 87,000.”<sup>79</sup> Nevertheless, a few Irishmen were economically successful as both Handlin and Shannon contend. These could have participated in the philanthropic network. Their absence could be credited to the refusal of Brahmins to open their ranks towards the Irish newcomers as well as to the failure of the Irish to recognize the potential of philanthropy.<sup>80</sup> However small the economic progress of Irishmen was, it did not result in Irish participation in Boston’s philanthropic establishment or in the creation of a counter-philanthropic establishment. In contrast to New York, where a similar conflict over philanthropy and power emerged during the 1870s, the two ethnically/religiously defined groups facing each other in Boston could not rely on equally distributed financial resources.

While the new elites in New York City were religiously diverse (Protestant, Catholic and Jewish), they also possessed immense financial resources that finally ■ 41

allowed them to outdo the old elites. The division lines between the Knickerbocker families and the new elites were, as much as in Boston, nearly unbreakable up until the 1870s. Real estate and trade were the economic basis for the Knickerbocker families while the new elites made their fortunes in the new industries (especially railways). Although the Knickerbocker aristocracy initially tried to limit its social contact with families that represented new money, they did not close their ranks completely to them. As in the case of Boston, new men (John Jacob Astor and August Belmont) found inroads into New York's established social circles.<sup>81</sup> Unlike New York, however, Boston's Brahmin families did not have to compete with a financially strong group. Although the Irish were able to dominate city government, they did not possess the financial means to establish a competing philanthropic system. The Irish-dominated city government, therefore, had to rely more than its Yankee predecessor on taxation of property to subsidize public institutions than on private philanthropy.<sup>82</sup> Thus, Boston did not see a "philanthropic competition" comparable to New York City, where two rivaling elite groups engaged in the creation of parallel cultural cityscapes by founding the Metropolitan Museum of Art (by the old elites) and the American Museum of Natural History (by the new elites). It was not the need for such museums alone that explains their existence but the desire of the old and new elites to claim their space in urban cultural life. Both, Boston's and New York's upper class, driven by similar motives, engaged unsuccessfully in political campaigns to limit the right to vote for recent immigrants, which constituted the lower classes in both cities.<sup>83</sup> While in the case of Boston this political strategy was directed against a monolithic group that competed with the Brahmins for political control over the city, New York's Knickerbockers (the "blue-blooded" economic, cultural and political elite that claimed ancestry among the earliest Dutch and English settlers), targeted a more diverse crowd of impoverished recent immigrants from Europe. Further, the Knickerbocker elite attempted this with the help of the new elites; a group with which the Knickerbockers in cultural and social spheres generally competed. Thus, Boston represents two homogenous groups battling for political power, while New York represents a much more complicated situation where two groups that vied for social and cultural dominance joined forces in order to disenfranchise an ethnically-diverse, but economically unified lower class. In the end, Boston's Brahmin and New York's Knickerbocker families retreated from political life since they were assured of their control over the boards of the city's museums, hospitals and social housing companies.<sup>84</sup>



## Notes

- 1 For a discussion of the concept of philanthropy see: Lawrence J. Friedman, Mark D. McGarvie (ed.), *Charity, Philanthropy, and Civility in American History*, Cambridge 2003; Thomas Adam (ed.), *Philanthropy, Patronage, and Civil Society: Experiences from Germany, Great Britain, and North America*, Bloomington 2004.
- 2 Thomas Adam, «Philanthropic Landmarks: the Toronto Trail from a Comparative Perspective, 1870s to the 1930s», *Urban History Review* 30 (2001), 3–21.
- 3 Kathleen D. McCarthy, «Women and Political Culture», in Friedman, McGarvie, *Charity, Philanthropy, and Civility in American History*, 179–197; Kathleen D. McCarthy, *Women's Culture: American Philanthropy and Art, 1830–1930*, Chicago 1991; Thomas Adam, «Ein Schritt in die bürgerliche Öffentlichkeit? Frauen und philanthropische Wohnprojekte im transatlantischen Raum des 19. Jahrhunderts», *Ariadne* 42 (2002), 24–31.
- 4 Adam (cf. note 3).
- 5 Sven Beckert, *The Monied Metropolis: New York City and the Consolidation of the American Bourgeoisie, 1850–1896*, Cambridge 2001, 247; Thomas Adam, «Philanthropy and the Shaping of Social Distinctions in Nineteenth-Century U. S., Canadian, and German Cities», in Adam (cf. note 1), 29.
- 6 Oliver Wendell Holmes, «The Professor's Story» *The Atlantic Monthly* V (1860), 93; Peter Dobkin Hall, *The Organization of American Culture, 1700–1900: Private Institutions, Elites, and the Origins of American Nationality*, New York 1982, 198–206.
- 7 William V. Shannon, *The American Irish*, New York 1963, 182 f.
- 8 Frederic Cople Jaher, «The Politics of the Boston Brahmins: 1800–1860», in Ronald P. Formisano and Constance K. Burns (eds.), *Boston 1700–1980: The Evolution of Urban Politics*, Westport 1984, 63.
- 9 Jaher (cf. note 8), 60–63.
- 10 Ibid., 70.
- 11 Thomas H. O'Connor, *The Boston Irish: A Political History*, Boston 1995, 62 f.
- 12 Paul Dimaggio, «Cultural Entrepreneurship in Nineteenth-Century Boston: The Creation of an Organizational Base for High Culture in America», *Media Culture and Society* 4/1 (1982), 47.
- 13 Betty G. Ferrell, *Elite Families, Class and Power in Nineteenth-Century Boston*, Albany 1993), 31. The Boston Symphony Orchestra will not be discussed here. See: Dimaggio (cf. note 12), 40–49; M. A. Dewolfe Howe, *The Boston Symphony Orchestra*, Boston 1931; Bliss Perry, *Life and Letters of Henry Lee Higginson*, Boston 1921, 291–324.
- 14 McCarthy (cf. note 3), 190.
- 15 Dimaggio (cf. note 12), 40.
- 16 Cleveland Amory, *The Proper Bostonians*, New York 1947, 37 ff.
- 17 Robert F. Dalzell, Jr., *Enterprising Elite: The Boston Associates and the World They Made*, Cambridge (MA) 1987, 128.
- 18 Amory (cf. note 16), 178.
- 19 This argumentation is based upon Dimaggio (cf. note 12), 38 f. His use of the term “non-profit corporation” however is inadequate since all philanthropic institutions under discussion relied on making profit. In the case of the BCBC a certain part of the profit was even distributed among the philanthropists/shareholders. See for the phenomenon of limited dividend companies the second chapter of this book.
- 20 Dimaggio (cf. note 12), 38.
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 *Biographical Encyclopaedia of Massachusetts of The Nineteenth Century*, New York 1879, 306–308; Walter Muir Whitehill, *Museum of Fine Arts Boston: A Centennial History*, Cambridge 1970, 11 f.



