

# The Great Reveal

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In literature, “the reveal” is a plot device that exposes the reader to a previously unseen or unacknowledged key character or vital piece of information that changes the course of the story. In the world of magic, “the reveal” refers to the culmination (often unexpected) of a trick or magic act. It “reveals” the illusions created by the magician’s sleight-of-hand and misdirection. (The person in the box was not sawed in half!)

The coronavirus pandemic continues to be a human catastrophe of untold magnitude and it may take years before we begin to understand the full impact of this crisis on the human community -- medically, emotionally, socially, politically and economically. But even at this early stage of the crisis it is becoming clear that this pandemic and our nation’s response to it has laid bare the true nature of our interlocking social, cultural and economic systems. This is the time of “the great reveal.”

## Pulling back the curtain on Free Market Capitalism

Starting in the 1980s a particular brand of political conservatism came to power that viewed government as the enemy of the people and championed unfettered free market capitalism as the antidote. The persistence of poverty was not due to systemic racism, sexism or grotesque income inequality. It was due to overly generous government programs and the moral failings of the poor. Our nation was encouraged to abandon President Johnson’s “war on poverty,” and replace it with a war on the poor (for their own good.)

Ronald Reagan was the champion of this movement and he rode this anti-government battle cry all the way to the White House. Reagan’s victory was not just political; it was cultural. His anti-government rhetoric transformed us from a nation of citizens into a nation of taxpayers. Our relationship with the government (and increasingly with each other) was becoming transactional: “What do I get in exchange for my tax dollars? What’s in it for me?” Reagan rode to victory on stories about welfare queens driving Cadillacs and promising a war on drugs aimed primarily at morally weak poor people of color. A new conventional wisdom was forming: poverty was the result of laziness and bad upbringing; greed was good and the rich were morally superior to the rest of us. Everyone could be a millionaire if they just rolled up their sleeves and put their mind to it.

Ironically the most successful practitioner of this new politics was Bill Clinton and the Democratic Leadership Council. Working with Republicans they succeeded in kicking millions of poor people off of welfare (but not moving them out of poverty) and putting into place key elements of the architecture of mass incarceration of people of color. They were able to convince the Democratic Party to abandon its New Deal conviction that government had a positive, irreplaceable role to play in the lives of the American people. These corporate Democrats continued to pay lip service to organized labor while catering to the wishes of Wall Street and the financial class. By the end of the Clinton presidency, it was hard to see any difference between the Republican establishment and the Democratic establishment.

The coronavirus pandemic has now exposed unfettered free market capitalism for what it truly is; predatory capitalism. The invisible hand described by Adam Smith has become a pick-pocket. It is clear that our reality TV star president’s entire response to the pandemic is grounded in the belief that the free market, not the government, is the best means to address this crisis.

In this predatory capitalist system, states must compete for essential goods and services with other states, with the highest bidder taking all. Even within states, cities and counties are in competition with each other for supplies needed to save lives.

In one very telling story from my home state of Illinois, a state official tells how she drove across the state line into Indiana with a check for \$3.5 million dollars that she had to give to a middleman at the parking lot of a fast food restaurant in order to secure the purchase of medical supplies before being outbid by an even more desperate state government. If you think this sounds like a shady drug deal, you would be right.

Not only are states in competition with each other, they also have to outbid our own federal government for the same supplies. Governors tell stories of secret deals with foreign governments to purchase badly needed supplies with secret cargo flights to escape attention from our own federal government. The Republican governor of Maryland was so concerned that the federal government would seize the coronavirus testing kits he was forced to purchase from South Korea, that he had them protected by the National Guard at an undisclosed location. Apparently we have learned a lot from Colombian drug cartels about how capitalism really works.

The sheer brutality and ugliness of predatory capitalism is fully exposed by this human crisis. And here is the fundamental problem: this life and death crisis of untold human suffering does not compute in capitalism; humans are merely consumers and producers. The driving force of capitalism is supply and demand. Capitalism is not concerned with human health or wellness; it only chases dollars. In this system, money is power: the more dollars you have the more the system will cater to your needs. Capitalism really doesn't care whether you are a billionaire who wants to be pampered or a single mother trying to pay the rent and feed her children. The only thing of value in this system is dollars; if you don't have any, you don't exist as anything other than surplus population.

