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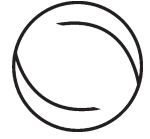
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# Media Review: Can Elite-Driven Social Change Save the World?

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**Anand Giridharadas**

**Winners Take All: The Elite Charade of Changing the World**

London: Penguin, 2019. 304 pp. [Kindle version]

**Reviewed by:** Myrto Chliova , *Aalto University, Finland*

This book aims to deliver a wake-up call to philanthropists, and more critically to the public at large, by bringing attention to the outsized influence and potential perils of elite philanthropy. The types of elites that Giridharadas focuses on are the United States' high-net-worth individuals, mostly entrepreneurs and executives who have made their fortunes in tech and finance in recent decades. While the author does not draw clear boundaries around this type of philanthropy, it seems akin to Horvath and Powell's (2016) 'disruptive philanthropy', i.e. philanthropy that competes with state provision – in contrast to 'contributory philanthropy', which amplifies democratically derived priorities. The choice of Giridharadas' focus on this type of philanthropy, rather than, for instance, philanthropy practised by the US's 'robber barons' of the past, by old elite circles, or by non-elites such as workplaces and households, lies in its influence. This influence is argued to be outsized due to the magnitude of these gifts, and the uncritical acceptance of the accompanying 'saving the world', 'win-win' discourse. Giridharadas' main argument is that such elite philanthropy is being successfully framed as the solution to widening economic and social inequalities, while its role in maintaining these problems is being conveniently obscured. He furthermore argues that such philanthropy can undermine democracy (see also Reich, Cordelli, & Bernholz, 2016).

Giridharadas enters the field of elite philanthropy, observes and interviews insiders, and, refusing to be wooed by its claims of grandeur, offers readers an incisive as well as entertaining critique. The book relies on an investigative journalistic approach, giving readers a glimpse of the dynamics and discourse of the field and the characters who populate it, including philanthropists, academics, consultants, nonprofit heads, and politicians. Giridharadas is neither a firm insider nor a firm outsider to this world. With his background as a graduate of history and politics, a McKinsey consultant, a *New York Times* journalist, book author and Harvard doctoral candidate, he got a first-hand glimpse when elected 'fellow' of the Aspen Institute, a major proponent of elite change-making. The experience proved disconcerting to the point that he felt compelled to deliver a wake-up speech to his peer 'fellows', which provoked both accolades and shock among them, went viral, and eventually became the seed of this book.

The book is a worthwhile read for problematizing the assumptions and foundations underlying the support for elite philanthropy, without shying away from issues of power. Giridharadas argues that elite philanthropists almost always try to ‘save the world’ in ways that are friendly toward ‘MarketWorld’ (a term he uses for the market logic) and their own fortunes. For instance, these elites will fund social enterprises to help precarious workers avoid becoming entirely destitute but oppose laws that would end precarious work. They will champion private charter schools, over time weakening the state’s ability to provide high-quality education to a universal citizenship. They will bemoan the state’s incapability to solve social problems, while successfully lobbying for regulatory change that deepens these problems. It is true, Giridharadas allows, that democracy and the provision of public goods may fail in certain cases, not least because of funding cuts. Yet, a further marginalization of the state’s role and reliance on elite projects that eschew democratic scrutiny can further damage public welfare, he suggests. Given free rein, elites only change the world in ways that maintain it unchanged, making democratic reforms that upset their interests highly unlikely. Accordingly, while the spread and dominance of the market logic across industries has been well documented by organization scholars, the book prompts readers to think explicitly and critically about its implications for public welfare.

Are elite philanthropists consciously serving their own interests when they promote market-based, win-win solutions, or merely driven by their unconscious biases? Giridharadas does not take a clear position. Yet, he provides several examples of discreet challenges to the win-win discourse that he witnessed that were swiftly contained by elites and their gatekeepers. Such is the case of the African American head of a major foundation who tries to discuss inequality with executives of a New York private equity firm; that of an audience member in a Clinton Global Initiative conference that raises doubts about the appropriateness of the win-win approach for women’s empowerment; that of a panel speaker at a philanthropy event who speaks up in support of the state’s provision of public goods. These incidents indicate that discussions of inequality and of win-lose social change are a ‘turn-off’ for elites, while a framing of ‘opportunity’ is a necessity to get a hearing in these circles.

