

Book Review: Charity Sucks by Iqbal Wahhab

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Are charities best placed to solve social problems and deliver welfare or might business do it better? This is the key argument of Iqbal Wahhab in his new 'provocation', Charity Sucks. While the controversial message of the book chimes with wider debates about the capacity for commerce to deliver prosperity, this unconvincing book fundamentally misunderstands the nature of donation and the relationship between capitalism and charity, writes John Picton.

Charity Sucks. Iqbal Wahhab. Biteback Publishing. 2016.

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Charity Sucks is a part of a Biteback series, named 'Provocations', intended as polemics on hot-button topics. While claiming to be 'sharp, intelligent and controversial', this book falls wide of the mark. It contains a single overarching theme – that businesses can deliver social welfare and that charity cannot – but it fails to convince.

The author, Iqbal Wahhab, a businessperson and restaurateur, puts forward the dramatic argument that charities are useless in almost all circumstances. He presents them as lacking commercial nous and – so long as the gullible continue to donate – inoculated against failure. Business, by contrast, is said to expand through success. Profit is earned through the endeavours of a rational brain, whereas charities just 'convince largely uninformed, if well-meaning, donors and philanthropists to finance them'.

To illustrate the social superiority of commerce, we are told that a subsidiary of Unilever produces detergent affordable to the [bottom billions](#). Similarly, a company named M-KOPA sells solar-powered chargers on hire purchase. This kit enables some relatively low income people to cheaply light torches, and to charge phones and radio. It is claimed, as a consequence, that a new broad-based capitalism is emerging that can provide for all, and now that [it is possible to make a profit on impoverished Africans](#), the market can efficiently supply the world with essential goods.

The question of whether or not commerce delivers universal prosperity is perhaps the [defining issue of our time](#). For the author to proclaim in a few short pages that business enriches rather than immiserates is indeed provocative, but it is also hugely simplistic. This is because while corporations might in some circumstances produce incidental social value, that value is always secondary to the generation of private wealth. It is the lack of a profit motive that distinguishes organised charity from commerce. Free from the pursuit of self-interest, charities are able to put public values first. Or, put another way, buying shares is not socially equivalent to donation, and commercial consumers are not the same as charitable service users. The *purpose* of corporations is to make a profit for shareholders: they hold the capital and call the shots. Indeed, M-KOPA's solar-powered kit will [cut out](#) if users are unable to pay the monthly charge.

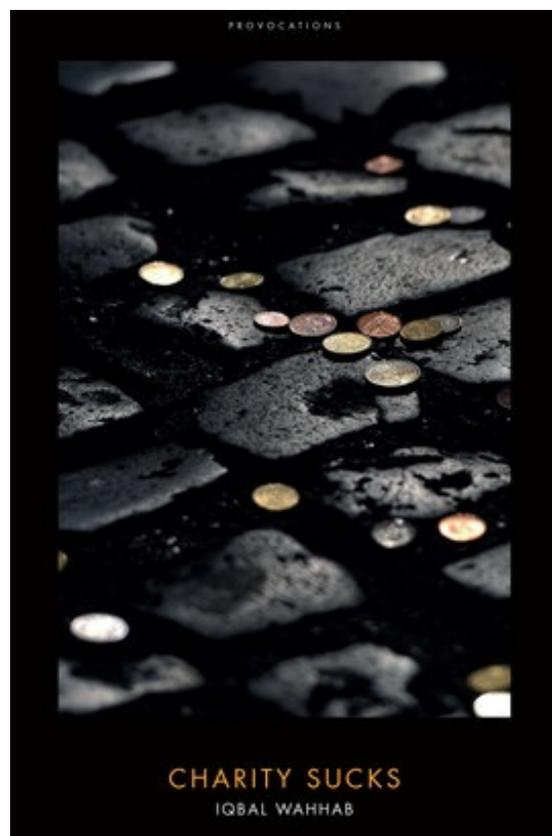




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Wahhab refers to charitable organisations as part of a 'cosy world of failure, inhabited by well-meaning charities and well-meaning philanthropists'. This sweeping claim is illustrated through reference to a wasteful charitable plan developed by a French charity in Togo. There, on a visit to a slum, Wahhab witnessed first-hand a useless scheme to erect an £8,000 fence being prioritised over far more pressing concerns. Yet, regardless of that particular and idiosyncratic case, there are more objective circumstances where, while never uncontroversial, global charity performs a worthwhile function. We turn immediately to charity in the wake of war, where quick-footed agencies can supply aid relatively free from [the constraints of global politics](#). We also turn to charity to provide material assistance to minorities in circumstances [where governments will not step in](#).

Alongside misunderstanding the function of global charity, the author misconceives the nature of charitable donation. Gift-giving is presented as a disingenuous affair. Wahhab vividly describes a London charity scene, also experienced first-hand, populated by business people at dreary galas. He criticises the players as being driven by a desire to network and so gain business contacts. But this is not a typical experience. Most ordinary people donate from either altruism or solidarity. They part with money because [they are sensible to the suffering of others](#). And so there is an irony: if the author were to look deeper, he would see that the criticism of elite donors stems from the fact that attendees at charitable networking events are driven by the profit motive.

Part of the author's case against organised charity is, crudely, that jobs are better than hand-outs. Wahhab employs ex-convicts in his restaurant, and he details how, when a particular former prison inmate came to work for him, it was spelt out directly to the new employee that the job had been earned through merit. There had been no demeaning charity involved. This vignette comes much closer to substantial critique: the sharpest attacks on charity flow from the fact that it embodies a power relationship. After all, where there is charity, there is always a recipient linked to a benefactor. But the book's understanding of social relations is naïve. The employment relationship is surely no less demeaning. Hiring a convict within a privately owned business is a very public display of personal power. Indeed, the function of the relationship is to make private profit from the labour of another as well as to control their time.

Finally, the relationship between capitalism and charity is misunderstood. The author conceives a binary as if the two constructs are entirely separate from each other. But they are not. All elite philanthropy is made possible by the fact that some people have vastly more wealth than others. Or as Andrew Carnegie termed inequality: 'the price

which society pays for the law of competition'. Charity is a product of a social system that generates massive disparities. That inequality is largely a result of the extraction of profit from labour. Elite philanthropy, insofar as it is redistributive, is best understood as the act of giving it back.

Charity Sucks contains a controversial message that has caused some [online debate](#) and this, it must be suspected, is a part of a marketing strategy to sell the book. Fittingly, it is a beautiful product. The book is elegantly presented in a smart black-and-orange dust jacket. But that is not enough. Even nicely produced polemics need good argumentation, particularly if they are to deal with weighty themes. That type of research is laborious and, ironically, very difficult to produce at a profit.

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Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.

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