

Class, Race and Corporate Power

Volume 7 | Issue 1

Article 7

2019

Review of Giridharadas, A. (2018). "Winners Take All: The Elite Charade of Changing the World." New York: Alfred A Knopf.


Joshua H. Martin

University of Colorado- Denver, jhughesmartin@gmail.com

Kae Novak

University of Colorado- Denver, novak.kae@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/classracecorporatepower>

 Part of the [Economic Policy Commons](#), [Growth and Development Commons](#), [Income Distribution Commons](#), [International Economics Commons](#), [Leadership Studies Commons](#), and the [Social Policy Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Martin, Joshua H. and Novak, Kae (2019) "Review of Giridharadas, A. (2018). "Winners Take All: The Elite Charade of Changing the World." New York: Alfred A Knopf," *Class, Race and Corporate Power*: Vol. 7 : Iss. 1 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/classracecorporatepower/vol7/iss1/7>

This work is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Arts, Sciences & Education at FIU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Class, Race and Corporate Power by an authorized administrator of FIU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact dcc@fiu.edu.

Review of Giridharadas, A. (2018). "Winners Take All: The Elite Charade of Changing the World." New York: Alfred A Knopf.

Abstract

A review of Ananad Giridharadas' "Winners Take All: The Elite Charade of Changing the World" (2018). New York: Alfred A Knopf.

Keywords

Philanthropy, Capitalism, Elite Charade, MarketWorld, Foundations, Doing well by doing good, Thought Leaders

Books about neoliberal efforts to solve the world's problems abound. Many have the typical book design of identifying the problems in the first half of the book and explaining how the problem can be solved in the second half of the book. *Winners Take All* is not that type of book. *Winners Take All* focuses on the rich elites, the neoliberals, taking on the role of leaders of social change. It uses a critical lens to look at the elites whose actions and careers either contributed to or sustained the problems they are now wanting to change. There is no explanation in direct form about how the problem can be solved. According to Giridharadas, "this book is an attempt to understand the connection between the elites' social concern and predation, between the extraordinary helping and the extraordinary hoarding, between the milking- and perhaps abetting- of an unjust status quo and the attempts by the milkers to repair a small part of it" (Giridharadas, p. 7). This book asks the reader to consider if we should turnover change-making to the elite through private market-driven endeavors or if it should be the work of participatory democracy? Through his reporting, Giridharadas concludes a change is needed in how problems are addressed through changes in power structures (what those changes in power structures are is not fully fleshed out).

The book consists of a prologue, seven chapters, and an epilogue. The first chapters introduce the mindset and even unconscious biases the elite may have in taking charge of changing the world. The author outlines how the change enacted works on symptoms and how the elite may be "helping but also hoarding the overwhelming share of the progress" (Giridharadas, p. 6). "The people with the most to lose from genuine social change have placed themselves in charge of social change, often with the passive assent of those most in need of it" (Giridharadas, p. 9). Throughout the book he introduces us to his interviews of people who have worked for foundations, consulting groups, and even academics who either are part of the economic elite or who earn a majority of their living from being on the lecture circuit for the economic elite.

In the mid-section of the book, the author calls out a solution solving method, we have seen often in schools and colleges. He identifies it as "not boiling the ocean" which narrows the focus to where it is the kind of change that "leaves the underlying issues untouched" (Giridharadas, p. 109). The book ends with discussion of 2016, the election of Donald Trump and how the economic elite may be beginning to understand that private market driven change is not alleviating the public's anger at being excluded from the progress. Throughout this whole book, the emphasis is not on supporting, helping, or financing the change in the world; it is a critique of elites leading the change.

The author, Anand Giridharadas is a journalist not a researcher or scholar. He clearly outlines for the reader his biases and his involvement in the system that the book describes. He tells us about how his time as a Fellow with the Aspen Institute and working as a management analyst with McKinsey & Company where he learned a capitalist market driven view of change for social good. He calls out patterns, motives and links the financial and social crises of the world to capitalism. Giridharadas also shows us how consultants and thought leaders "render of social problem as unintimidating, bite-sized, digestible" (p. 119). The book includes a section titled *A note on sources*. In this section of the book the author includes "a list of substantial sources that I did not cite in the text" (Giridharadas, p. 271). This allows the reader to cross-reference the events and persons mentioned throughout the book.