Opposing this view, Giridharadas calls out elites for what one of his interviewees terms the ‘trying-to-solve-the-problem-with-the-tools-that-caused-it issue’. Indeed, a very interesting aspect of the book is that it features several insiders to the field who have over the years become disillusioned with it, grappling with the uncomfortable sense that they serve elite interests a bit too well. These range from Michael Porter, who laments the extent that management academics and consultants like him have helped firms become globally and perfectly optimized, resulting in rampant precarious work, to Andrew Kassoy, one of the founders of B Corporation, who struggles with the sense that the popular certification standard he created has no effect on management malpractice more broadly. Others, like Bill Clinton, are portrayed as having transitioned from a belief in the democratic approach to a belief in the inevitability of the elite-friendly approach to social change. His Foundation’s initiative to reduce obesity in the US, for instance, was conceived to go only as far as ensuring corporate interests of snack manufacturers could be fully preserved. The field is thus pictured as divided, with some of the actors that populate it being convinced that they must fully align with market interests, and others tormented by the dissonance between what they do and what they think is right.

Giridharadas’ deeper concern is that philanthropic money lacks accountability and damages the democratic process. While it carries a great weight of influence, it is not subject to the democratic process, during which the benefits and costs of each allocation of funds can be debated and prioritized considering collective interests. He juxtaposes this lack of accountability to the widening inequality experienced in the US. The more business practices that are unfriendly to citizens (or outright criminal, as in the case of the Sackler family’s role in the opioid crisis) can be appeased by

later philanthropic deeds, the less are gaping social problems substantively addressed. He furthermore relates this disconnect to the emergence of populist discourse. When wealthy and mobile elites and parties across the political spectrum champion social enterprises, globalization and universalism as a solution to the world's problems, while branding the opposition of vulnerable citizens who are stuck in one place as 'ignorance', they inadvertently fuel cynicism, which paves the way for populism to take hold. In contrast, Giridharadas urges citizens to renew their efforts for social change through democratic participation and to demand that public goods and rights be provided and protected by the state even when doing so damages the interests of the ultra-wealthy.

What is the relevance of this book for organization scholars? Our field is not immune to the assumptions propagated by elite philanthropists. The social entrepreneurship literature, for example, is underlined by the implicit but pervasive assumption that whatever the ambiguous category label means (Chliova, Mair, & Vernis, 2020), it has a positive net impact on the world. Few studies have examined how power is being exercised as part of elite-driven social change efforts, for example by silencing the interests and perspectives of those being helped (Khan, Munir, & Willmott, 2007) or by imposing a win-win ideology (Hehenberger, Mair, & Metz, 2019). Our well-intentioned hope that non-confrontational approaches can solve thorny social problems might be influencing the types of organizations we choose to study, namely success stories. Yet, Giridharadas' book can act as a nudge towards the path less travelled. Taking a sociological macro approach, scholars could, for instance, examine whether the claims of causality between elite philanthropy and reductions in public spending and in democratic deliberations hold true. In turn, those studying social enterprises could examine more failure cases, to counterbalance a possible selection bias. Finally, scholars studying meaningfulness and other individual-level outcomes could dig deeper into the disconnect felt by professionals in the elite philanthropy field.

Additionally, for us teaching in business schools around the world, this book might spur a more sober assessment of the practices we celebrate and teach to students. Most business schools nowadays try to help students to change the world – but how bold and how transformative are the changes we aim for? It is common to hear ambitious students proclaim that they will build a new social enterprise to tackle problems of the poor in a remote corner of the world that they know nothing about, such as a slum in India; they assume that their newly acquired business skills are essential – and sufficient – for reducing poverty. They also hope to set up the project quickly, and then move on with their lives, carrying the market-friendly badge of the 'social entrepreneur'. Giridharadas' book suggests that this approach might not only be unreflective and arrogant, but also quite conformist. Excerpts from the book and similar readings could therefore help encourage critical reflection on market-based social change.

One limitation of the book is that it is focused on the US, and thus reflects the sharply growing economic inequality and the large influence of the market logic over the provision of public goods in that context. While both economic inequality and the legitimacy of elite-sponsored philanthropy and social entrepreneurship have been increasing globally in the last decades (Lounsbury & Strang, 2009; Reich et al., 2016), there may still be critical differences in contexts where the legitimacy of the state is higher, where the state is unable to provide certain public goods, or where the state is authoritarian. Should we expect elite philanthropy to be equally perilous there? A second limitation is the fragmentation in Giridharadas' mapping of the US elite philanthropy field, its constituents, and its links to the broader political economy of the US. This limitation begs the question of how exactly high-net-worth individuals coordinate with the corporate and political establishment to promote their philanthropic endeavours. Finally, the book could be taken as a condemnation of all types of philanthropy and social entrepreneurship; yet I think this interpretation misses the point. In my view, the point that is worth considering is how elite-driven, celebrated solutions for social

change can co-exist with globally worsening indicators of inequality and democracy, possibly dampening timely democratic deliberations and reforms. In that direction, this book offers much food for thought.

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