

Have You Heard#51 Win/Win: Why Billionaire Philanthropists are Bad at School Reform

Episode transcript

Jennifer Berkshire: Welcome to Have You Heard, I'm Jennifer Berkshire.

Jack Schneider: And I'm Jack Schneider.

Berkshire: And Jack, we frequently discuss books of which I am enamored on this show.

Schneider: That's true. I thought you were going to complete that sentence by saying 'and which you Jack are resistant to having an episode about.'

Berkshire: Dot, dot, dot. In fact, one of our listeners recently complained that the flurry of book recommendations that comes from this show is so intense that her bedside table is literally collapsing under the strain.

Schneider: Once it does collapse, she'll have a new table—a table made of books. Unfortunately, those books will not be accessible to her because she will have a new pile of books on them. But I think we get credit as furniture designers.

Berkshire: Well, our topic today is a book of which I am particularly enamored. It's a book that's gotten a lot of attention. It's called *Winners Take All: The Elite Charade of Changing the World*. It's by a writer named Anand Giridharadas. And I am going to go out on a limb and say that I think it's the best explanation of the sort of billionaire fascination with remaking public education that I've come across.

Schneider: You're saying this, of course, in the presence of somebody who has written about that. So I'll just pretend that there was an asterisk there that says, 'you know, with the exception, of course, of your work Jack.'

Berkshire: That goes without saying, Jack. So I think when people typically think about why the richest among us from Bezos to Zuckerberg—I'm sure there is a billionaire that starts with A, but I can't think of him right now—the explanation that they come up with is that there must be some monetary motivation for why these people are as interested in remaking the schools as they are.

Schneider: You know, there is, of course, money involved in that there are often investments that are most frequently tangential to whatever the reform being pursued is. But ultimately that's not really what this effort is about. That the most direct line between philanthropists and something of benefit to them is not often the truest story we can tell.

Berkshire: When we think about the impact that income inequality has on public education, we think of it very literally. I remember a sign that one of the students who walked out of the Boston

Public Schools over budget cuts a couple years ago had. They had a very sort of vivid image of skyscrapers rising over the city even as their own schools were confronting deep cuts.

That's what income inequality looks like. But as *Winners Take All* argues, the impact of inequality is actually much broader than that. It constrains the kind of ideas that are taken seriously. It constrains the definition of what the problems are and who gets to solve them.

Schneider: A shorter way of describing that is just to talk about the fact that it matters who is at the table. And so in education, you know, it's often the case that because of democratic governance structures that lots of different kinds of people are at the table, but increasingly we see a role being played by philanthropists who, of course, by virtue of the fact that they're philanthropists and not elected officials, do not have any connection to democratic governance structures. And because of the economic advantages that are what made them philanthropists in the first place, they tend to share particular beliefs. They tend to share a particular worldview.

In fact, research has documented that they tend to share similar social circles, which means that the ideas that are in currency with some of them soon become accepted aspects of ideology for most of them. This is something to be really concerned about because they may have good ideas, but they may not. And if they're trapped in an echo chamber with tremendous resources at their disposal, you can see that there's a potentially problematic situation with regard to the policies that are going to be enacted

Berkshire: Well, enough about what we think about *Winners Take All* and why it's so relevant to understanding the various efforts to disrupt public education. We're joined now by the author himself, Anand Giridharadas. Anand: welcome to Have You Heard.

I want to start out by asking you about a winner who does not appear in your book, but is doing his part to change the world and that would be Amazon's Jeff Bezos, now, the richest man in the world. He announced a couple of weeks ago that he's going to give back by starting up a chain of Montessori-inspired preschools in urban areas. It's a perfect example of the 'winner take all' mentality that your book is about, that someone who has been absolutely central to our age of inequality is now stepping in to offer a fix—on his terms.

Anand Giridharadas: Jeff Bezos becomes the latest entrant to a whole world of billionaire givers, and what's interesting is that he arrives at a moment of reckoning within both the the tech world where he made his money and the philanthropy world where he's now alighting. I think five years ago the general attitude to big tech was, 'thanks so much for this app uncle,' and you know, in the general attitude to people giving money away was like, gosh, thanks so much. Thanks for giving back. And our culture is changing on both those scores.

I think we now understand that we're living in this age dominated by a small handful of tech players that are sucking the life out of lots of other parts of the economy. And you know, it's no accident that Mark Zuckerberg who talks more about changing the world and making it better

also, you know, runs a company that has the distinction of being the first company in American history to seriously compromise an American election. It's no accident that the idealism came with, you know, the worst crime on our most sacred thing that's ever been done by an American company.