While the people interviewed were also insiders like the authors, I would have preferred more examples. I appreciate that Amy Cuddy, a Harvard Business School professor who has the second most downloaded TED Talk, was used as an example. Rather than coming back continually to Cuddy's situation, I would have welcomed additional interviews with more thought leaders. Similarly, the vignette of Darren Walker's limousine ride to meet with wealthy and powerful people resulted in a no contest in terms of changing hearts, minds, and actions.

This book will not derail the field of school reform or the interplay of education with technology, innovation, and economics nor it promise to solve the problem of education or any other social issue. Instead, it shines a light on the elites, thought leaders, and foundations who are using a market driven economic view of solving problems. The book enhances the field by focusing on how leading change initiatives by the elite, for the working class and poor can be both "laudable and self-serving" (Giridharadas, p. 5). It lets the reader know the formula and patterns they will likely to encounter if their school becomes involved with any market-driven foundation say for example, the Bill & Melinda Gate foundation. It also provides hope that there are those who are in contact with philanthropic organizations and donors who are starting to see their actions as complicit in the suffering of the marginalized and oppressed. Additionally, this book enhances the field of education by reinforcing the role of unfettered government in leveraging the people to solve problems and hold the elite accountable.

This book should be read by education administrators. It should then be reviewed by educational administrators anytime they read an initiative or consider sending in a grant proposal to a foundation. Educational technologists and anyone else at school and colleges who are involved in technology decision making should read this book. As an educational technologist and instructional designer who has designed and taught online education at scale and who has heard the siren's song of the Gates Foundation's grant waves, I understand administrators being tempted by the promise of solutions that do not touch their budgets or expend any of their resources. I would also suggest that any educators who regularly uses TED Talks in their courses read Chapter 4 titled "The Critic and The Thought Leader." The author even outlines a three-step process of thought leaders on how not to be a critic. This three-step process for thought leaders includes, "focus on the victim not the perpetrator ... personalize the political ... be constructively actionable" (Giridharadas, p. 97 - 99). This is not to say TED Talks should not be used but they should also be examined through a critical lens of gender, class, and race. As Giridharadas suggests, this book should be read by those in the position to take a public problem and develop a private solution to it. His most striking conclusion is that "generosity is not a substitute for justice" but those in positions of power often allow such a compromise to be made (p. 182). This would suggest that the new age robber barons are perpetuating an injustice that the alms they give are not able to blot out.

The author sets the tone of the book in the epigraph by linking it both to Tolstoy's *Writings on Civil Disobedience and Nonviolence* and a letter from the supreme ruling body of the Bahá'í Faith. In the prologue, the author covers innovations, which have not been properly disseminated or utilized in the American population. This includes: medicine, education, technology, and food distribution. Critical studies students and scholars will find the themes familiar. For someone who does not normally read critical theory, the author frames each chapter

successfully with its title. The chapter titles such as *Rebel-Kings In Worrisome Berets* and *Arsonists Make the Best Firefighters* are thought provoking and immediately direct the reader to critical examination of problem.

This book could have been improved by incorporating a critical race theory and interest convergence lens. Similar to how Milner (2008) analyzed teacher education policies and practice, this book could have been improved by the author looking at research done by Bell (1980) on status quo and social justice initiatives and Gordon (1990) on work to change the world when the world already works for the change agents. Through his reporting, Giridharadas concludes a change is needed in how problems are addressed through changes in power structures. However, what those changes in power structures are is not fully fleshed out. This would seem to line up with the main goal of critical pedagogy not providing answers, but rather asking thought- and action- provoking questions. The book predominantly focuses on class, other than the examples of #AirbnbWhileBlack, which mentions discrimination based on race and the TED Talk example of power poses which calls out its topic as a gender issue, but does not develop into an in-depth discussion.

References

- Bell, D. A. (1980). Brown v. Board of Education and the interest-convergence dilemma. *Harvard Law Review*, 93(3), 518 - 533.
- Giridharadas, A. (2018). *Winners Take All: The Elite Charade of Changing the World*. New York: Alfred A Knopf.
- Gordon, B.M. (1990). The necessity of African-American epistemology for educational theory and practice. *Journal of Education*, 172(30) 88 - 106.
- Milner IV, H. R. (2008). Critical race theory and interest convergence as analytic tools in teacher education policies and practices. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 59(4), 332-346.