



## Consumer Culture Coroners

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**review of:**

Thomas Frank (2001) *One Market Under God: Extreme Capitalism, Market Populism and the End of Economic Democracy*. London: Secker and Warburg.  
(HB: pp.430, £18.99, ISBN: 0436276194)

A previous reviewer for *ephemera* made innovative use of amazon.com in his discussion (De Cock, 2001). I'd thought I'd follow his lead. An *ephemera* concession might be inappropriate in the current context so I'll confine myself to pointing out that the site shows that purchasers of Thomas Frank's *One Market Under God* have also bought books by Naomi Klein, Noreena Hertz and George Monbiot. No surprise there. But I wonder why? Frank warns that his contribution gives "no advice that might help the reader to pick a NASDAQ tenbagger, say, or rebrand a line of detergent or footwear" (p.23). Which I think is unhelpful not only because no sane person would have been expecting it, but also because I have no idea what a "tenbagger" is. I think perhaps I'd quite like one but would probably feel bad about it- but more of this later.

So what's the point of Frank's book? And the answer is that I'm not sure. As a starting point, I offer a new innovation- from *The Guardian Editor* supplement *The Digested Read Digested*. For those not wishing to read the full version, Frank appears to be saying: 'Bad, Bad. BAD. Bad, Bad, Bad, Bad. BAD'.

This is a little unfair because Frank has a strong central thesis. He argues that in contemporary society the increasing power of business is protected and projected by what he calls 'market populism'. This is the belief that the will of the people is expressed and facilitated through the market. According to Frank market populism:

was just the thing for a social order requiring constant doses of legitimacy. Taking as a fact the notion that business gives people what they want, market populism proceeds to build all manner of populist fantasies. Of businessmen as public servants; of industrial and cultural production as a simple reflection of popular desire, of the box office as a voting booth. By consuming the fruits of industry, we the people are endorsing the industrial system, voting for it in a plebiscite far more democratic than a mere election. (p.30)

Under market populism it follows that an unregulated market drives a truly democratic society. The market represents the people; it provides the products they like at prices they can afford. And the relentless upward movement of the stock market ensures their financial security. The two coalesce in our investment strategies. Just invest in brands – the products that you buy, consume and trust. The market will even provide for those ‘downsized’ – if they are given shares in the company that has sacked them then everyone benefits from the ‘efficiencies’ resulting from their sacrifice. Given the mutual benefit flowing from the market, any attempt by government, unions (and particularly the French) to control its activities (and those of its agents) represents unwarranted elitism. Criticism of business becomes criticism of the tastes and choices of the common man. Regulation protects only the snob products of the elite.

Hence markets are not only mediums of exchange but also mediums of consent. And consent is managed via a massive PR enterprise. The major part of the book is devoted to exposing the ways in which market populism has been propagated. We read of cyber-prophets juggling divinity and natural law to present market forces as inevitable and irresistible (and woe betide anyone who tries to resist); new age managers seeing business as really a means for further social causes; Generation X’ers investing carefully in order to (one day) avoid the authority of regular employment; advertising executives recasting themselves as ethnographers developing brands by building ‘relationships’ with clients/consumers/citizens. Worse, Frank shows how potential critics in the media and academy have either been seduced by the market or become preoccupied with internal squabbles. Under market populism what were once countervailing sources of power now provide only reaffirmations. The result is that we have become more and more ignorant of massive (and growing) inequalities of income.

So having established his thesis, Frank spends the best part of 300 pages outlining the bad and mad arguments mobilised in the name of market populism. There are some nice sections that point out particularly telling contradictions. He shows how corporations represent themselves as depending on ‘good’ management. And ‘good’ management is, of course, deserving of handsome rewards. But as soon as management is embraced outside the market it becomes an anathema for creating ‘rigidities’ and ‘stunting’ enterprise. Frank notes that investing in ‘big brands’ betrays the hypocrisy at the heart of market populism. It assumes that the market is both free to make its own choices, but also controlled by the brand managers.

But after a while, and after the same names keep cropping up, we start to need something else. Indeed at one point, Frank seems to stop commenting himself, content it appears to let the absurdity speak for itself. There are a number of problems here. Personally I’m not that close to swallowing the bombast peddled by the new economy prophets. And I’m sure few reading this piece will be either. But that’s not saying much. Belief would, for some of these ideas, be similar to believing in Father Christmas. We have a fair bit of empirical evidence, the bursting of the dot-com bubble, the US economic downturn, that Father Christmas is at least feeling rather fragile. Maybe some will be shocked by this news and follow some personal path to redemption. But what are the rest of us, the readers of Klein, Monbiot and Hertz to do. We read, see and feel much about the effects of growing power of corporations to make us deeply

uncomfortable. But what are we going to do about it? To put it another way, what comes after bad, bad, bad, bad, BAD.

It is tempting in considering this discomfort to confess our implicit identifications with the tenets of market populism. I have an ISA. This means that I'd prefer the market to go up rather than down. This means that whilst I'm not too preoccupied with spotting 'tenbaggers', I guess I'm counting on someone (and who knows perhaps someone closer to believing the tall tales in Frank's book than you or I) to look out for them on my behalf. Many of us are employed in university departments sustained by shiny dreams of aspirant new economy professionals. I understand that Frank has faced some personal criticisms along these lines, being asked to account for a number of articles written for business magazines. His explanation was simple, "I have to eat. I have a child on the way. I'll write for anyone who will pay me, as long as they don't force me to change what I have to say. And I also don't want to preach solely to the choir" (Newitz, 2001: 2). But it was quickly pointed out that just because he hasn't been censored doesn't mean that he hasn't been co-opted. The dissenting voice becomes proof of the liberalism of the powerful.