### **Extreme Individualism: "You are on your own."**

Hand-in-hand with this system of predatory capitalism is a culture of extreme individualism. In his writing on capitalism, Adam Smith noted that in capitalism every individual labors to earn as much money as he/she can: "He [sic] generally neither intends to promote the public interest nor knows how much he promotes it. .... He intends only his own gain, and he is in this, as in many other cases, led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention."

At the heart of this economic system is the belief that when individuals pursue their own self-interest in the marketplace, everyone benefits. Underpinning the entire system is the primacy of the individual and the choices he/she makes. Over time, the interlocking institutions that shape, define, promote and sustain our free market consumer system have generated a common culture that serves to legitimize the values, beliefs, practices and outcomes of the system.

individualismAutonomy and self-reliance are prized in this culture and they are seen as virtuous and exemplary. But for most of human history and for many non-western indigenous cultures, the autonomous individual would be viewed as an object of pity. For most of recorded history, personal identity was created within the context of communal or tribal identity. This was not the superficial communal identity associated

with sports teams or the polarizing tribalism associated with politics. It was the firm conviction that healthy human development and resiliency was the product of social commitments that bound people to each other in mutual support and protection. Outside of these nurturing webs of relationships, human being wither and die. This is what the Church means when it insists that humans are social beings.

Because free market capitalism is purely transactional (*quid pro quo*), it is only natural that our politics would become the same. And if virtue is defined in terms of the individual's pursuit of their own interests, then the politics of self-interest becomes normative and notions of the common good become meaningless slogans.

But this crisis has revealed the lethal shortcomings of this culture of individualism. One of the painful lessons this pandemic is teaching us is that, like it or not, we are bound together in a common destiny. Every decision we make has the potential to impact the entire community. The question forced upon us by this crisis is this: Are we the United States of America or are we the Autonomous States of America?

The reason other nations have been able to bend the curve of infections and bring down the number of deaths while we have not, is because enforcement of physical distancing, ramped up testing and contact tracing have been uneven and inconsistent across our nation. When states like Georgia or Florida recklessly decide to "open" their states, it endangers everyone in our nation. When the federal government insists that states are on their own to combat this pandemic, it means that continued outbreaks are inevitable. Within the cultural construct of free market absolutism, not only is every state on its own, but every city and town is on its own — every family is on its own.

### **Profit over People**

For more than 125 years the Church has consistently taught that the economy is meant to serve the people and not that people serve the economy. And for as many years, champions of free market capitalism, like Cardinal Dolan of New York, have sought to finesse this teaching with misdirection and sleights-of-hand arguments like the notion of "virtuous capitalism." But this coronavirus pandemic has laid bare the ugly truth about so called virtuous capitalism.

Even as our heroic first responders and health care workers were finally able to take a deep breath as spikes in new cases were beginning to plateau, there were calls to re-open the economy and get people back to work. Certainly small businesses and workers need financial protection in this crisis and it is the role of government to do so. (Canada is providing \$2,000 a month for up to 4 months for individuals who lose income due to the virus. The U.S. is providing a one-time payment of \$1,200 to some — but not all — workers who have lost their jobs.)

No one should have to choose between financial solvency and preserving human life, but that is exactly what predatory capitalism requires. As Dan Patrick, Texas's 70-year-old lieutenant governor, said, "There are more important things than living, and that's saving this country for my children and my grandchildren and saving this country for all of us." And, of course, what Lieutenant Governor Patrick means by "saving this country for my children and grandchildren" is saving the current economic system of predatory capitalism. During the next pandemic other politicians may make the same argument as Mr. Patrick — only the next time his children and grandchildren may need to sacrifice their lives.

The stark calculus of predatory capitalism in the time of pandemic is illustrated by the story of our nation's meat and poultry processing plants. Meat packing plants are dangerous, exploitative workplaces that often prey on vulnerable populations like immigrants and people of color. They are also hot spots for spikes in coronavirus outbreaks and deaths. As of early May more than 11,000 workers have tested positive and 48 have died. Yet Donald Trump has ordered meat packing plants to stay open, and together with Republicans in Congress, is working to shield the owners from liability if workers become infected with COVID-19 on the job. As a conservative chief justice of Wisconsin's state Supreme Court recently said, meat-packers in Wisconsin who have contracted the coronavirus aren't "regular folks" like other residents of the state.