And similarly with philanthropy, you know, there is a reckoning happening where people are understanding that the traditional approach to philanthropy that has prevailed since Andrew Carnegie laid out his gospel of wealth 100 and some years ago—that basically if rich people give back, you zip your lips about how they made the money—that's breaking down finally and belatedly. People are starting to recognize that a lot of the money that is being given away, a lot of how it's made, a lot of how it's kept, are themselves the causes of the problems that these rich people turn around and solve. And that we may be better off as a society with people just not causing problems in the first place and then turning around and solving them.

Berkshire: My cohost, Jack Schneider and I were talking before you joined us about how a lot of people in our world assume that guys like Jeff Bezos or Mark Zuckerberg must have a financial interest in education. That it's money that's the big motivator for what some people call the billionaire boys club. But part of what makes *Winners Take All* such a compelling read is that you really let us see the world through their eyes and the picture we get is much more complex than just 'I want to cash in on the schools.'

Giridharadas: One of the things I'll say just overall is that, you know, for *Winners Take All* I spent about two plus years in the world of elite so-called world changers, trying to understand how they see the world, understand how they try to make change. And one of the things that I would say as an overall conclusion is I think one of the reasons rich people are so effective at railroading the rest of us and, and siphoning the gains of the future away from most of us and, and, and building the society to kind of suit themselves is that we, the rest of us, don't do a very good job of understanding them and their motives. When journalists tend to write about inequality, they always write about poor people. You know, when they write about our education system, they go to the south side of Chicago and write about kids in a struggling school.

And I kind of had this epiphany of like, 'why are we writing about these problems without writing about the engineers of the problems. Why are we just writing about the victims of the problems? Why aren't we reading about the people who designed the system that generates these problems. And it seemed to me it was important to understand the architects, and one of the things that I did by spending time in that world and understanding it is we don't really get them. We think, as you suggested, that people are trying to get an education and make more money or it's all greed or this and that.

What I found is much more nuanced story about what motivates the winners of our age and among the things I found was that many, many elites who try to give, who try to donate to a charter school, who try to get on the board of a charter school, who try to, you know, help the Harlem Children's Zone, who try to do any number of things in any number of other

areas—there's a general sincerity to these people in general. They are not trying to do this to make more money, they're trying to do this to make the world better.

The problem is that they're not. The problem is that the good they do, which is real but limited, is often an accomplice to the preservation of a system that keeps generating more harm. The charter school that they donate to, their donation to it as part of a system that allows them to protect the underfunding and unequal funding of public schools across this country.

Berkshire: I want to just dwell here for a moment at the risk of crowding out my co-host who has been waiting so patiently to ask you a question. So you're not arguing that the motives of the world changing elites are necessarily bad, but that they are perpetuating and benefiting from a system that is increasingly unfair.

Giridharadas: In many ways, the very real good they do out of sincere motives is part of an enablement of inequality and cruelty and I think if we want to actually stop rich people from fleecing America, we actually have to understand what makes them tick.

Schneider: I want to follow up about something that you talk about in the book and that you were talking about a sort of indirectly just a moment ago and that's the 'win/win.' And so I think it's a really a pithy way of identifying the kind of ideological orientation of many elites to distinguish the win/win from the win/lose. And I'm wondering first if you can just describe that for any of our listeners who haven't already read the book and then maybe if we can follow up a little bit to unpack some of that because I think it's particularly relevant for education reform.

Giridharadas: The win/win is at the heart, the beating heart, of our age of inequality and our age of essentially withholding the American dream for most Americans. And that may sound paradoxical to some of your listeners because win/win, you know, unlike the word 'win' by itself, which is just a single victory, win/win is suggestive of a double victory, which, even if you're not a math teacher, you know that two is generally more than one and better than one.

You may have listeners who have used the word win/win unironically in the last week. You may have listeners who hear it all the time. You hear it on TV, you hear it in the culture, there is probably a tote bag that says win/win on it. I mean, win/win is as ubiquitous as you get. And what is the win/win? The win/win is the idea, it originated in business and kind of the idea of trade and exchange. Like you have money, I have ice cream, you want ice cream, I'll get your money. Good. Win/win. That is a real win/win actually that I just laid out for you. And a lot of things that take place in the realm of exchange are win/wins right?

But what has happened in recent years is that the idea of the win/win has kind of insidiously infiltrated the world of social change, of education, of health, of fighting inequality and poverty. So that the view has taken hold that this law that applies to ice cream from money exchanges, which is that we both must benefit for it to be worth doing, has now conquered the world of social change so that there is now this feeling that both parties—the powerful and the

powerless, the haves and the have nots, the rich and the poor—must benefit from a social change for it to be worth doing.

