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One Market Under God: Extreme Capitalism, Market Populism, and the End of Economic Democracy. By Thomas Frank

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BOOK REVIEWS

One Market Under God: Extreme Capitalism, Market Populism, and the End of Economic Democracy. By Thomas Frank. New York: Doubleday, 2000. 414 pages. \$26.00.

The notion of an American consensus has taken a beating in the last four decades. Political, cultural, and social rifts appeared during the Civil Rights and anti-war movements of the sixties, separating the activist left from the “silent majority,” the hips from the squares, and the urban centers from the suburban and rural areas. In the eighties and nineties, the culture wars, the exploding gap between rich and poor, and the collapse of union power and politics seemed, like ice in a cracked sidewalk, to expand the fissures dividing Americans. The contentious 2000 presidential election demonstrated the difficulties contemporary politicians experience walking from one side of the tracks to the other. But in *One Market Under God: Extreme Capitalism, Populism, and the End of Economic Democracy*, Thomas Frank takes a new look at the consensus concept. Dismissing the conventional wisdom, Frank surveys contemporary business culture and “management theory” and insists that consensus has not rested in peace. He argues that, revived by the ideology of “market populism,” an undead version of American abundance theory has lumbered its way into political offices, boardrooms, newsrooms, and even our own family rooms.

Like his earlier *The Conquest of Cool* (1997), *One Market Under God* admonishes cultural critics for their almost uniform failure to address business culture in their studies. In assessing twenty years of business journalism, management theory, and business self-help books, he argues that the dominant strain in this literature has been the ideology of “market populism”: the belief that the free market, better even than the institutions of democratic government, expresses the beliefs and desires of Americans. This idea and its corollaries—that market regulation and even market criticism are elitist and undemocratic, that

employees and consumers are “free agents” who can bargain effectively and directly with corporations, that political liberation parallels *laissez faire* economic freedom—would not have been notable had they been confined, as they have been for much of the twentieth century, to the business and advertising fields. But in the nineties, Frank maintains, this idea became a naturalized assumption for large sections of society. The business public relations machine, fueled by the wild ebullience of the “New Economy,” the liberatory ideals of youth counter-culture, and even multicultural relativism and resistance theory in academic cultural studies, helped to naturalize the manipulations and mechanics of corporate capitalism. The new narrative revealed that aging, creaky bureaucracies were being undermined and outwitted by agile and creative entrepreneurs. Absolute freedom of thought and action in the marketplace created not only a set of new, young billionaires, but exciting consumer choices and commercial abundance. Even as large portions of the population were failing to gain any wage increases during the boom, enough people—from former Deadhead computer wizards to staid corporate managers—believed in market populism to justify calling it a new American consensus.

Frank’s argument is compelling. As in *The Conquest of Cool*, he ably demonstrates the convergence of the counter-culture enthusiasm for liberation with business attempts to gain popular legitimacy, without resorting to a tired theory of outright co-optation. One senses that Frank’s advertisers and business writers are not simply decorating their arch-conservative ideals with nose rigs and VW Bugs; instead, they want to see themselves as “extreme” individuals identified closely with their companies’ marketing goals and products. As Frank notes of one management theory bible, “as a description of the tormented inner life of the white-collar class, it has a certain merit”(245). However, as in *The Conquest of Cool*, he has trouble sustaining his rejection of co-optation narratives. Frank never seems certain of the relationship between business culture and business practice. But in more careful moments, he recognizes the interplay between the two. After discussing one particularly absurd management theory (he has numerous examples), Frank steps back:

These things are amusing, and they are sometimes so ephemeral it is difficult to imagine that they have any significance at all. But they matter. It is worth examining the way business talks about itself, the fantasies it spins, the role it writes for itself in our lives... The culture of business in particular has massive consequences for the way we live... It’s a set of beliefs that, once enacted into public policy, has permitted an upward transfer of wealth unprecedented in our lifetimes; it’s a collection of symbols and narratives that understand the resulting wealth polarization as a form of populism, as an expression of the people’s will. (86)

In this explanation, businesspeople have genuine investments in business culture, even if that culture is bizarre and harmful. At other points, though, Frank depicts espousers of business culture as malevolently manipulative: “Management theories live and breathe... to reassure us—the downsized, the laid-off, the temp

workers, the consumers—that the new way is best for all” (192). Is business culture, then, an organic outgrowth of business peoples’ needs and desires, or a mechanical creation designed to quell the masses? Frank never seems sure.

At its best, though, *One Market Under God* describes a nation obsessed by youth, liberation, consumerism, and freedom, and a business community that has adopted those obsessions both as an expression of its “inner-life” and as an instrument for social legitimacy and political power. The consensus he describes, then, is only in part based on “market populism.” More broadly, it is a belief in the good life as the freedom to “express oneself” in both social and market spheres, and the corollary desire to differentiate oneself. And paradoxically, Americans often try to achieve this differentiation by consuming mass culture. Market populism ideology exemplifies what Michele Lamont describes in *Money, Morals, and Manners* as the American desire for “self-actualization.” This belief manifests itself not only in business managers who listen to Stone Temple Pilots and in the proliferation of “extreme” versions of mundane products; this ideology also informs our students’ cool assertion that “everyone has their own opinion” and our own discomfort with grading and criticizing their work. But the true dark side of the liberatory pursuit of “self-actualization,” as Frank demonstrates repeatedly, is our society’s profound failure to recognize the social and economic roots of this “freedom.” Forced to scramble for *any* healthcare at all, some individuals surely recognize the absurdity of the American Medical Association’s contention that a national health care plan would limit “choice” for patients. The “self-actualizing” freedom of the professional and middle classes in the United States is often dependent on the stagnant wages and dehumanizing jobs of the working class, and no amount of anti-hierarchical rhetoric and “populist” fervor will change that economic reality.

This, perhaps, is what galls Frank the most: that *laissez faire* economics has returned under the guise of “populism,” “democracy,” and “egalitarianism.” John Dos Passos, writing in response to another decade of exploding gaps between wealthy and working people, wrote that the American elite “have turned our language inside out... have taken the clean words our fathers spoke and made them slimy and foul.” But like Dos Passos, Frank insists that the language will survive this assault:

To the casualization of work, to the destruction of the social “safety net,” to the massive prison roundup, the powers of commerce added the staggering claim of having done it all on our behalf... [However] in the streets and the union halls and truck stops and the three-flats and the office blocks there remained all along a vocabulary of fact and knowing and memory, of wit and of everyday doubt, a vernacular that could not be extinguished no matter how it was cursed as “cynicism,” the resilient language of democracy. (358)

By closing with this last note of resistance, Frank belies his earlier assertions that “market populism” is truly a consensus belief. Instead, this “consensus” consists largely of business managers, journalists, capitalists, and advertisers—in short, the upper and professional classes. And by criticizing academic cultural studies,

he aims to turn leftist scholars away from what he crudely caricatures as multicultural relativism, which he thinks only feeds into the “self-actualization” consensus. He urges scholars to turn instead to class-based analysis as a remedy for market populist ideology. Through his study of business culture, Frank wants to link cultural and economic scholarship, or, as one senses he might phrase it, “real” concerns and organized political action.

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