

Exploitation

by Bill Herbst

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Anyone who reads my commentaries knows that I'm not a fan of civilization in general and America in particular. From my perspective, the good that is created at all levels and in all ways — material, social, psychological, and spiritual — from these collective human endeavors (civilization and America) is outweighed by the evil they perpetrate. Even if the results of either were mostly good, with only a small amount of violence, cruelty, and suffering as collateral damage, I would still be inclined to point out the failings. As it is, with the proportion slanted toward the negative (in my perception, at least), I feel duty-bound to stand on my little soapbox and protest.

One of the fundamental human-created ills I see in civilization in general and America in particular is *exploitation*. As an economic principle, exploitation means using something or someone to produce a profit that is then not equitably shared among its creators. In short, exploitation is theft — taking something that does not belong to you and claiming it as your own. Sometimes this thievery is straight from Mother Nature, through the plumbing of natural resources (such as mining, timber, and fishing). Other times, the theft involves taking stuff already in use by human beings (such as land or money). Beyond that, there's the tendency following the initial theft to then refuse to share whatever value gets created or produced afterwards.

I could, if I wished, explore the subject of exploitation by taking it into the realms of economic systems — capitalism, socialism, syndicalism, etc. There are already many thoughtful and learned people doing that, so I don't feel a need to add my small voice. Instead, I want to look at the subject of exploitation from the moral and spiritual realms of Us-versus-Them.

In America, economic exploitation is considered normal, acceptable, and even perfectly OK. Commerce in this country amounts to mass theft — everyone stealing from everyone else. Well, maybe "everyone" overstates the case. Perhaps a better way of saying what I wish to convey is that, in this country, it's normal and acceptable for Americans to steal from other Americans.

Sounds harsh, doesn't it? Why would any country or culture build commercial and social systems that cannibalize its own population? Well, the answer is: because of the Us-versus-Them dynamic so fundamental to the way our brains are wired and programmed. "Us" includes all the people we love, respect, care about, or with whom we identify and empathize. "Them" includes all the people we *don't* love, *don't* respect, *don't* care about, or with whom we *don't* identify or empathize. This is basic In-group Out-group stuff. It's not new, it's not recent,

it's not unusual. It's been going on since civilization began, and very pointedly since the beginnings of European colonization of the western hemisphere. Now, half a millennium later, it's ramped up to almost unimaginably extreme levels and in ways that are so systemic, routine, and banal that almost no one even notices, since this massive theft is taken for granted.

We seem to think that dog-eat-dog competition (as a zero-sum game, where for one person to win, another person has to lose) has always been the natural way of things for human beings in society. As if cooperation and sharing were mere afterthoughts hardly worth considering. See, the only people with whom we cooperate and share are Us. Everyone else is Them, and fair game to be exploited ruthlessly. In for-profit corporations, Us is the owners and no one else.

The marked tendency in society is to focus on theft only through individual examples, most particularly when a thief gets caught and turns out to be someone of note in the worlds of power and celebrity. Nancy Pelosi is the most recent example of an elite politician who may have used her privileged position of access to insider information to pull off, through her husband's stock options trading, an immensely profitable stock heist.

What Pelosi did is considered "legal." She didn't break into a family's house and steal their flat-screen TV. No, she (or, more correctly, her husband) bought stock options for certain companies, then converted the options into stock purchases at precisely the right moment in time, just before announcements that sparked sudden and significant runs up of those companies' stock prices. Within days, Pelosi's husband sold the newly converted stock, and the couple pocketed millions in damn near overnight profits. Just as bad as the allegation of insider trading, though, is the inherent conflict of interest. Pelosi and her husband are investing in the very companies that Nancy herself as Speaker of the House is largely responsible for regulating.

Will Pelosi be brought to justice? No. Almost none of these people ever are. Consequences will not be imposed. Justice will not be served. All that will happen — all that ever happens — is that ordinary people get upset for a couple of days, but then that outrage is replaced by another, fresher melodrama in the churn of the 24/7 news cycle, and we all just move on, returning to business as usual, which is to say, ever more theft. Endless thievery.

But such scandalous examples of celebrity elites profiting from their skullduggery are not really what interests me, nor is the unholy marriage between business and government, the revolving door of pigs at the trough. What I find more compelling (and disturbing) are the millions of Americans — how many millions? I don't know, maybe 150 million? 200 million? — who think it's perfectly OK to steal from their fellow Americans. These people don't see themselves as cat burglars, pickpockets, or Mafiosi. They sleep soundly in their beds at night and have no pangs of conscience at all about the ongoing theft in which they are engaged. The elites may be criminals, but the rest of us aren't so innocent.

Exploitation takes many forms, all of which revolve around greed. Corporations are a primary vehicle for this. Lust for profit is the bottom line for corporate

commerce in America — not quality of life, not community, not the good of the country or the world. Money is typically the sole consideration behind every business decision. Look at Big Pharma, Big Tech, or Big Anything. Cashing in — however possible and as much as possible — is the American Way.

