

Shadow Elite: How the World's New Power Brokers Undermine Democracy, Government, and the Free Market

Shadow Elite: How the World's New Power Brokers Undermine Democracy, Government, and the Free Market, by Janine R. Wedel New York, NY: Basic Books, 2009. \$27.50 cloth. 283pp. ISBN: 9780465091065.

Thomas Birtchnell,
Lancaster University, UK
t.birtchnell@lancaster.ac.uk

Two distinct audiences will find much reward in reading Janine R. Wedel's *Shadow Elite*. First, those concerned with the extant focus of the book: U.S. political-economic issues and public policy—albeit in a global context—and the trajectories of America's neoconservatives. It is a vital area of inquiry and one that has considerable commercial appeal in light of the current power shift that has taken place in the United States; a power shift that allows a more objective, retrospective appraisal of the rise of the neoconservatives. Wedel's central thesis, that the cultures of the Cold War impacted greatly on neoconservatism, surely deserves a critical appraisal. However, a second, perhaps more shadowy audience will be interested in *Shadow Elite* as a work of anthropology and as an example of the cutting edge of the discipline. The book sits alongside other recent work on neoliberalism and cultural critique by authors such as Aihwa Ong. This review will discuss what the book has to offer as an approach to anthropology in new contexts and areas.

Wedel identifies herself as an “anthropologist,” in fact a “social anthropologist,” and much of the work reflects her earlier ethnography in Poland. Unlike this earlier work—and diverging from traditional anthropology—*Shadow Elite* takes as its focus not a distinct field-site or ethnic group per se, but rather an organizational culture; what Wedel terms a “flex” culture. Those hoping for interviews with the U.S. political elite or their advisors will be disappointed; instead Wedel identifies a shadowy group of people who work behind the scenes: subjects with shifting values, allegiances, and goals. While appearing at times to be more transnational professionals than elites, the individuals or flexians whom Wedel interviews circulate in the top tiers of the government, the academy, and the private sector. Flexians are lobbyists, diplomats, and consultants. They are all coercers. Yet, it is unclear who employs them or indeed what binds this group together. Wedel takes this shadowiness not as a sign of poor definition but rather as evidence of an organizational phenomenon, a cultural “performance,” that lies at the core of current capitalist regimes. Performance emerges as a vital skill for personal survival and profit.

Throughout *Shadow Elite* the informants are contradictory and indeterminate. The ambiguity comes not from the book's approach, but from the everyday life practices and values of the subjects. The reader both reviles and respects these shadowy actors. Wedel identifies three key terms to unpack this ambiguity: flexibility, accountability, and “truthiness.” In anthropology these three issues have longer lineages than the casual reader might first assume, and Wedel has given contemporary shape and context to them. In effect, Wedel offers a *modus operandi* for how anthropology—and more widely the social sciences—might engage with these slippery, challenging flexians. Here, the anthropological method, through lived critique and direct experience, offers much deeper analysis than the questionnaires and surveys common in the social sciences and the management sciences, which flexians are skilled in co-opting, corrupting, or deflecting.

Thus there are three key anthropological questions that *Shadow Elite* broaches. The first, truthiness, is often understood in anthropology within the paradigm of “studying up.” If truthiness is afforded to elites and those with status, does this mean that anthropologists cannot trust their informants' accounts and narratives? The second, accountability, sits within the optic of the “audit culture” in applying ethnography within organizational, rather than ethnic, settings. How does anthropology maintain its thick description within the framework of neoliberalism that funds, supports, and justifies the discipline? The third, flexibility, has been discussed in multi-site ethnography, transnationalism, and in the new mobilities turn in the social sciences as an issue of fixity. How can anthropologists conduct fieldwork if sites are politically charged, mobile, and fleeting? Rather than being intimidated by these issues, Wedel addresses them directly as given challenges within the research rather than faults in anthropology's methodological tools. In taking this stand, Wedel shows that those interested in anthropology, ethnography, and ethnomethodology can still engage with power, politics, and mobilities. By becoming a “flexian” in her academic approach, Wedel allies herself with many other researchers who might identify with anthropology, but who can now be

found in a range of eclectic departments, centers, and institutions. In effect, Wedel subscribes to the very flex culture she articulates—she has “gone native”—displaying a pragmatism that now underpins anthropological practices.

Shadow Elite is a prime example of why anthropology, and even its core methodology, ethnography, is widely criticized as a dead-and-alive “zombie” or even perhaps “shadow” discipline. Books like *Shadow Elite* show that anthropology, as it is commonly understood, has legacy core principles (one year of fieldwork; a fixed field-site; discernable, “ethnic” informants) that are profoundly inflexible and thus ill-suited to the sort of cultural forms in political and public governance. *Shadow Elite* also shows that the proponents of the anthropological project are much more flexible than has been assumed by those foreseeing anthropology’s institutional demise. As Wedel and other authors like Ong show, a reimagined anthropological, “mobile” method might be the best there is to tackle slippery subjects like flexians. Anthropologists have learned to be flexians themselves, often occupying multiple roles, belonging to a range of organizations, and crossing disciplinary boundaries with ease. Rather than worry about anthropology’s substance, Wedel shows that the game of the day is to be flexible, mobile, and pragmatic. In attempting to address these issues Wedel demonstrates that the values and practices that underpin anthropology should not be abandoned because traditional anthropological approaches appear fundamentally incompatible to the sorts of tactics necessary to understand flexible, mobile, unaccountable, transnational elites. While the danger in affiliating with accountability, flexibility, and truthiness is that these issues expose traditional shortcomings in method, thus exposing the “deep” political journalism that Wedel’s book sometimes appears to be, *Shadow Elite* also allows anthropology to show itself in a complementary light as *flexible*.

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