Now, the cleverness of this is it still called a win/win, so it still sounds great. But hold on a second. Are we saying that the powerful must always benefit from helping the powerless? Are we saying that social change must always kick something upstairs to the people benefiting from the status quo? Are we saying the only way to empower women is in ways that give a little something to the men? Are we saying that the only way to help poor kids that are screwed by our education system are in ways that also kicked something up to the affluent? Are we saying that the only way to, you know, improve our healthcare system is in ways that take nothing from billionaires and corporations?

Yeah, that's what we're saying when we increasingly talk about social change as being a win/win.

Berkshire: We're talking to Anand Giridharadas about his new book, *Winners Take All: The Elite Charade of Changing the World*. We'll hear more from him in just a minute, but first I want to call upon our resident public intellectual. That would be Jack Schneider, because when we were getting ready for this conversation, you said something that I thought was really interesting that win/win doesn't just mean somebody always has to benefit financially from say, doing good, but that policies that result in somebody having to give something up aren't even being considered. Tell us more

Schneider: Win/win, of course, isn't just a kind of policy paradigm with regard to financial issues. It also increasingly, I think shapes the way that we view what is possible in terms of politics. That if anybody has to give anything up, it's a nonstarter politically. So, you know, when we think for instance, of the example of busing, something that has completely fallen off the table as a mechanism for addressing school segregation now, nevermind, that there's actually fairly abundant evidence that moving students around was a more effective way of integrating schools than allowing parents to choose where they send their children to school. You know, allowing for choice is a kind of win/win if things happen to work out well, right? Parents get choice and the schools become less segregated.

But of course, you know, there is no such thing as a free lunch, that you can't get all of the good without any of the bad. And in this case, what we do is we get rid of any of the bad, but we lose much of the good along the way. And so, you know, it troubles me when I think about this concept of the win/win because what it means is that our broader political conversation is impoverished. It means that we think only about what we get from something and not about the difficult trade offs that have to be made in order to accomplish some of the really ambitious things that we hope to do as a society.

Berkshire: I want to bring our guests back in. Anand: one of the arguments you make in the book is that inequality isn't just about economics but about ideas, and that the more resources a

small group of people commands, the more they effectively control the terms of the debate. But there's obviously a cultural element at work too, that we've given, say, Mark Zuckerberg an incredible amount of authority, including now anointing him as the savior who's going to fix our public schools.

Giridharadas: A lot of what I'm talking about in the book is how we have enabled this extreme inequality and how we've enabled these billionaires to get away with it, but it is culture that as you say, all of us share in and participate in that gives them the permission to do that. I will tell you something very simple. In Europe, in general—Europe's a big place, but I think this is a fairly accurate statement based on my reporting and travels. In Europe, no one thinks of Mark Zuckerberg as someone who's changing the world. Now 'no one' may not be literally correct, but in European cultures, that's just not how they see someone like that. They see Mark Zuckerberg as like, yeah, 'he's a guy with a great company. Good. Good for him.' They see him as like someone with a chemical company here. They see him the way we see someone with a chemical company. Probably a nice person, probably in it for themselves, probably trying to dump some toxic something into our world, and we should probably be vigilant and make sure they don't do that.

That's a normal, healthy way to view someone who has a company, and therefore in Europe they're not as vulnerable to the Mark Zuckerbogs because they know how to regulate them and they fine him and they stand up for themselves. They create data protection laws that are much tougher than ours. They create antitrust scrutiny that's much tougher than ours, and I think a big reason they do that is they have a culture that's free of these myths.

And so this is actually an empowering message, I think, to your listeners and to regular people in general, which is that we are participating in a culture that valorizes the win/win, that valorizes the billionaire savior, that is grateful when people who have money they probably shouldn't have give it away. And we can actually participate in not believing those things anymore. We can just stop believing those things. We can actually, the next time someone gives money away and is, you know, at a conference that you're attending, ask them a question about how they made the money, not how they're giving it away.

We uphold through what we passively assent to in this world, and schools uphold it by who they put on the board and, you know, and who they raise money from and who they allow to be their advisors. We are all in on a world that has entrusted the super rich to become our saviors and and the replacements of government in many areas of our life, and that's an empowering message because we can stop participating in that culture today.

Berkshire: I want to read a short passage from *Winners Take All* about the billionaire changemakers' disdain for democracy that really stayed with me.

