

# Corporatocracy

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***Corporatocracy:*** a society or system that is governed or controlled by corporations.

Over the past weeks, I've been insisting that we're all responsible for the mess that humanity is in. I've hammered away at the admittedly less than pleasing notion that everyone is complicit, either actively or passively, in sharing at least some of the blame for the unnecessary suffering that civilization systemically produces. My shorthand for the insanity of this cruel collective agreement, however unintentional and unconscious it may be, is *Death Culture*.

Now I want to turn my intention (my ire?) toward specific elements, forces, and players within the Death Culture system that bear a much larger share of the responsibility. At the top of my list are corporations.

As a way of expanding human agency while limiting personal liability (and, it turns out, social responsibility), corporations are a quite recent development. While the longing for monopoly control extends back to the beginnings of human socialization in families and tribes, the creation of the modern corporate form as a legal entity chartered by governments occurred in the 17th century. Groups of investors (meaning people whose ambition is to own property and acquire personal wealth) were granted exclusive permission by the ruling monarchs to operate in specific economic arenas and endeavors. The British East India Company is the most well-known early example. Over the subsequent two centuries, commerce and society were transformed. I daresay that the Industrial Revolution of the 19th and early-20th centuries and the Technological Revolution that followed would not have been possible without corporations.

Corporations have always wielded great power in America. Despite periodic public disapproval and government attempts at reform, their influence as a dominant force in altering the landscape of all our relations with each other and the environment has been undeniable. Corporations have played an outsized role in every collective American enterprise, from the building of cities, westward expansion, industry, medicine, education, and agriculture. The military materiel boom ramped up during World War II opened the floodgates, and by the 1950s, corporations (especially the largest) had become the backbone of American society.

Since the Reagan backlash to the turbulence of the 1960s and the neoliberalism (i.e., trickle-down economics, “free markets,” deregulation, privatization, etc.) that rode into town with it, America has morphed into a no-holds barred, out-and-out corporatocracy. Corporations (and the wealthy who own and operate them) rule. They call the shots and get damn near everything they want.

Was Joe Biden nominated by the Democrats and then elected President because black voters in the South Carolina primary miraculously resurrected his failing campaign? Well, sort of, but Biden’s victory was, to a larger extent, orchestrated by corporations, which had chosen Biden as “their guy.” It’s not that big business necessarily disliked Trump — it was Bernie they really didn’t want — but Donald was just too crazy, unpredictable, and dangerous for them. Biden would do their bidding more reliably, more smoothly, and presumably with greater stability.

Government and business have been in bed together for a long time in America. Beyond the executive branch, consider the legislative arena. Corporations are routinely consulted whenever Congress proposes legislation, and it’s not unusual for corporate lobbyists to actually write the bills themselves.

With precious few exceptions, our representatives in Congress got where they are by allowing themselves (often eagerly) to be bought and sold ten times over to their Big Money donors, i.e., corporations. Only the most naïve among us believes that taking the oath to “protect and defend the Constitution” carries any weight at all in the minds of many Senators and House members. Even for those who take public service seriously, fealty to their financial donors often intrudes, bleeding in to influence everything they do. For the rest, appeals to ideals or principles have become just empty words falling on deaf ears. Politics is the sleazy handmaiden of the corporatocracy.

The New Deal created the American middle class. That was achieved by taxing corporations and the rich and then redistributing that money downwards through policies and legislation, such as the G.I. Bill after World War II that opened college to so many veterans. As an economic class, the wealthy hated the New Deal, so they undid it as soon as they could. The dismantling was achieved over the last three decades of the century in part by lobbying the government to enact business-friendly laws (deregulation, tax breaks, favored status, subsidies, etc.), but also with the aid of a massive propaganda campaign of slick narrative untruths foisted on a gullible American public that bought the snake oil of “freedom,” greed, and racism. The story told was that minorities and the poor weren’t held down or disenfranchised. No, they were lazy, weak, and undeserving — Social Darwinism par excellence.

