

# THE CULTS OF CAPITAL

**What happens when  
an apocalyptic pandemic  
meets the apocalyptic  
death-cult of neoliberalism**

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*To People,*

*may they eternally be of benefit to each other.*



The phrase “business as usual” evokes a wry glance or a cynical snort even under normal political circumstances. In the face of the crisis in which we now find ourselves, the phrase sounds positively delusional. And yet “business as usual” is precisely what the Democratic leadership seems to be offering us, even as we are now so far from anything “usual” that many of us are probably not readily able to remember what the word even means. On March 17th, the congressional Democrats touted a bill<sup>1</sup> that would, for the first time, mandate paid leave for workers around the country...with such broad exceptions that only 20 percent of workers would actually benefit. (They passed it on March 27th.) Despite the Democrats’ constant self-promotion as the party of Facts and Reason and Solutions, they seem completely incapable of treating a pandemic with the seriousness that it warrants. In plague-stricken New York, a panel convened by Andrew Cuomo—current darling of “solutions”-oriented Democrats—recently proposed<sup>2</sup> \$400 million in cuts to Medicaid spending over the next year, while in D.C. Nancy Pelosi now believes<sup>3</sup> that a Republican stimulus bill that doles out a paltry

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2020/03/16/paid-sick-leave-coronavirus-house-bill/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://nypost.com/2020/03/19/cuomo-panel-recommends-400m-in-hospital-cuts-as-coronavirus-pandemic-rages/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2020/03/24/coronavirus-stimulus-government-response/2905878001/>

one-time \$1,200 to individual people “has moved sufficiently to the side of the workers.” These are not the words and actions of reasonable people—they are symptomatic of a deep-seated denial that reaches down to the core, to the place where we keep our most serious moral and religious commitments. This is the denial of the fervent religious believer who has, to their mind, discerned God’s will and will carry it out to the end, regardless of what God might have to say about it.

This kind of denial is also, appropriately, characteristic of apocalyptic scenarios, or in some cases, of their conspicuous absence. Domsday cults are not a new phenomenon especially in American history: This country has birthed a number of religious movements whose central animating belief was that the world would end on a particular day. The Millerites, for example, were a Christian movement who believed that Jesus would return physically to earth on October 22, 1844 and cleanse the world of sin and impurity. I am not arguing that the Democratic Party has been predicting the end of the world: In fact, they have continued to proclaim the inverse, that the world will *not* end and business as usual will continue. But much as the Millerites were destined to see October 22 come and go without a bodily appearance of Jesus, anyone who commits to the idea that business will perpetually continue as usual, and the economy will simply grow forever<sup>4</sup>, is placing a losing bet.

The key to understanding Democratic irrationality and intransigence in the face of this crisis lies not merely in their commitment to the neoliberal consensus, but in what exactly neoliberalism is. The term is somewhat muddy, but a good starting definition is “the conviction that market competition is the most efficient method of allocating any resource, and therefore should be introduced into every sphere of life,” a definition expansive enough to

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.currentaffairs.org/2019/10/we-need-a-fair-way-to-end-infinite-growth>

cover the governing American consensus on such diverse issues as healthcare (buy what you like, get only what you pay for), global trade (open borders for capital and goods, closed borders for human beings), and education (make public schools “compete” for funding by introducing high-stakes testing and unregulated charter schools). This commitment to total marketization is not merely a policy commitment: It carries with it a complete worldview about human nature and the nature of the good, as well as precepts for how to live life so as to be judged among the righteous (that is, the rich, or at least the financially stable) and avoid the wrath of the omnipotent and all-seeing market (that is, poverty). Such judgments stretch even into valuing lives in purely monetary terms, as Obama administration regulatory czar Cass Sunstein did in 2004. Because younger people are more economically productive and have more years of productivity left, “a program that saves younger people,” he writes<sup>5</sup>, “is better, in this sense, than an otherwise identical program that saves older people.” To any morally healthy person, a statement like that is symptomatic of profound spiritual disease, but it is paradigmatic of the neoliberal soul. Human beings are only as valuable as their productive capabilities; it is their ability to serve the market that matters, not their lives or their happiness. As historian Eugene McCarragher describes it<sup>6</sup>:

The Market suffuses the Great Chain of Being; it's the marrow of neoliberal divinity. Far from merely allocating goods and resources, the Market is the ontological architecture of the universe, an inerrant, pansophical quintessence wiser than any puny and fallible human being...It's the newest impersonation of God.

