

The Journal of Social Encounters

Volume 7
Issue 1 *Extractive Politics, Conflict and
Peacebuilding*

Article 34

2023

Review of Wildland: The Making of America's Fury

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Recommended Citation

Droel, William (2023) "Review of Wildland: The Making of America's Fury," *The Journal of Social Encounters*: Vol. 7: Iss. 1, 341-342.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.69755/2995-2212.1191>

Available at: https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/social_encounters/vol7/iss1/34

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***Wildland: The Making of America's Fury.* Evan Osnos. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 2021. 465 pp., \$30.00, ISBN 9780374286675**

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Evan Osnos was a foreign correspondent for *The New Yorker*, stationed in the Middle East and then China from 2002 until July, 2013. Upon returning to the United States he spent seven years gathering material for *Wildland*, a smartly written chronicle of recent domestic trends and events. He visited three cities where he once lived: Clarksburg, WV; Chicago, IL; and Greenwich, CT. The book gives an economic and cultural overview to each place. In its 21 chapters *Wildland* uses these cities and engaging profiles of two or three residents in each to develop themes.

Greenwich is a wealthy suburb; a one-hour ride on the Metro North from Manhattan. It is in Greenwich that Osnos first situates his primary theme of inequality. Joseph Chip Skowron comes from a middle-class family. He was into drugs in high school but got excellent grades. He goes on to graduate from medical school and to obtain another advanced degree in biology. Soon bored in his practice of medicine, Skowron turns to managing hedge funds, earning over \$13 million one year. But along the way Skowron breaks his moral compass. He is unfaithful in marriage and begins to bribe pharmaceutical executives for information. Eventually Skowron serves five years in prison for insider trading.

Osnos encounters the other end of material prosperity in Chicago where he meets 44-year old Reese Clark. Clark served over ten years for attempted murder. Despite his engaging personality, Clark can't seem to get a steady job.

Here and throughout the rest of the book, Osnos shows how poverty and wealth are preexisting conditions, determined by the economic status of one's parents and one's neighborhood. He refutes former president Barack Obama who said, "This is a country where no matter what you look like or where you come from, if you're willing to study and work hard, you can go as far as your talents will take you." Obama's message is promulgated in various ways by the prosperity gospel, by liberal Democrats who don't connect with laid off industrial workers and by Republicans who equate success with moral virtue or poverty with moral deficiency. "The United States has the largest economy in the world... but the living standards for millions of people [has] stagnated or declined," Osnos writes. Over and over he concludes that these millions of people are "stuck in place." A society that claims to be free operates in ways that leave people with little control over their prospects.

What reinforces the static condition? Our United States culture is driven by "self-expression," by "the gospel of liberty." Meanwhile the "local networks," like unions, clubs, churches and small newspapers, "intended to balance individual ambition with the public good [are] in retreat." During World War II "a spirit of sacrifice for the greater good" was taken for granted. By contrast, during the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars the public "offered thoughts and prayers but they had been asked to give nothing."

A superficial culture takes the place of mediating institutions, leaving the vulnerable further isolated in a world shrinking around them. Meanwhile a small percentage of people whose world is global get rich on the basis of wealth that they and their parents already have.

Millions of people, though they plug along, have lost faith in economic opportunity. Government is supposed to assist those falling behind. But guided by the same individualistic philosophy many politicians practice cynical corruption, Osnos writes.

Former president Donald Trump appears in chapter twelve as a symptom and an accelerant for our country's deepening inequality. He "combined the victimhood routine with a dash of prosperity gospel," Osnos writes. Trump's only accomplishment was tax breaks for the wealthy and opposition to regulation on business. He played a cynical game, keeping the populace distracted from what matters. Instead of really improving safety, education, and job prospects, Trump elevated "furies and fantasies." His primary tactic was sounding the alarm on non-existent threats, particularly hordes of violent immigrants.

In addition to its compelling vignettes *Wildland* has interesting statistics and telling quotations from several social scientists. Did you know that in the 2016 election just 158 families "donated half of all the money to candidates"? Did you know that although gun sales are increasing, the buyers are previous owners? Today each gun owner in the United States has "accumulated an average of eight guns."

Wildland is a grim report but it commands a reader's attention. Its sentences and paragraphs flow smoothly. Abstract issues like the treatment of veterans, employment for ex-convicts or the predatory nature of high finance become real people in *Wildland*. The book is not a plea for sympathy. It does not moralize but invites the reader to ponder each chapter's implications and then perhaps to act.

Osnos does not despair. He mentions a handful of individuals who have dug in to improve the political process or who provide healthy outlets for young people. He even finds finance executives in Greenwich who take small steps toward stakeholder-centered capitalism. Osnos, who wrote a 2020 biography of Joseph Biden, is impressed by our president's call for listening, respect and cooperation, particularly during the weeks between the November 2020 general election and the 2021 inauguration. Can the small ripples of hope become a mighty wave of justice?

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