- 23 The following information is based on: *Proceedings at the Opening of the Museum of Fine Arts: With the Reports for 1876, a List of Donations, the Act of Incorporation, By-Laws etc.*, Boston 1876, 21–32; *Trustees of the Museum of Fine Arts: Twentieth Annual Report for the Year Ending December 31, 1895*, Boston 1896, 34–46.
- 24 See for these family stories: *Boston Past and Present Being an Outline of the History of the City as Exhibited in the Lives Of its Prominent Citizens*, Cambridge 1874; Mary Caroline Crawford, *Famous Families of Massachusetts*, 2 vol., Boston 1930.
- 25 *The McQuiston McCuiston and McQuesten Families 1620–1937*, compiled by Leona Bean McQuiston, Louisville (KY) 1937, 68 f.
- 26 Ibid., 164.
- 27 For a discussion of the ability of the Brahmins to absorb new men and capital see: Jaher (cf. note 8), 70.
- 28 William A. Braverman, *The Ascent of Boston's Jews, 1630–1918*, PhD thesis, Harvard University 1990, 90; Ellen Smith, «Israelites in Boston», 1840–1880», in Jonathan D. Sarna, Ellen Smith (ed.), *The Jews of Boston: Essays on the Occasion of the Centenary (1895–1995) of the Combined Jewish Philanthropies of Greater Boston*, Boston 1995, 62.
- 29 Braverman (cf. note 28), 113.
- 30 Sarna/Smith (cf. note 28), 329; John Koren, *Boston, 1822 to 1922: The Story of its Government and Principal Activities During One Hundred Years*, Boston 1923, 205.
- 31 Braverman (cf. note 28), 116; Smith (cf. note 28), 57.
- 32 Braverman (cf. note 28), 116.
- 33 Ibid., 117.
- 34 Martin Green, *The Problem of Boston: Some Readings in Cultural History*, London 1966, 45.
- 35 Koren (cf. note 30), 205.
- 36 Stephan Thernstrom, *The Other Bostonians: Poverty and Progress in the American Metropolis 1880–1970*, Cambridge (MA) 1973, 112.
- 37 Green (cf. note 34), 44 f.
- 38 Oscar Handlin, *Boston's Immigrants: A Study in Acculturation*, Cambridge (MA) 1959, 184.
- 39 Shannon (cf. note 7), 182.
- 40 For a discussion that focuses on the conflict in the field of education and schooling see: Barbara Miller Solomon, *Ancestors and Immigrants: A Changing New England Tradition*, Cambridge 1956, 44–52.
- 41 Thernstrom (cf. note 36), 112.
- 42 N. I. Bowditch, *A History of the Massachusetts General Hospital*, New York 1972, 423–431.
- 43 Green (cf. note 34), 49.
- 44 Ibid.; Dalzell (cf. note 17), 131.
- 45 Frederic Cople Jaher, *The Urban Establishment: Upper Strata in Boston, New York, Charleston, Chicago, and Los Angeles*, Urbana 1982, 22–26, 50–54.
- 46 Betty G. Farrell, *Elite Families: Class and Power in Nineteenth-Century Boston*, Albany 1993, 35 f.
- 47 Shannon (cf. note 7), 185.
- 48 Walter Firey, *Land Use in Central Boston*, New York 1968, 65–70.
- 49 Shannon (cf. note 7), 185.
- 50 Green (cf. note 34), 49.
- 51 Dalzell (cf. note 17), 153 f.; Walter Muir Whitehill, *Boston Public Library: A Centennial History*, Cambridge (MA) 1956, 34–36.
- 52 Koren (cf. note 30), 114.
- 53 Whitehill (cf. note 51), 19, 22.
- 54 Koren (cf. note 30), 114.
- 55 Neil Harris, «The Gilded Age Revisited: Boston and the Museum Movement», *American Quarterly* 14/4 (1962), 549.
- 44 ■ 56 Ibid., 559; Whitehill (cf. note 22).

