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# A Group Reflection: Winners Take All: The Elite Charade of Changing the World

By Juniper Glass, Julie Savaria and Clelia Cothier

***Winners Take All: The Elite Charade of Changing the World*, by Anand Giridharadas. Knopf. New York, 2018; 304 pp: ISBN 9780451493248**

**Juniper Glass:** I didn't think I would like this book. I had a knee jerk reaction to the slickness of both the title and the author's hairdo.[1] And, I must admit, by how much buzz the book has received. Wouldn't author Anand Giridharadas be just another of the celebrated but vacuous "thought leaders" that his book criticizes? I thought *Winners Take All* would be a presumptuous, superficial approach to the topic of how the world is to be changed for the better. Instead, the book is an in-depth cultural critique. Giridharadas effectively analyzes the presumptuous, superficial concepts about what change is, who can create it, and how, which have come to dominate global social change narratives.

What makes the book so readable is that each chapter focuses on one main character to explore a fallacy in the usual narratives. The people profiled are not made-up characters but real-life figures – including a do-gooder millennial working for McKinsey, a social justice-minded philanthropist, a Hooters server who became a corporate social responsibility executive, and a former president of the United States. Through these stories, marked as they are by paradoxes, Giridharadas leads the reader to see beneath a powerful set of concepts and values that currently hold great sway in global elite culture, including:

- The market is the most important vehicle for solving the world's problems;
- Governments get in the way: for real change, we have to go above or around public policy;
- The best solutions are win-win (when creating social benefits we should also create financial profits);
- Technological innovation can solve most problems (we can invent our way to prosperity and wellbeing);
- To achieve progress, we just need to make doing good easier (rather than make doing bad harder); and
- Individual agency and responsibility are supreme (per neo liberalism).

Many of the characters featured are people Giridharadas already knew, some quite well. That is because he himself was immersed in "MarketWorld," a term he coined for the global network based on these

values, as an emerging celebrated thought leader on the elite conference circuit. The detail and depth with which Giridharadas is able to delve into the concepts and contradictions of actors in this culture is largely due to his intimacy with it.

“MarketWorld is an ascendant power elite that is defined by the concurrent drives to do well and do good, to change the world while also profiting from the status quo. It consists of enlightened businesspeople and their collaborators in the worlds of charity, academia, media, government, and think tanks. It has its own thinkers, whom it calls thought leaders, its own language, and even its own territory, including a constantly shifting archipelago of conferences at which its values are reinforced and disseminated and translated into action. MarketWorld is a network and community, but it is also a culture and state of mind (p. 30).”

Buzz about the book made its way to my Facebook page. A critical mass of folks in Montreal were grappling with the challenges Giridharadas poses for social entrepreneurship and many other dearly-held and popular social change trends. When an acquaintance offered to host a book group to discuss *Winners Take All*, I jumped at the chance to chew on these meaty ideas with others. The most inspiring people I met were Julie and Clelia, two young women with different backgrounds and experiences of international migration, race, family, education, and work, but who both find themselves today in Montreal and in the global culture of MarketWorld. They generously and humbly agreed to share some of their thoughts about how they are wrestling with, and digesting, the deep cultural critique contained in *Winners Take All*.

*Tell me about your work, and how it relates to the challenges identified by Giridharadas.*

**Julie Savaria:** I work for a B Corp named Emzingo. We design leadership programs coupled with social impact consulting projects, seeking to empower the next generation of leaders to exhibit a more responsible style of leadership (thinking about profit, yes, but also people and the planet). We work in multiple countries, but have our biggest presence in South Africa, Peru, Spain and the United States. My role is to oversee our academic programs, manage our global internal affairs and our diversity, inclusion, and equity programs. This book hit a chord for multiple reasons: 1) We are a B Corp, 2) Our fellows and staff are all from a privileged backgrounds in our respective contexts, therefore we have been evolving in what Giridharadas qualifies as “MarketWorld,” 3) According to Giridharadas, we are part of the problem as we want to equip leaders with skills to lead responsibly in their own sphere of influence.