Consider business owners (both executives who run corporations and investing shareholders who claim an ownership stake). How many owners regard their employees as merely another cost of doing business — no different than office supplies, machinery, or buildings? Too many. In the minds of these owners, workers are simply another cost of doing business that should rightly be reduced as much as possible, so as to maximize profits. If the owners could get away with paying their employees nothing, they would. Thus, the radical idea that perhaps businesses should operate like families never occurs to the owners. Why not? Because the owners regard the workers as *Them*, not *Us*. So, since we love *Us* but don't give a shit about *Them*, workers are fair game to exploit in every way that's permitted. If we could get away with working them to death without social blowback, as happened in Nazi prison camps in Poland and Soviet slave labor camps in the Gulag, that would be just fine. Workers in Amazon warehouses today may feel that this is what's being done to them.

Back in the 1950s, the financial compensation for the average CEO of a major American corporation was about 50 times more than the wages paid to an average worker in the same corporation. Oddly enough, I'm sort of OK with that. It's a little outrageous, but not too much, and I can live with it. But now in 2021, the average CEO gets paid *400* times as much as a typical worker. And if we add up all the perks high-end business execs get — annual bonuses, stock options, golden parachutes, etc. — the multiplier is sometimes much greater than 400. Some of the Titans on Wall Street make *50 million bucks* a year. That's *1,000* times more than a typical employee at Starbucks, and *2,000* times more than an Uber driver. Friends, that's theft, pure and simple. On top of that, it's done in broad daylight, without a shred of guilt or a single pang of conscience among the executives (i.e., thieves), who delude themselves into believing that they deserve everything they get.

What happens when a new CEO takes over the reigns of a major corporation, which then tanks during his or her tenure as chief executive, sometimes losing billions of dollars. Do these people get fired for mismanagement and booted out on their asses or lynched by the shareholders? No. They step down or are replaced by the Board of Directors and invariably given a lucrative severance package that would shame the Shah of Persia. In other words, their financial compensation isn't tied to their performance. And even after screwing up, they get hired afterwards by some other corporation. It's a culture of corruption, and once in the club, you're a member for life.

Libertarians are fond of claiming that businesses care about their customers. Bullshit. What businesses are really fond of is using the techniques of "public relations" (i.e., smarmy half-truths, feel-good slogans, and even outright lies) to convince their customers that the company loves them. In a marketplace with millions of potential customers, any given group of customers is entirely disposable. Customers are *Them*, not *Us*. They are sheep to be sheared, until

they get old, of course, and then we kill them and eat them for food. Yeah, businesses love their customers about the same way a hungry gourmet loves a leg of roast lamb with a side of mint jelly.

I'm not suggesting that Americans are heartless monsters. Only the roughly 1% of our national population that qualifies as hard-core psychopaths, sociopaths, and malignant narcissists are truly heartless. And even among that woe begotten group of egomaniacal deviants, love for others will occasionally arise from time to time, even if it is self-serving. No, most Americans feel love, affection, and care for others in great measure. They (we) feel an empathic and sympathetic generosity and open-heartedness toward everyone they (we) regard as *Us*.

The problem here isn't closed hearts or a lack of love. No, the screw-up comes from skewed assigning of membership in the clubs of *Us* and *Them*. Basically, the situation is that, for most people, there are far too few of *Us*, and far too many of *Them*. All the love goes to *Us*, none to *Them*. The Cosmic Truth, though — and I readily admit that this truth is profoundly difficult to wrap one's head around — is that every creature is *Us*. *There is no Them*. Every person, every animal, every plant, every single-celled organism or virus, and quite probably every rock, planet, sunbeam, or exploding star is actually *Us*.

Joni Mitchell had it right with the lyrics for her song, "Woodstock." Most recorded versions of the ballad (CSNY's being the most famous) are celebratory anthems — homages to that brief, shining moment in 1969 when the rebellious youth subculture of the '60s culminated in what started out as a four-day festival and rock concert, but turned out to be its one and only stand for peace, love, and harmony. Joni, however — who was not present at Woodstock (as most of us weren't) — sings her own song not as a joyful eulogy, but as a funereal dirge. The refrain of the last stanza confirms the lament:

*"We are stardust
— billion year old carbon —
We are golden
— caught in the devil's bargain —
And we've got to get ourselves
back to the garden."*

The "devil's bargain" is the compulsive, competitive, and driving instinct for survival on the part of a tyrannical self that separates us from all other life around us. That self, of course, is ultimately an illusion and is destined to pass away. While we live in these bodies and psyches, however, self-centeredness is a very compelling hallucination that keeps us singular and isolated, alone and fearful. It also makes us crazy and prevents us from recognizing the Ultimate Oneness — the ineffable truth that *everything* in Life is *Us*, and *nothing* is *Them*.

And so, to maintain that illusion, we exploit everything and everyone that we imagine to be "not *Us*," thus fulfilling a very dark fantasy.