All around us, the winners in our highly inequitable status quo declare themselves partisans of change. They know the problem and they want to be part of the solution. Actually, they want to

lead the search for solutions. The initiatives mostly aren't democratic, nor do they reflect problem solving or universal solutions. Rather, they favor the use of the private sector and its charitable spoils, the market way of looking at things and the bypassing of government. They reflect a highly influential view that the winners of the status quo and the tools and mentalities and values that help them win our redressing the injustices.

I bet that this will strike a chord with anyone who is, say, trying to figure out exactly where Mark Zuckerberg's enormous stake in expanding personalized learning, for example, is going and as you recount in the book, Anand Giridharadas, it's basically none of your business.

Giridharadas: Mark Zuckerberg is not playing the small ball of working through democracy. Democracy is not—he's too big for democracy. So he's giving it away, I mean you are nobody in this scheme, because you're merely a citizen and when you give the way Mark Zuckerberg gives, you're giving the way a king gives. This is Downton Abbey feudal giving, and who are the serfs to know about what Lord and Lady Grantham are doing?

Schneider: I feel like I didn't do my requisite PBS homework.

Berkshire: But you also argue that we don't have to accept that the market way of looking at things is the only way, that we can essentially demand a more democratic approach. Explain.

Giridharadas: The question that I ask people to think about is, for a long time, we've all been on the receiving end of this culture that tells us to solve things privately, you know, either have a billionaire give back or buy a tote bag that's going to change the world or a red iPhone case that's going to change the world or, you know, go to a plutocratic conference that's going to change the world. I want to urge people to, the next time you are walking around your society and you see a problem that disturbs you, you see problem with education or any other area of your life that disturbs you, think of a solution that has the following four qualities: it's public, it's democratic, it's universal and it's institutional. Think of a solution that actually would solve the problem at the root, not in the branches and for everybody, not just the people that you would want to save that day, and get out of that relationship of saving to begin with.

When we act privately, when you have these foundations or companies picking and choosing people they want to save, again, that's a feudal relationship. That's a relationship of master and servant. The servant is having a little difficulty in their life, the master is throwing some gold coins at them, but it's not changing the relationship of master and servant. When we act democratically through our shared institutions to solve a problem for everybody, in education, in health, whatever else, we are expressing the value of the whole. We are acting together to protect each other and it has a fundamentally different meaning. We are both the object and the subject of the help, and I think we have to, in education and every other sphere, get out of this world in which we think that because you once got lucky at a hedge fund trade, you should decide what our schools are like.

Because you got lucky at a hedge fund trading, and because we have the kinds of rules that allowed you to keep that when you probably shouldn't have kept all of it, you are a moral debtor to society, the way Chiara Cordelli, one of the political philosophers I write about in the book, puts it. You're a moral debtor to society and you should have as much discretion about where the money goes as credit card debtors and others, which is to say very little or none.

You shouldn't probably have the money you have. I'm good that you want to give it away. You should give it away in ways that don't involve your name, that don't cost the public money by you claiming a charitable deduction, that don't increase your power over the society but actually reduce your advisory role, that don't put your name on it. You should give in ways that reduce your power. You should be brave enough to become less powerful through the act of giving.

Berkshire: Well, I am obviously a huge fan of the book. I have been pushing it upon almost everyone I meet. It's an infuriating read. I would advise people to avoid reading it in the presence of pitchforks, but it's also kind of liberating and I'm curious about what you hope readers will take away from *Winners Take All*.

Giridharadas: I think of this book as very much trying to dismantle a culture and it does so through stories of people living in this culture, struggling with these ideas, trying to do better, but being limited inhibited by a bunch of mythology that encircles them, and my book is trying to kind of get rid of that mythology. It's trying to dismantle it and make you never use the word win/ win or thought leader or innovation non ironically again. I think this kind of this false sense that you can change the world in ways that protect the status quo for the winners of our age is at the heart of why we live in an age that has been so good for winners and so, so you know, mediocre at best or punishing for everybody else.

Berkshire: That was Anand Giridharadas, author of the new book *Winners Take All: The Elite Charade of Changing the World*, and hopefully hearing this interview will encourage you to read his book because it's absolutely packed with insights that will help you understand the ever-expanding billionaire school transformation biz. And Jack and I will be right back to discuss his secret fantasy of finally becoming a thought leader.

[Music]

Berkshire: So Jack, I want to skip ahead to the end of *Winners Take All*. We just heard this rousing call from Anand Giridharadas that we should overthrow our elite overlords, but the book actually ends with kind of a melancholy portrait of Bill Clinton. He's sitting in his skyscraper office in New York City grappling with what's happened since he led the Democrats in a particular direction. Some would call it neo-liberalism, although not me, because I'm not allowed to use that word on this program, and Giridharadas argues that, you know, it's not only because of the right that we've ended up with a world where market solutions are the only thing on offer.

