Owen Jones:
The Establishment. And how they get away with it.

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Reviewed by Charlie Web

The Establishment is neither an academic text or aimed at being one. Owen Jones, as he mentions in this book, is primarily a journalist and political activist. He writes for the Guardian newspaper, appears on TV and serves on the National Advisory Panel of the think tank Class (Centre for Labour and Social Studies). This book is aimed at ordinary people who are interested in current British politics and its development since the early 1980's. Jones states in his foreword that the aim of this book is to stimulate debate and I think he has achieved this.

Jones begins his book with a discussion of how he is defining "The Establishment." Interestingly Jones does not describe some nefarious network of powerful conspirators working behind the scenes like something out of Mario Puzo's The Godfather (1969), rather he describes a set of shared ideals and assumptions which underpin the thinking of many rich and powerful people in British society. Jones goes to great lengths, both in this introductory chapter and his foreword which was added for this 2015 edition, to highlight the point that he is not railing against these people as individuals. As he states "The behaviour of those who rule Britain is, on its own terms, entirely rational (p. xvii)." He is more concerned that their world outlook is flawed and that the terms of debate have shifted so that what was once accepted as common sense is now branded as radical and, at times, almost heretical. This shifting the terms of acceptable debate is a termed the "overton window" and is a theme to which Jones returns many times in this book. This introductory chapter, and the foreword

to the 2015 edition of this publication, are important because they help to set out the context for the rest of the book.

The first chapter of this book is entitled "The Outriders." This chapter lays the historical foundations for the rest of this book. It begins with a discussion of the, so called, Mont Pèlerin Society. This was, and remains to this day, an organisation of philosophers and economists who are all united in a shared commitment to free market, *laissez- faire*, economics. Jones claims that this group, and in particular Madsen Pirie, has had a profound impact on British politics since the late 1970's. Jones demonstrates how, through effective and well organised lobbying and propaganda, thinkers who share this commitment to the free market have been able to capture important institutions within British society and have been able to propagate and popularise their ideas amongst the wider population.

Although Jones puts forward a convincing argument he makes little attempt to hide his personal sympathies. He describes Ha Joon Chang, for example, a respected academic at Cambridge University who has published several popular works as a "dissident (p. 44)" and describes the TaxPayers Alliance as "a right wing organisation, funded by conservative business people and staffed with free- market idealogues… [while] it presents itself as though it were simply the voice of the taxpayer (p. 32)." It is here that Jones shows that he is not an objective observer. He falls into the same trap as the TaxPayers Alliance by presenting opinion as fact but as he [Jones] freely admits, indeed he states in his foreword, the objective of this book is to be polemical and to fuel debate.

In Chapter two Jones takes aim at the politicians who have been elected to serve in Parliament. His title for this chapter is "The Westminster Cartel" and it gives a clue as to his thoughts on this subject. This chapter is wide ranging and begins with a discussion of the debate over salaries for Members of Parliament (MP's) and the expenses scandal which engulfed Parliament in 2009. Using a mixture of inflammatory language "It's ironic, then, that the individuals most vociferous about rolling back the state were often the ones most desperate to milk it (p. 49)," real world examples and statistics Jones is able to create a narrative of MP's as grasping, selfish and ultimately hypocritical stakeholders in an unfair system designed to benefit those at the top. This, the idea of a system designed to shelter those at the top while blaming those at the bottom, is a constant theme for this book. Jones then takes a brief look at the relationships of the three major political parties at the time in Britain and examines their relationship with "the Establishment." While this section is just as full of loaded statements "Tony Blair was fixated with wealthy and powerful individuals (p. 57)," it is relatively objective in terms of an overall critique. Despite the fact that Jones is known to have sympathies for the Labour movement he does not hold back in his criticism of the party. Finally this chapter assesses the sometimes murky world of revolving

door appointments. Again Jones uses a mixture of real world examples, such as former Health Ministers going on to serve of the boards of private health companies, and statistics, "in the mid-New Labour period 46 per cent of the top fifty publically traded firms in the UK had a member of the British political elite as either a director or a shareholder (p. 71)," to inform the reader of the close links that exist in Britain between large corporate interests and Parliament.

