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How Conservatives Rule*

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Abstract

This analysis of American politics today is done through the lens and style of Raymond Chandler. And it is brilliant. Frank dissects the murky world of right wing politics with precision and a sharp wit. It is a better book than his much praised *What's the Matter With Kansas?*, partly because he paints on a bigger canvas and partly because this book does read like a thriller. It is a thriller about the corporate capture of Government in the United States of America. What's new about that, you might well think? Hasn't the ruling class always controlled Government? The point, however, is that until the Reagan years and beyond, some countervailing power, some Government autonomy existed. The liberal state from FDR up until Reagan did regulate and even govern, however inadequately, in the interests of common folk as well as the wealthy. This book is a lament to the fact that this liberal state has been smashed by conservatives—the wrecking crew of the title—who shore up corporate power in the name of smaller government. Meanwhile, Government does not get smaller, the military-industrial complex that Eisenhower warned against takes over, the Fat Cats get fatter and Wall Street crows. Until, of course, it all come tumbling down. Frank's book finishes before this turn of events but the story he tells contains many warning signs.

Thomas Frank, *The Wrecking Crew: How Conservatives Rule*, Metropolitan Books, New York, 2008, pp. 369.

Reviewed by Anthony Ashbolt, University of Wollongong

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The growth of corporate lobbyists in the United States is but one index of the wrecking crew's success. There are 35,000 official lobbyists in Washington but some estimates place the figure closer to 100,000. These lobbyists, argues Frank, have captured Congress or, rather, Congress has sold out to them. The Congressional earmarks, whereby special interests are served by sometimes needless projects being tacked on to bills (Alaska's bridge to nowhere receiving much publicity recently) highlights the power of the lobbyist. Frank's portrait of the typical lobbyist is devastating:

In most of the United States, male office-wear tends towards the drab; the lobbyist, by contrast, fancies himself Beau Brummel. He appears to choose each element of his ensemble for its conspicuous priciness, and you can spot him on the field by his perfectly fitted thousand dollar suits, usually blue; his strangely dainty shoes; his shirts, which often come in pink or

blue with white collar and cuffs, the latter of which display cufflinks of the large and shiny variety; his vivid, shimmering ties, these days preferably in orange or lavender; his perfect haircut; his perfect tan; the tiny flag attesting to his perfect patriotism on his perfect lapel.

Frank's prose really does shine in this book and makes it a memorable page-turner. His colourful cast of Republican right characters like Grover Norquist and Howard Phillips come to life in truly frightening ways. This is *noir* politics at its best. Take his portrait of Norquist—here is someone concerned to get the money into, not out of, politics. The scene is a fashionable Washington restaurant furnished with portraits of the power elite:

People under invest in politics, Norquist told me. When he speaks to business leaders, Norquist makes a point of informing them about the potential rate of return on political expenditure...And then it struck me, sitting there in the Palm, surrounded by all those grinning gargoyles of power brokers past, that Norquist was hinting at something both ingenious and incredibly malevolent: a systematic connection between conservative politics and private profit.

And this connection is precisely what Naomi Klein, amongst others, has been documenting for years. The private profiteers rode on the backs of conservative ideologues into Iraq and then into New Orleans—a wrecking crew, indeed. This crew are the cheer-leaders of a corporate globalization which leaves guest workers in the Pacific Island state of the Marianas as little more than slaves. They have privatised war and just about anything else they can get their hands on. Social Security and a public school system remain but only just. They have changed the very face of American society and removed any sense of social justice from the political agenda. Yet, they plead, we are marginalised, the outsiders, run roughshod over by liberal elites. Frank mocks this particular conceit:

The hallucination is dazzling, awesome. For most of the last three decades these insurgents have controlled at least one branch of government; they were underwritten in their rule by the biggest of businesses; they were backed by a robust social movement with chapters

across the radio dial. Still, however, they are the victims, the outsiders; they fight the power, the establishment, the snobs, the corrupt.

We know the story well in Australia, of course, where the intellectual titans of *Quadrant* and the Centre for Independent Studies bleat about the elites that dominate while they crack the controlling whip one more time.

Frank is realistic about the prospects of undoing the damage done by the wrecking crew. A Democrat victory, such as we have just seen, will be insufficient. A massive revival of the public sphere is required and this means also reviving “the social movements of the left that brought liberalism into being in the first place.” The liberalism which Frank refers to fondly is the liberalism of civil rights and social justice not the corporate liberalism that created and sustained an American empire. A reviewer, perhaps, should not give away the final lines of a political thriller but the temptation this time is too great:

Whenever there was a choice to be made between markets and free people—between money and the common good—the conservatives chose money. It’s time to make them answer for it.