The extraordinary acceleration of economic inequality that followed has been stunning. According to a working paper by Carter Price and Kathryn Edwards of the Rand Corporation (funded by the Fair Work Center), the upward transfer of

wealth over the past 45 years (since 1975) from economically middle and lower Americans into the coffers of the top 10% (and disproportionately to the top 1%) amounts to 50 trillion dollars. **\$50 trillion.** That's not chump change or small potatoes. Scourges like the rustbelt, the opioid epidemic, and the rise of the Trump Cult are the direct result of that theft. It was a betrayal supported brazenly and in the open by both Republican and Democratic administrations because corporations wanted it. The CARES act passed near the beginning of the COVID pandemic last year was a massive gift to corporate bottom lines and worsening wealth inequality. People shouting "Stop the Steal" should quit focusing on the damned election and start thinking about their own pocketbooks.

Biden's role as President is to reestablish enough of the illusion of stability that most Americans will go back to sleep. That's what corporations really want — obedient workers and willing, unconscious consumers. (I credit George Carlin with that insight, although he was hardly the first person to say it.) The fly in the ointment, though, is that collapse of the whole economic system is already underway. Do you believe that the pandemic is solely responsible for the sharp economic downturn of the past year? Or that the stock market and financial sectors are good and trustworthy indicators of our economic health? If so, I've got a bridge in Brooklyn that I'd like to sell you. At this point, the American economy is a house of cards, as is the society itself. Pull out any of the supports and the whole fragile structure comes crashing down.

Charters of private corporations typically specify that the *sole* concern of the enterprise must be the financial benefit to *shareholders*, meaning the owners of the corporation. This excludes interest in the welfare of *stakeholders*. Those are people who aren't owners but whose lives are impacted by what the corporation does and how it's done. Why aren't stakeholders even considered? Because ownership of property is simple and effectively sacrosanct, while stakeholding is less easily defined, as well as being a serious threat to the ownership class.

Time and again throughout American history, the Supreme Court has valued ownership (and ruled in favor of it) above all other interests, to the point that the Court has effectively forbidden corporate concern for even the slightest notion of the greater public good. Is it any wonder then that greed and irresponsibility have been not just normalized but actively encouraged?

As happens with so many human inventions, what may begin with honorable intentions ends up, to a greater or lesser degree, corrupted to serve nefarious purposes. Good all too easily morphs into evil. With corporations, this has meant an increase of narcissism and arrogance, both of which are part of human nature's sociopathic shadow. If America were saner, more mature, and less infantile, corporations could be immensely helpful. Instead, they are too often harmful, enemies of the common good rather than allies. Corporate cheerleaders and the mainstream media routinely deny this, but they tend to be paid shills, status quo groupies, or naive "centrists" who've drunk the neoliberal Kool-Aid.

Significantly increasing taxes on corporations and the wealthy (or closing the ridiculous loopholes) would be a step in the right direction. This won't be done, of course, at least not in the current climate where "freedom" is divorced from responsibility and corruption is the accepted norm (despite endless lip service to the contrary). There's not a snowball's chance in hell of huge corporations or their fabulously rich owners choosing a more reasonable path until collapse has done its dirty work and caused so much suffering that the villagers grab their pitchforks and finally rise up to hunt down the Monsters. In January, we saw a perverse and stupidly wrong-headed version of that revolt in the assault on the Capitol, but the real thing might yet occur at some dark point in America's future.

I'm not suggesting that taxing corporations and the rich is the "solution" to all that ails us. Not even close. All I'm saying is that "trickle-down" economics is an abomination, an obvious recipe for disaster. We should stop believing it. I doubt that we will, because corporations rule, their propaganda is masterful, and they can't see past their own noses (meaning their next quarterly profit statement). Even in the institutions that patrol oversight, the foxes are guarding the hen house.

The rich and powerful *like* being rich and powerful. While some benefactors of the corporatocracy are worried about the future, the overall assumption seems to be that the gravy train of "*all for me and as little as possible for you*" will go on forever. Even if a percentage of wealthy corporate owners are sane enough not to believe that, too many of them still intend to squeeze out every dollar they can for themselves before the train derails. It's one thing to know that the world is careening toward disaster. It's another thing entirely to stop pushing us ever faster toward the cliff.

Existing corporate culture and the power structures of American society make that immensely difficult to even challenge, much less change.