On the one hand, you have republicans who are openly contemptuous of government, but the response of Democrats has not been to stand up for public institutions, but to basically agree that they're broken and offer up market-friendly, donor-approved fixes, and Giridharadas writes quote: "They conceded so much to government's haters that the cause lost the fire of purpose. What say you?"

Schneider: That reminds me of Federalist Paper number 10 by James Madison, and what he talks about there is what eventually does become a kind of uniquely American approach to dealing with civic disagreement. And that is to allow factions to counter each other in—Madison says something along the lines of, you know, 'the spirit of party and faction will ensure ordinary operations of government.' And it's almost as if the new Democrats forgot that, right? That they presumed a kind of goodwill and orientation towards a common good that, you know, a political philosopher, more like Rousseau would have presumed to be a prerequisite of a democratic society. And as a result of that, which you see is a lot of ceding, not the sort you put in the ground, but the sort you suffer when you are losing, a lot of ceding of ground with regard to issues like public education for instance.

So, you know, charter schools, which we could have a healthy and robust civic debate about, actually become a project of both the new Democrats and the political right. And as a result of that, there is no real powerful faction countering them. You just end up seeing a kind of triumph there for a policy proposition that you know, could have been encountered by a robust antagonistic faction. This is not to say that that's the best way to make policy, but it is to say that consensus government is not always a consensus oriented.

Berkshire: And now that policy has again shifted right, and you hear people openly and disparagingly referring to government schools, it's much harder for the faction that was already proposing public private partnerships and win/win policy to come back with a really, like a full-throated defense of why Democratic oversight, for example, is important in public education.

Schneider: You make an important point. Once you lose ground, once you cede ground to the opposition, it is a very hard to gain that back. The terms of the debate effectively change. There's a presumed consensus around something, that the public moves in that direction, at least, you know, a majority of them, or perhaps a plurality of them, and then pushing back against that becomes a tremendous uphill battle. And so, you know, again, I find myself as somebody who has long sort of prided himself on being able to engage people with different beliefs in a kind of thoughtful, measured dialogue, but it does make a case in American politics, at least, for contention and for something that is not compromise but which may produce that as the result of contentious policymaking.

Berkshire: So Jack, that time has arrived as it does every episode when I try to lure our listeners over to www.Patreon.com to be our supporters. But before I do that, I wondered if you would take this opportunity to announce our exciting Graduate Student Research Contest.

Schneider: I'd be happy to. So we have launched our first annual, and so there's a kind of commitment, our first annual Graduate Student Research Contest, and we're calling for graduate students enrolled in a nonprofit credit-bearing institution—no, that's fine, University of Phoenix students are invited to apply as well. We're an equal opportunity podcast. What we're looking for is just a short abstract describing your research and then a couple sentences about why you think the public needs to hear what you're working on and why it ought to be on this podcast. Our hope in doing this is to tap into a lot of the exciting work that is being done by students out there in America's universities who often end up working on projects that are too time-consuming for professors to really bothered getting engaged in or are too small in terms of their scope. And I think that's really fascinating work, right? These sort of longer, difficult efforts or these very small scale efforts which often have every bit as much to teach us as, as the different kinds of educational research which we more often encounter.

Berkshire: And all the information about how to apply, deadlines, etc., that's all at the [Have You Heard](#) blog. And Jack, as our regular listeners know, at the end of every episode we do an extended play version for our Patreon supporters. Those are people who go to www.patreon.com and hand over a small donation and, and we give them access to interesting extended and behind the scenes footage. And today I had such a great idea. One of the most interesting arguments that Anand Giridharadas makes in his book that we didn't get to is about the way that income inequality is crowding out public intellectuals in favor of what we might think of as Ted talkers. I thought, wouldn't it be fun for our regular supporters to hear me give you a little makeover from public intellectual to thought leader.

Schneider: I would say that I'm excited, but I'm a bit fearful and I am hoping that whatever gets recorded here does not end up being used against me at some point. But I'm willing to give it a stab. While I prepare for my Ted Talk training, I just want to remind all of our listeners that they can help people find the podcast by going on iTunes or wherever they get their podcasts and giving us a review, preferably a five star review and if they want to be in touch with questions, comments, concerns, they can reach out to the podcast twitter handle: [@haveyouheardpod](#) or they can email Jennifer.

Berkshire: If you want to hear Jack's makeover, all you have to do is go to www.patreon.com and become one of our monthly supporters. For everyone else, that'll do it for this episode of Have You Heard. Until next time, I'm Jennifer Berkshire.

Schneider: And I'm Jack Schneider.