- 57 Dimaggio (cf. note 12), 40; Jaher (cf. note 8), 64; Ronald Story, *The Forging of an Aristocracy: Harvard & the Boston Upper Class, 1800–1870*, Middletown (CT) 1980.
- 58 Jaher (cf. note 8), 73.
- 59 Handlin (cf. note 38), 190.
- 60 Charles T. Russel Jr., *Disfranchisement of Paupers: Examination of the Law of Massachusetts*, Boston 1878, 7.
- 61 Russell (cf. note 60), 8.
- 62 Handlin (cf. note 38), 205.
- 63 Russell (cf. note 60), 4.
- 64 Ibid.
- 65 Geoffrey Blodgett, «Yankee Leadership in a Divided City: Boston, 1860–1910», in Formisano/Burns (cf. note 8), 90.
- 66 For a discussion of philanthropy and power see: David Hammack, «Patronage and the Great Institutions of the Cities of the United States: Questions and Evidence, 1800–2000», in Adam (cf. note 1), 79–100.
- 67 Dalzell (cf. note 17), 160.
- 68 Neil Harris, *Cultural Excursions: Marketing Appetites and Cultural Tastes in Modern America*, Chicago 1990, 85.
- 69 Harris (cf. note 68), 86.
- 70 Ibid.
- 71 Jaher (cf. note 8), 60.
- 72 Adam (cf. note 5), 15–33.
- 73 Dimaggio (cf. note 12), 40.
- 74 Shannon (cf. note 7), 186.
- 75 Ibid.
- 76 Ibid.
- 77 Thernstrom (cf. note 36), 133.
- 78 Handlin (cf. note 38), 216.
- 79 Ernest S. Griffith, *The Modern Development of City Government in the United Kingdom and the United States*, London 1927, 111 (footnote 1).
- 80 Handlin (cf. note 38), 222 f.; Shannon (cf. note 7), 186 f.
- 81 Jaher (cf. note 8), 70; Beckert (cf. note 5), 246 f.
- 82 Koren (cf. note 30), 135–151, 205.
- 83 Beckert (cf. note 5), 218–224; Sven Beckert, «Democracy and Its Discontents: Contesting Suffrage Rights in Gilded Age New York», *Past and Present* 174 (2002), 116–157.
- 84 Thomas Adam, «A Rich Man's Guide to Social Climbing: Philanthropy as a Bourgeois Behavioral Pattern in Nineteenth-Century New York», *The Journal of Arts Management, Law and Society* 32/1 (2002), 15–24.



**ABSTRACT****BUYING RESPECTABILITY. PHILANTHROPY AND CULTURAL DOMINANCE IN 19<sup>TH</sup>-CENTURY BOSTON**

Philanthropy, understood as the provision of material and immaterial resources for the creation and maintenance of public institutions, has been an essential feature of 19th and 20th-century urban cultures. Museums, art galleries, social housing projects, libraries and even universities and hospitals in American, Canadian and German cities are the result of private initiative and philanthropic engagement. 19th-century philanthropists provided the necessary means (money, buildings, and time) to establish a social and cultural infrastructure that proved essential for the functioning of modern urban societies.

Philanthropic engagement, however, was hotly contested among potential philanthropists. Not every one was invited to contribute towards philanthropic projects. Wealthy Jews in Toronto were excluded from philanthropic projects of Toronto's bourgeoisie such as the Toronto Art Gallery, the Toronto General Hospital and the Royal Ontario Museum until the 1920s. And while Boston's Irish-Catholic population succeeded in claiming political domination during the 1880s, it remained excluded from Boston's philanthropic establishment that employed its philanthropic institutions as a counter government. Women recognized the potential of philanthropic engagement for integration into the public sphere and its definition early on. More than half of all Leipzig philanthropists who provided funding for social housing projects between 1848 and 1918 were women. In the case of New York City, the divisions between new and old money were so deep that it resulted in the construction of two different spheres of philanthropic engagement: the old elites established their Metropolitan Museum of Art and the new elites established their American Museum of Natural History. While both New York elite groups were kept apart in the realm of museums, they clashed over the control of the city's music culture. The Metropolitan Opera House, financed exclusively by the new elites, marks the defeat of the old elites and the transition of power from the old to the new elites. In this struggle for dominance over urban society New York is not unique. This article will argue that philanthropy served as a tool of inclusion and exclusion and provided a basis for claiming and defining urban spaces and the public sphere of 19th and early 20th-century urban societies on both sides of the Atlantic.