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Book Review: 'Unaccountable' by Janine Wedel

Assume corruption, and follow the money

As an anthropologist who has studied the ingrained corruption of communist-era Poland, Janine Wedel sees a lot of familiar signs in the United States. Much like the ruling class in Poland, the ruling class in the USA slides easily between corporate and government and back, as needed. The line is completely blurred now, as corporates write our regulations and laws and electeds become directors. As much as three quarters of the federal government has been simply outsourced to the private sector, because civil service codes of conduct (as well as wages and benefits) can be avoided.

Lobbyists often don't bother to register as such for several reasons. Sometimes they just deny they are lobbying; they are simply taking meetings like everyone else in the private sector. Or they understand that the penalties for not registering are no worse than the restrictions of registering. Or, they get their client, say the country of Libya, to pay its enormous fees to a PR agency, not (officially) a lobbying group. The PR firm can implement events unrestricted by laws governing foreign influence. The whole financial crisis was one of corporates running the Treasury for their own benefit – until they burst the bubble. No need to lobby – they were running the whole show.

Think tanks used to be neutral. Today, with a hundred times as many, they are instruments of somebody, pushing a private agenda. For example, 72% of climate change denial books have a verifiable link to think tanks, and 40% of those were written or edited by people with no relevant scientific credentials. But having a published book allows the network to quote from these "authorities". The dramatic result was that the number of Americans who don't believe in climate change increased significantly, despite the pileup of visible evidence around us. Finally, think tanks provide institutional memory for government since it is so unstable and insignificant by comparison. And they are unaccountable to anyone except their funder.

This same analysis applies to journalism, to industry, to government, to academia and even to philanthropy. Non-profits have proliferated into agenda-pushers, funded usually in secret, and often to the immense profit of both the owner and the sponsor. Fully integrated corruption is the order of the day. Be careful what you "like" on Facebook.

The joke comes near the opening of the book, where Wedel examines the famous Transparency International corruption index. The USA always ranks highly, being a beacon of purity in a sea of depravity. As the book digs deeper into every segment of society, she proves again and again that is

laughable.

I was little apprehensive about an anthropologist making recommendations at the end of the book, but they turn out to be simply sage advice. Always be suspicious of pundits whose title is Former. Who's paying them now is what we need to know. Expert is another cover. It could simply be someone who has written a bogus book. Professors are just as likely to be in the pay of an agenda pusher as any lobbyist. Wedel says we should go "one click further" and see who's behind the opinion. That won't change the unaccountability, but it will help prevent the rampant manipulation we undergo daily. It's nothing the Poles or the Russians or the Chinese couldn't tell you about.



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