Putting aside the fact that Americans eat far too much meat and that reducing our consumption of meat would result in positive benefits to our nation's health, the Trump Administration's willingness to sacrifice the lives and well-being of workers in order to insure that our supply of meat not be interrupted shows the true face of predatory capitalism. While insisting that workers put their lives in danger to provide us meat, the administration has only provided voluntary guidelines and suggestions to the owners about keeping these workers safe (the same type of voluntary guidelines that were in place when so many workers were infected and died.)

### **Necropolitics and the Racial Construct**

Necropolitics is the use of social and political power to place value on some lives while devaluing others. It dictates how some people may live and how some must die. It was first coined by Joseph-Achille Mbembe, a Cameroonian philosopher, political theorist, and public intellectual in describing colonial and post-colonial Africa. Necropolitics is more than a right to kill; it is also the right to expose other people (including a country's own citizens) to death.

Necropolitics is the inevitable outcome of predatory capitalism. And when it comes to decisions about which lives are worthy to be protected and saved and which are not, our legacy of white supremacy and white entitlement comes to the forefront. Isn't it interesting that so many jobs we now consider as essential to our survival do not pay a living wage? Workers who just a few months ago could not find support to raise the minimum wage are now being called heroes. By some estimates, 75% of front line workers in New York are people of color; nationwide the number is 41%.

For many of these workers, being hailed as "heroes" is synonymous with being held as "hostages"; being declared "essential" is synonymous with being treated as "expendable." While many of us complain about having to stay at home during this crisis there are many others who have no choice but to go to work. Every day they make the calculation that predatory capitalism demands: "Do I go to work in order to pay my bills or do I stay at home to protect the lives of myself and my family?"

As President Trump said in Arizona on May 5th when asked about the dangers of ending physical distancing too soon: "Will some people be affected badly? Yes. But we have to get our country open and we have to get it open soon." And, of course, he was not talking about his friends at his Mar-a-lago Country Club; he was talking about poor people who work jobs that expose them to the virus for low pay with few benefits and no paid sick leave.

## A different world is possible

It is important to note that not only has this pandemic revealed the true nature of predatory capitalism; it has also revealed the capacity of the American people to respond to each other with compassion and solidarity. While the federal government has largely washed its hands of leadership and responsibility during this crisis and states are overwhelmed by its magnitude, every day Americans across this country have found creative ways to come together and help each other.

In truth, our people are ready and willing to be called to a higher purpose if only given the encouragement to do so. My brother Frank is the co-founder of the Des Moines Catholic Worker Community that has been serving the poor in his neighborhood for over 40 years. He recently told me that he has been astounded by the amount of hospitality and service to those in need he has seen since the outbreak of this pandemic. It appears that the Catholic Worker ethos of radical personalism has gone viral.

I work in an upper middle-class parish in Naperville, Illinois where most parishioners identify themselves as politically conservative. In the midst of this pandemic our parishioners have found creative ways to take care of vulnerable parishioners and people in need in the wider community. We have reached out to every elderly parishioner to make sure they are well and to offer volunteer grocery shoppers. (We have over 40 volunteer shoppers ready to serve!) Our parish children are writing letters, creating artwork for parish shut-ins. We have volunteers ready to deliver prepared meals to any front-line worker or elderly person who needs them. Our St. Vincent de Paul group is providing financial assistance to anyone living within our parish boundaries. We are providing a rent subsidy to a refugee family during this pandemic and have raised money to provide food for other refugee families in the area. As a popular social media posting noted, "With church doors shutting across America, it is time for us to show that Church has never been about the building."

In spite of the powerful culture of predatory capitalism and extreme individualism, many Americans have rekindled the same flame of solidarity and compassion that helped us survive catastrophes like the Great Depression. We are learning again that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself. At the ground level most Americans understand that we are all in this together and only together can we get through it.

The question that remains is what kind of nation we will become once this pandemic has passed. Will the powerful cultural forces that serve to legitimize the values, beliefs, practices and outcomes of extreme individualism and predatory capitalism continue to mesmerize us with sleights-of-hand and misdirection or will we develop the communal antibodies to make us immune to the clever magicians of predatory capitalism?

As Indian prize-winning author and political activist Arundhati Roy reminds us, "Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is portal, a gateway between one world and the next. We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it."