

# Capitalism Gone Wild

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Review of *The Unwinding: An Inner History of the New America* by George Packer, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013

This American life is a mess, argues George Packer in *The Unwinding: An Inner History of the New America*. It's a nation fraying, with core institutions from government and finance to housing, jobs and education dysfunctional or "unwound."

Packer, as befits a *New Yorker* staff writer, is a sharp stylist with a keen eye. While he does pay homage to the American ideal of self-reinvention and upward mobility that existed imperfectly at best in the past, he focuses his seemingly infinite capacity for listening on bringing to life the stark inequalities of a society that is experiencing contrasts in wealth and poverty not seen since the late 19th century. It's one in which billionaires and the homeless multiply while the proportion of middle-income families shrinks and where six of Sam Walton's heirs have as much accumulated wealth as the United States' bottom 30 percent.

His vision of an anomic, atomized America unfolds like a well-produced slideshow. Highlights include an insider's view of K Street swinishness, its manufacturing of "grasstop" coalitions and how lobbyists on Capitol Hill not only grease politician's palms but write legislation in the interest of no one but their own clients.

There's also great reporting on the epidemic of robo-signing, mortgage and security fraud, bank failure, securities fraud and bankruptcy. His pointing to the collapse of federal regulations on bankers and traders that allowed for the Wall Street feeding frenzy is on target and a good introduction to the 2007-2008 collapse and its devastating consequences nationwide.

Taken singly, many of the chapters are brilliant, as is his coverage of the 2012 GOP convention and the ghost subdivisions and foreclosure wipeouts in Tampa, Florida. There's Youngstown, Ohio's shedding of 50,000 jobs (with a population of 150,000) and the vacating of 40 percent of its housing parcels in just 10 years. There's also devastating takedowns of the gremlin-like Newt Gingrich, the preposterous Oprah Winfrey and the weaselly Robert Rubin matched with fitting portraits of new Massachusetts Senator Elizabeth Warren and writer Raymond Carver, named "the chronicler of blue-collar despair."

A reviewer in *The Guardian* described his feelings after reading the more than 400 page tome as having "The sense of loneliness — of isolated souls, failed by their institutions, pummeled by the forces of big money — seems to seep under your skin, and to stay there."

My reaction was that, too; it's a tough read when bad things happen to good people. Or when good things happen to the undeserving rich. Yet the pieces, exquisitely and intelligently drawn, don't make for a whole picture. Not only is there no unified theory — it is, after all, journalism — there is no uniform explanation for the crises beyond hubris, the sclerosis of government and politicians unconscious when not themselves abetting crimes. We get a cataloging of malignity, venality, chaos and stupidity, as well as a growing list of victims. Like the libertarian masters of the universe in his tale, we have to do the theorizing for ourselves.

That's problematic because as accurate as the depictions are, they're static. His villains may know how to network, but his victims for the most part are loners, with little social interaction outside of

their immediate family. It's as though he takes seriously the paradigm of the right — that society is a fiction — though he clearly despises the right's politics. And if America is unwinding, when was modern life ever a coherent whole? When was it ever “wound”?

Unfortunately, Packard's roster of villains is circumscribed. As responsible as they were for instigating the Great Recession, Wall Street and the securities industry were not the business centers solely at fault for the lead-up to the collapse. An outsized military budget, imperial wars, the decline of unions as counterweights to corporate excesses and the flight of manufacturing overseas played their parts, too.

At bottom, despite the thick description in Packer's work, there's no sense of working people as actors, only as creatures acted upon. This may be true enough for the people profiled, at least initially, but weren't there other people in other areas who acted as their own social agents? His subjects are real enough, but they're presented without enough historical context to understand what options they had, if any, for a fight-back.

Here Packer could have taken the extra step of looking at the present crisis less as a failure of government to rein in the thieves — which it is — and more as capitalism unfolding in a global economy, as a process that creates not simply winners and losers but evolving social classes, learning from their mistakes and successes and — in the case of working people — rediscovering cultures of resistance.

In Youngstown, Tammy Thomas, a black worker at the then- prominent Packard Electric and single mother of three, goes to a union meeting. She finds it pointless — two white guys arguing, she tells Packer, and her description is doubtlessly right. But why was the meeting pointless? And was it always thus? Did this local union have a history of militancy? Of accommodation?

Thomas for one goes on to be a first-rate organizer, but that's due to the influence of an outside organization. Similarly the good guy in foreclosure-ravaged Tampa is a feisty local lawyer, not an affected homeowner. Were there no instances of community institutions that resisted the leveling of their world?

Packer rightly cites local critics calling the funding for exurban Tampa's heady property-flipping a Ponzi scheme, and one with the active collusion of county commissioners, “but everything kept growing and no one paid attention,” he writes, end quote. Why no attention?

And why, when almost all of his white characters are either moneyed Rand Paul-style libertarian ideologues or conservative Christians, does he give them such ample room to expound? Couldn't Packer have found even one semi-employed Marxist in one of the troubled locations to balance the picture? If Packer was stuck, he could have called me.

Packer exhibits both the strengths and weaknesses of mainstream newsgathering. Even when he refuses to sing hosannas to the rich and the ubercomfortable, instead acting as an informed and aggressive skeptic who tells oppressed people's stories so well, he never quite pulls the trigger. Nor does he seem to know he can.

Capitalism is about much more than conscious thievery, guilty individuals, enabling politicians and victims; it's a system that depends on exploitation and class division. It may require exploiters to tell outsized moral tales about themselves, whether as members of yesterday's Calvinist elect or today's libertarians, but it's first a system of production, and an unstable one made up of real people in a real and conflict-ridden context. Why people do or do not make common cause and fight back — and what they fight for — are as much part of the story as are the hideous conditions they endure. That's

the part Packer doesn't tell, and I wish he had.

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