**Clelia Cothier:**I have been working for Desjardins' innovation Lab for almost three years, where I have been pushing the social innovation agenda. [The] Desjardins Lab has been created to enable and accelerate innovation within this large financial cooperative. Today, I am part of the open innovation team and shape the social innovation strategy for Coopérathon, an international open innovation competition that connects citizens, communities, entrepreneurs, researchers, academics, and large institutions to develop, together, a socially responsible future. In many of the projects and roles I have played within the team, I have contributed to connecting ecosystems: internal, external, tech, social innovation . . . Navigating between these worlds has both taught me good “translating” skills, and made me practice my flexibility. The “win-win” approach Giridharadas is mentioning is part of our DNA to bring a wide diversity of people together. We organize large gatherings and conferences to share big ideas and inspire people to start their own projects; his criticism of “MarketWorld” events and thought leaders definitely hit a chord for me as well.

*Which chapter had the most impact on you and why?*

**Julie Savaria:**The prologue impacted me for a simple reason: I had underestimated the power of the message and the tone of the book. The desire of the author to make the readers shift perspective is clear and straight to the point, in a way that you cannot escape. The introduction to *Winners Take All* and the overview of what is to come filled me with excitement and discomfort as well, as the author attacked some institutions and movements I saw as positive for the world. For example, seeing the B Corp movement depicted as a good try, but pointedly called out with the observation “if you want nothing to change, you have to change something,” made me defensive at first then pensive. It is an idea that is really important in the book: that we talk a lot about creating change when fundamentally, most of our reforms and adjustments are actually making an inequitable system more tenable, not actually shifting the system. Those who have lots of power and resources keep their power and resources while global inequity continues to increase. What if the author was on to something that was right in front of me all along but that I could not see because of my educational, intellectual, and professional background?

**Clelia Cothier:**I agree with Julie that the book had a strong start, and I share that sense of excitement and discomfort: a lot of my models and frameworks were shaken while reading the book. The most personal one was Hilary Cohen's story in Chapter 1. Hilary is a young woman with a good education [who] wants to make a difference in the world. She followed a path that many privileged, well-intentioned, and ambitious young people take these days: working for global consulting firms, first Goldman Sachs, then McKinsey, because of the promise for incoming junior associates of the opportunity to work on files with social meaning. I recognized myself in many of the choices she made in her life and am going through similar challenges. As a young woman launching my career, I too was told that “the era of big government is over” and I would not have any impact going into the public sector. I too believe(d) that “there was more power in building up what was good than in challenging what was bad,” and that “to be a leader in the world, you need this [business/consulting] skill set.” *Winners Take All* made me re-question the pace and direction I am taking through work. It does have a tone you cannot escape. Reading the book was for me both amazing, as I could feel I that my secret doubts were actually shared by many, and destabilizing as I do not want to contribute to the “elite charade” Giridharadas describes in such excellent detail. That charade ultimately maintains a broken system.

*What is your main takeaway? How has the book impacted your perspective on your life and work?*

**Julie Savaria:** I honestly loved *Winners Take All*. I think these types of books are much needed as we are getting more individualistic and are losing sight of the big picture. We have lost track of how to truly help communities thrive. We are too content in our own privilege and comfort to reflect on how we can meaningfully support change. But that requires that we stop thinking about ourselves. The book showed me a different perspective on how to look at our world today. I thought I was very open and knowledgeable being Canadian and Senegalese and having lived in multiple African countries. Working with Emzingo exposed me to different ways of thought that showed me how clouded my judgement was, and this book further pushed the envelope by putting a mirror in front of my privilege. I agree that democratic governments and institutions need more power and trust to play the central role they did in the past, but I also believe that all sectors should work together to achieve greater impact. A change in perspective from the top 1% is crucial as well, and we need to stop multiplying the top-down initiatives to “help” the less privileged and eradicate poverty. We need to come together, from all spheres, to think about how we can achieve this. The social entrepreneurship sector is still very white and Western and needs to be decolonized. Same with the international aid and not-for-profit sector. For this to happen, we need to bring all parties to the table to design solutions that are relevant.