Chapter three is set up in much the same way but instead of highlighting the links between parliamentarians and business Jones focuses on the links between MP's and the media which is not always as separate as it could be. Jones main worry is an ideological one. He views the media as a tool which is used in a democracy to keep the government of the day in check. Jones believes that this is no longer the case as, all too often, the owners and editors of media outlets are personal friends with those they are meant to be criticising. As he writes "Much of the media is a political machine, lobbying for the often personal objectives of their owners. The media and political elites are frequently deeply intertwined, sharing as they do many of the same assumptions about how society should be run and organised (p. 123)." Even the BBC is not spared in Jones damning critique as he claims that "the BBC is, more or less, a mouthpiece for the Establishment."

Chapter four examines the link between the police and the Establishment. Jones claims that while the police is, in theory, an independent body "under the new Establishment, the police have drawn ever closer to the state." Jones makes some controversial assertions such as the British police are institutionally racist, which he claims can be statistically proven (146–156), and that the police are tasked with demonising certain misdemeanours, such as drug offences amongst lower socio-economic groups, while largely ignoring "white collar" crimes such as tax evasion (pp. 125–156). Jones claims that since the early 1980's the police have been guilty of various miscarriages of justice, such as the 1984 Battle of Orgreave, the 1989 Hillsborough disaster and most recently the 2009 death of Ian Tomlinson amongst others, have been either covered up by the Establishment or swept under the carpet (pp. 129–140). Again Jones makes an interesting case and uses a mixture of anecdotal and statistical evidence to back up his assertions.

Chapters 5 and 6 deal broadly with the same topics. Jones highlights what he perceives to be inconsistencies in the arguments of Establishment thinking. He claims that despite being suspicious of Government intervention many profitable companies rely on the State for lucrative contracts which help them maintain their profitable business models. He states that "British capitalism is completely dependent on the largesse of the state (p. 169)." He also claims that many of the world's worst offending companies in terms of tax avoidance "have directly benefitted from state largesse" in terms of both direct in-

novations, such as the development of the Internet, and indirectly in terms of government research and development grants. He also maintains that businesses of all size benefit from state infrastructure such as railways, roads and airports and yet some of the largest beneficiaries are those least willing to pay for it.

Chapters 7 and 8 are concerned with the concentration of power in financial and public relations industries. Jones claims that democratically elected governments have become largely beholden to global financial flows and victims of their own, alleged, groupthink. Jones uses some powerful examples which succeed in being polemical while maintaining logical consistency. Jones notes with interest that although largely united in terms of ideology these shared values can sometimes lead to disagreements within the Establishment such as the position of Britain within the European Union (EU) which, on the one hand promotes these shared values but at the same time can be argued to be a vehicle for promoting a competing narrative (pp. 286–292).

In the final chapter Jones attempts to present an alternative to this system. In his foreword he acknowledges that some of his demands are relatively mild but he justifies this by claiming that his job is not to reshape British politics completely, it is to stimulate debate. Despite the whole book being a polemic with little attempt made towards objectivity this is the most normative chapter. It begins, for example, with this opening salvo "The status quo may be treated as common sense now, but future generations will surely look back with a mixture of astonishment and contempt at how British society is currently organized." Jones essentially argues that society should be reformed to be more democratic in terms of public ownership of key utilities (p. 304), domestic capital controls (p. 306–307) and campaign financing (p. 309–310).

Overall this book achieves what the author wanted. It is a compelling read, as you would expect from a well-respected and awarded journalist, and maintains an internal logical consistency. It is certainly controversial both in its assertions and conclusions. Although Jones falls into the trap of presenting opinion as fact, something he complains about in others, he is open about his beliefs and prejudices. As he acknowledges in the final chapter and in the foreword some of the initiatives and drivers behind his "democratic revolution" are movements he is directly involved in. This book certainly raises some important questions which those who serve on the boards of these multinationals whom Jones rails against and the politicians in Westminster would be well advised to take note of. Jones book is part of a growing anti-establishment body of literature and their popularity is certainly a subject of interest both in the academic and wider societal sphere.