

# The Philanthropy Racket or: How The People Destroying the World Anoint Themselves Its Savors

Friday 21 September 2018, by [LEHMANN Christian](#) (Date first published: 22 August 2018).

**As Anand Giridharadas argues in his indispensable new book, *Winners Take All*, “There is no denying that today’s elite may be among the more socially concerned elites in history. But it is also, by the cold logic of numbers, among the most predatory.”**



As wages stagnate and decline, and income and housing supports are viciously winnowed away, a new brand of philanthropic do-goodism aims to transform social relief into entrepreneurial opportunity. In big-name corporate consultancies like McKinsey, at global meeting grounds like Davos, Aspen and Doha, within the warm self-admiring glow of the Clinton Global Initiatives (CGI), the very class profiting from global inequality convenes in search of ways to ameliorate its symptoms—profitably, of course, via a stable of “disruptive” market-driven interventions in healthcare, transportation, housing and other spheres that are sold to investors as ingenious ways of hacking society.

The perverse dogma behind such initiatives is the mantra “win-win”—the notion that social reform need never entail any cost to corporate bottom lines. As one of its chief theorists, former TechCrunch reporter Greg Ferenstein explains, if you assume the public sector is fundamentally at odds with the market:

You worry about disparities in wealth. You want labor unions to protect workers from corporations. You want a smaller government to get out of the way of business. If you don’t make that assumption, and you believe that every institution needs to do well, and they all work with each other, you don’t want unions or regulation or sovereignty or any of the other things that protect people from each other.

He sums up this government-market synergy, daftly, as “Optimism.” After all, the neoliberal elite has found a remedy for the savage inequalities of the market—a suite of cosmetic social fixes that abide by market logic, such as micro-loans and school vouchers.

Giridharadas supplies a lacerating critique of this quisling rationale by virtue of knowing it firsthand;

he's a former McKinsey consultant and Aspen Institute fellow who's done the rounds of TED talks. His insider access allows him to tease out the intellectual and moral failures of our Optimist overlords in a devastating portrait of the "network and community" and "culture and state of mind" he calls "MarketWorld":

These elites believe and promote the idea that social change should be pursued principally through the free market and voluntary action, not public life and the law and the reform of the systems that people share in common; that it should be supervised by the winners of capitalism and their allies, and not be antagonistic to their needs; and that the biggest beneficiaries of the status quo should play a leading role in the status quo's reform.

As Giridharadas notes, defending MarketWorld requires no end of distortions and diminutions of social thought. The social psychologist Amy Cuddy, for instance, delivered one of the most successful TED talks in history by presenting feminist activism largely as a matter of adopting tweaks to personal comportment in the workplace, such as "power postures." Such glosses on social conflict, Giridharadas writes, "have given rise to watered-down theories of change that are personal, individual, depoliticized, respectful of the status quo and the system, and not in the least bit disruptive." Bruno Giussani, the TED official who hosted Cuddy's talk, concedes as much, noting he'd even coined a term for the elite evasion of social conflict: "Pinkering," after the Harvard linguist Steven Pinker's argument that the arc of history is bending ineluctably toward world peace.

Reporting from the last convocation of the CGI, Giridharadas quotes former President Bill Clinton's valedictory address to this High Church of MarketWorld. "Good people, committed to creative cooperation, have almost unlimited positive impact to help people today and give our kids better tomorrows," Clinton intoned. "This is all that does work in the modern world." Giridharadas rightly dubs this latter claim "astonishing"—it's redolent of Margaret Thatcher's insistence that there was simply "no alternative" to untrammelled capitalist rule.

Giussani suggests that such Olympian narratives of elite reassurance serve to dismiss any critical perspective as backward and unenlightened: "Your problems don't really matter compared to the past's, and your problems are not really problems, because things are getting better."

Asked whether all this flagrant Pinkering had contributed to the backlash of pseudo-populist anger now roiling the West, Giussani avers, "Of course that distortion contributed. I believe even that it is one of the biggest engines of it." Nevertheless, the lead theorists of MarketWorld hope to ride out the present crisis by cleaving to their pet shibboleths more firmly than ever. The surprise "yes" vote on Brexit, for instance, prompted Clinton to observe that Brexit supporters simply "had no idea what they were doing." As Giridharadas drily notes, "The people setting themselves the task of understanding the anger around them were precommitted to the idea that the anger had no possible basis in reason or conscious choice."

And that, by and large, is the discursive world we continue to inhabit since the election of Trump. MarketWorld's hiring political mouthpieces stolidly insist that all is fundamentally well in the world—that Democratic leaders are being targeted by the Trumpian forces of darkness because they're "effective," as Pelosi outlandishly claimed in a recent *Rolling Stone* interview. In point of fact, of course, the neoliberal dream of governance has been a grotesque bust, with Pelosi's Democrats facing the lowest ebb of political influence in America since 1924. But that's a bitter truth that will never penetrate the high-priced pageants of neoliberal self-congratulation.

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