**Clelia Cothier:** The book had a lasting effect on me. Since reading it, I have had additional checks and balances in my head. I am more mindful, more careful and ask myself many questions to make sure I am not missing any blind spots. I became more aware that although intentions are good, that is not always enough: throughout my work I now try to be more critical and constructive in designing programs that will be inclusive.

*Winners Take All* did not help me answer *all* questions but brought me more good ones: I acknowledge my part in perpetuating the problem. I am a mix of confused, relieved, and frustrated. I share the ambivalence of Andrew Kasoy, co-founder of B Lab, which led to the proliferation of the Benefit Corporation model around the world. In the epilogue, reflecting on the limitations of the market-based model he helped promote globally, he concludes “I believe there is a very strong role for the state. And I don’t know how to make it happen.” As much as I want to believe in the role of the public sector, I do not think the shifts in perspectives will happen fast enough if we focus only on government actors, especially in the light of societal challenges we face and which are getting worse: climate change, migration, massive inequalities. I share Julie’s faith in a multi-sectoral approach. I believe in the strength of working together, across sectors (public, private, academic, social), valuing inclusion and diversity of actors, and bringing more humility into the process. To me, *Winners Take All* did not provide a short-term, concrete solution on challenging the problematic status quo, but rather is an amazing resource for deeper introspection to encourage the reframing of assumptions for aspiring changemakers.

**Juniper Glass:** I agree with Giridharadas’ insight that “MarketWorld-style change crowded out the habit of democracy.” But I also agree with your frustration that the book’s main conclusion is that democratic institutions need to be strengthened as the rightful locus of coordinating societal change and reducing inequalities. Giridharadas explores this notion in greatest depth with the final “character” presented in the book, Chiara Cordelli, a political philosopher (and author of another book I previously reviewed for *The Philanthropist*). Cordelli explains the paternalism inherent in MarketWorld elitist approaches:

“It seems to me that these days everyone wants to change the world by themselves. It’s about them; it’s

about what they do. But there are other people around you, and you owe it to them to support institutions that can, in the name of everyone, including in [your] own name, secure certain conditions for a more decent life. . . You can't speak in their name [people you are trying to help]. I can maybe speak in the name of my child, but *other people are not your children*(emphasis added) (p.262).”

I wholeheartedly agree that democratic processes and institutions are the rightful place for discussion and decision-making. But governments can become as elitist as MarketWorld. I think democratic institutions and public policy need to be leaders in bringing about the solutions we need, but only if in close communication (both harmonious and challenging) with civil society and social movements led by people with lived experience. Almost entirely missing from the book was any reflection on the grassroots and working classes. Real innovation cannot come about without involving these “users” or “beneficiaries,” and not just informing the design of new social innovation projects as often happens in “design thinking” contests, but having communities actually leading, directing resource use, and benefiting economically from success.

Sprinkled throughout *Winners Take All* are hints from Giridharadas at what a meaningful narrative of true global systems and social change should include. He does not go into depth, as that was not the mandate of the book, but I found inspiration in the glimmers of hope in each chapter. What will changing the world really take? Mostly likely all of these and more:

- Focus on addressing root causes and making systemic change;
- Power redistribution;
- Surrender by elites of excess privileges and resources;
- Holding those that “do bad” to account (not just celebrating those that “do good”); and
- Supporting and improving public institutions to be a central driver of change for the good of all.

Personally, I do not have faith that market forces (and whichever big philanthropist feels ascendant at the moment) will bring about the change we need for a just, sustainable, healthy future on earth. I put my trust in collective wisdom, improved democracy, seeing and addressing root causes, collaborative, inclusive, feminist leadership, and initiatives that aim to bring about deep shifts in culture and systems.

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[1] The author writes about his hair in this article in *The Huffington Post*

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