

Capitalism: The American State Religion

by Bill Herbst

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You have hand it to Congress. In March, the legislative branch — for so long crippled in gridlock — stepped up and courageously responded to the economic challenge of the COVID-19 CoronaVirus pandemic by passing a multi-trillion dollar stimulus package, most of which went directly to large corporations. And that was only the first of many giveaways to follow. With the economy partially shut-down to “flatten the curve” of raging infection and rapidly rising deaths, the sacred stock market simply cannot be allowed to crater.

God forbid that the Dow or S&P might collapse. This would cost the wealthy and ultra-wealthy a large chunk of the ill-gotten and phenomenally large gains they’ve enjoyed since the corporate bail-outs that followed the 2008 financial meltdown. Hell, the rich taking a significant financial hit might even lower America’s Gini Coefficient rating, reversing at least a little our ever-widening income equality. We can’t have that now, can we?

Predatory Capitalism, and in particular its tender care and perpetual feeding of the richest among us, is the presumptive if not-quite-official “state religion” of America. Evangelicals may believe that Christianity is the American religion, but that’s not so. Capitalism is our religion, and — like all religions — its devotees have developed an exhaustive set of rationales to support its many unfounded assumptions. These include numerous convictions: that private ownership of *everything* is sacrosanct, that the profits from industry and commerce should go mainly to the small club of owners, that “labor” is merely a cost of doing business (meaning that paying workers as little as possible is a valid way to increase profits), and that “trickle down” — i.e., letting most people survive on scraps from the table — is the correct order of our economic affairs. The Capitalist religion includes a fervent belief in the absolute supremacy of markets over people. Well, not everyone actually, but certainly the bottom 90% of humanity.

Who cares if workers who’ve lost their slave-wage jobs can’t pay their mortgage/rent or buy food? Who cares if minorities of color throughout the land (and specifically those worthless ne’er-do-wells incarcerated in prisons, whether convicted and serving sentences or just awaiting trial) suffer disproportionately

from the pandemic? I mean, those people have had significantly greater disease and earlier deaths for a long time already — effectively forever in terms of American history — so who cares if that statistic is amplified by the CoronaVirus? Far too many Capitalists and Republicans (which are different names for the same club) belong to the Marie Antoinette School of Social Philosophy: *The answer to the poor not having bread is to "Let them eat cake."*

The one and only job of the Republican-led Federal Government — from the White House, through Congress, to the courts — as well as the spiritual mission of every red-blooded Republican in America (politicians and voters alike), is to *Protect the Rich*, to insure that those elites continue to own damn near everything and enjoy all the privileges of the great wealth to which they are obviously entitled and clearly deserve.

And so, Trump yammers on every day on his Reality-TV-show "pandemic briefing" about re-opening the economy and getting Americans back to work. Each week Trump points his stubby finger at a new villain he blames for the severity of the pandemic. First it was the Democrats, then it was the Chinese, and most recently it was the U.N. World Health Organization. He tells reporters that before asking questions they should congratulate him for the great job he's done. He repeats over and over that he is not responsible for anything bad about what's happening. Trump repeatedly urged Americans to take a malaria drug that has potentially fatal side effects to supposedly protect themselves from the CoronaVirus by saying, "*What do you have to lose?*" (Only your life...) But even that wasn't enough. Now he suggests the possibility of ingesting disinfectants (care for a Clorox bleach cocktail, anyone? Or perhaps a Lysol milkshake) and irradiating our innards with ultraviolet light.

For decades, Republicans in Congress have pulled every trick in the book transfer wealth upwards and give more money to the rich. And now, between the Trump Administration and Mitch McConnell's Republican Senate, that skullduggery is insanely over the top. The 2017 two-trillion-dollar tax cut worked out perfectly for the Republicans' primary constituency (mega-corporations and the wealthy), but not so well for the rest of us. That giveaway is looking even more suspect now that the pandemic has tanked the economy.

And the courts — packed as they are now with right-wing judges — provide no relief. Wisconsin State and U.S. Supreme Courts told Wisconsin's voters that they had to risk infection and death by going out to vote. Republicans are skilled in voter suppression through gerrymandering and other disenfranchisement, especially of minorities. They're united in opposing voting-by-mail for Americans, since (in their lying propaganda) that will open the door to invite massive voter fraud, a crime for which there is not a shred of evidence). They don't mention their well-founded fear that making voting easier for everyone would virtually insure that fewer Republicans would be elected to office.

But, as I've written before and feel compelled to repeat here, Republicans are terrific at hoodwinking gullible Americans and winning elections. Unfortunately, they're absolutely terrible at governing. But that's to be expected from a political party that wants to destroy government. Trump did such a great job over the past three years of taking a wrecking ball to the federal government that a viral pandemic that could have been minimized from the start is now wreaking havoc on the country, with no end in sight to the suffering, both human and economic. But we could all see that handwriting on the wall on election night in November, 2016. One way or another, regular Americans were going to get screwed.

The Repugs talk about democracy and freedom, but what they really love is Mussolini-style fascism — the unholy marriage of Government and Big Business. Sadly, Democrats are hardly a viable alternative. They may be slightly less abhorrent than the shape-shifting-lizard Republicans, but not by much. The Dem's propaganda message is different, of course. They prattle on about helping the people, but they are almost as beholden to Big Money as the Repugs. Both political parties in the duopoly worship at the altar of predatory capitalism and genuflect willingly to the false god of Mammon. Private ownership is everything. The Commons is nothing. Material wealth is the only value that matters.

Friends, none of this is new or surprising. It's been going on for decades in plain sight. It's always been part of the American psyche, but then ramped up further with Reagan and Thatcher in the 1980s, only to increase ten-fold since then. What's different now is that Americans are suddenly dying because of it, dying in the tens of thousands. We're passing the point where more Americans will have died from COVID-19 after a mere four months than were sacrificed in Vietnam over twelve years.

Yes, I'm well aware that this week's commentary is not a calm, reasonable, or nuanced piece. It's a screed, a diatribe, a polemic. It's a rant, a call to arms. That's because I've had it up to my ears with all the steaming bullshit that poses as "truth" in this country. While I'm not impressed with what passes for Center-Left liberals and progressives in America, the Right infuriates me. The pious laments over the dead offered by too many Capitalists/Republicans — a sizable percentage of whom are True Believers — don't ring true. They don't actually care much about the pain, suffering and grief of lives lost, as long as those lives aren't members of their Country Clubs. What they care about is maintaining their power, increasing their wealth, and keeping the deadly economic game of legalized theft going. They are the Chosen People, devoted to their religion, and it doesn't appear to me that they're coming around to reality anytime soon.

Can this tragic state of affairs be changed? What will it take? And will it matter, given the even more dire, long-term crises not yet fully upon us that are waiting in the wings on the heels of the pandemic? I plan to write about all that over the months ahead.