In another section of the book, Frank writes about market populism and academia. Frank has a PhD. He talks about the difficulty of getting a tenured job and of academics turned into casual labourers by the market. Nevertheless he is disillusioned by the state of his discipline. He feels academics have become cultural coroners dissecting the decomposing corpses of their disciplines – self-obsessives indulging in "theoretical hedging – paying homage to all the right texts; identifying and avoiding errors of this school and that; situating itself with relationship to Foucault, Gramsci, Deleuze and Guattari" (p.284). He also writes about a visit to an advertising conference full of bright young things. Casting a weary eye, the conference seemed to him, "like postmodern cultural radicalism come home to Madison Avenue complete with all its usual militancy against master narratives and hierarchical authority... Only one thing was wrong. These enthusiastic, self-proclaimed vicars of the *vox populi* were also, almost to a man, paid agents of the Fortune 500" (p.257). Frank finds many graduates but few '*bona fide*' PhD's. They are however keen to see themselves as very, very clever. At the same time, at Frank's own *alma mater*, ad agencies like Ogilvy and Mather trawled for anthropology PhDs (p.275). His view is that academics are either indulgently preoccupied with internal debates or in the process of selling out (or being sold out) to the market. I'm sure that readers of *ephemera* can produce their own version of these sentiments... Derrida, Foucault, ESRC, RAE, MBA. His response, probably not taken by many *ephemera* readers, is to address a different audience and given that he has mouths to feed, to take the corporate shilling direct. We launder it through something called *Critical Management*.

Once this felt in itself deserving of criticism. So I poked fun at the (in)authenticity of Naomi Klein's middle class camper van dreams (Smith, 2001). And became steadily (but silently) bothered by our increasingly indulgent (and repetitive) 'reflexive' loopy-loops. Now, you will be pleased to hear, I am less hung up on whether we are co-opted by, or complicit in, the system. Since it is obvious that we are, it's clearly redundant as a line of criticism. It is a preoccupation that creates only resigned fatalism. That's not to say that some exploration of the desires that lead to this co-option is not important. It's

just that it has to provide the basis of something more. In the context of globalisation, many of these desires have bad effects. And they are clearly intensified by the persuasive efforts of capital. Bad indeed. But like our own disciplinary efforts, the consumer culture coroners are becoming self-sustaining and formulaic – *The Guardian* recently (4/08/01) published in the review section a top ten sales chart for ‘anti-capitalist’ books.

Yet Klein’s loft apartment, Frank’s hungry baby and my ‘tenbagging’ are still relevant. Whether unintentionally or not, at least Naomi Klein’s musing about her mall-rat youth, the tacky corporate takeover of her once trendy residential area and wistful regrets over the loss of the “untrammelled pastures” once explored by her (rich, white, liberal, elite) parents brings to the fore some of the questions we must confront if we want to respond to the bad things that Frank simply reports. At one point, Frank makes a criticism of media mogul and founder of *USA Today*, Al Neuharth, by noting ironically that he had put a criticism of elitism into the mouth of Singapore’s Lee Kuan Yew, “The more you judge others by your own standards, the more you show total disregard for their circumstances” (p.331). Now whilst this might be deeply suspicious coming out of certain mouths, as a general point I think it is important. *One Market Under God* catalogues the absurdities of capital and hopes (I assume) that people will recognise this and formulate some suitable responses. But at the same time Frank tends to see individuals as gullible and is scathing of “audiences-agency” approaches as another examples of populist spin. If its rhetoric is so self-evidentially unconvincing, then why is it so powerful? He mocks the blunt tools of focus groups and market segmentation and criticises a financial journalist for not defining ‘his’ middle class, but writes himself of an undifferentiated middle class whose consent and desires are supremely managed by market populism.

Clearly ‘people’ want ‘stuff’. New cars, out of season melons at reasonable prices, fashionable sporting goods, the sense of security produced by expanding wealth. On the one hand, the displacement of the rural peasantry in the developing world will continue whoever buys a corporate melon. On the other, if we want people to change the products that they buy, we have to consider the significance of their social-economic position on these desires and the willingness to modify what we consume. So whilst I want the various elements of Frank’s analysis to provide alternatives, and an understanding of market populism to offer some grounds for resistance, this must be informed by an understanding of our differing positions within this system and the effect this has on the viability of these alternatives. It’s easy to feel hopeless when faced with the vastness and intangibility of the systemic badness that is reported. But it’s easy to give in to shiny desires when implored by the abstract anti-materialism of the already sated.

I pointed out earlier that Frank warns against the absence in his book of investment strategies or branding advice. But no advice at all? If all this is to be more than hand wringing, if it is meant to produce action, then perhaps producing specific and detailed advice is precisely what *we* should be doing. Market populism is about effacement of course. And Frank writes powerfully about its strategies, about how effacement is achieved. But given the sheer volume of corporate criticism that is currently being produced, I’m more concerned about what is being effaced and what we can do about it.

This needs facts, claims, assertions leading to prescriptions and alternatives. Things that hang heavy... those unephemeral things. I'm not sure how this can be reconciled with a sympathetic and differentiated understanding of why people want things, but suspect it means beginning with the things themselves.

Nike, Gap, Saipan, sweatshops...yes, yes. But how much do you *really* know about that melon?

**references**

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