Neoliberalism is, by any reasonable social definition, a religious worldview, one which assures its adherents that so long as the market is appeased on both an individual and social scale, prosperity will inevitably follow. If an individual fails to thrive,

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4099352>

<sup>6</sup> <https://thebaffler.com/outbursts/the-world-is-a-business-mccarragher>

they simply haven't hustled hard enough; they haven't sacrificed enough of their blood, sweat, energy, and time to the market.

For some time, the Democratic consensus was that prosperity would continue and all we needed to do was tinker with the basics, a consensus that has now been unmasked as a delusion roughly on par with that of a man who believes that he can keep moving forward even though he is standing on the edge of the Grand Canyon. Since the 1990s, the Democratic establishment has been controlled by committed neoliberals, a group which cemented their power<sup>7</sup> with the election and re-election of Bill Clinton. Senior Democrats like Nancy Pelosi, Chuck Schumer, and Joe Biden were all active participants in Clinton's re-writing of Democratic priorities away from the power of labor and toward bipartisan plans to minimize the "market distortions" supposedly caused by overly generous, outdated policies like welfare<sup>8</sup> and domestic labor law<sup>9</sup>. It is this philosophy of minimalism and twiddly market fixes that has been caught with its pants not only down but in tatters, since highly contagious diseases will not heed calls for bipartisan cooperation or step up to the negotiating table to agree on a reasonable death toll. The Democrats' insistence on treating a viral epidemic—or fascist Republicans—as something with which they can negotiate and which will respond to the "nudging" programs that crawled out of Cass Sunstein's fever dreams<sup>10</sup> (and which formed the core of the U.K.'s disastrous mitigation strategy<sup>11</sup>) is the coping mechanism of a sect that has witnessed a failed prophecy.

As it happens, there is ample precedent for this in the history of apocalyptic sects. The failure of the Millerite prophecies in 1844 engendered a wide range of reactions in believers. Many simply

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/the-rise-and-fall-of-clintonism/>

<sup>8</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Personal\\_Responsibility\\_and\\_Work\\_Opportunity\\_Act](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Personal_Responsibility_and_Work_Opportunity_Act)

<sup>9</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/North\\_American\\_Free\\_Trade\\_Agreement](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/North_American_Free_Trade_Agreement)

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/16/magazine/16Sunstein-t.html>

<sup>11</sup> <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/03/17/britain-uk-coronavirus-response-johnson-drops-go-it-alone/>

gave up their beliefs and tried to return to their previous lives, but others reacted much more strongly. A sizeable contingent of ex-Millerites joined the Shakers, the famously celibate sect who believed Christ had already come again (the group also made wonderful furniture). Others began behaving like children in public, based on an idiosyncratic reading of the gospel of Mark. (Mark 10:15: Assuredly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the Kingdom of God as a little child will by no means enter it.) But a substantial number persevered in their faith and revised their understanding of the prophecies. Christ, they said, had indeed begun the work of his final judgment by entering the Heavenly Sanctuary, so that despite the lack of any earthly events, the prophecy was in fact completely correct.

The “actually we were right all along” strategy of prophetic revision is the one being pursued by Democratic elites at the moment, most visibly in their continued support for a mostly absent Joe Biden<sup>12</sup>. What America needed all along, goes the argument, was steady and familiar leadership that wouldn’t change much, and this crisis, rather than obviously disproving everything we have always believed about the economy, only underscores the belief that we need to stay the course. That this leadership seems incapable of actually doing anything at all and has, for the most part, steadily avoided any kind of public spotlight is beside the point: What actually matters is that the Democratic leadership can retain its dogmatic commitments to minimal market intervention and corporate bailouts, as Pelosi’s wholesale approval of the dreadful Republican “relief” bill demonstrates (in marked contrast to AOC’s fierce denunciation<sup>13</sup> of its corporate-friendly provisions, and Bernie Sanders’s successful threat to hold the bill<sup>14</sup> until Republicans dropped their objections to unemployment

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<sup>12</sup> <https://www.currentaffairs.org/2020/03/where-is-joe>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.nydailynews.com/coronavirus/ny-coronavirus-aoc-ocasio-cortez-stimulus-congress-20200327-f6d33k66ljgkzkbwoflskiidt4-story.html>

<sup>14</sup> [https://www.democracynow.org/2020/3/26/coronavirus\\_relief\\_bill\\_berniece\\_sanders](https://www.democracynow.org/2020/3/26/coronavirus_relief_bill_berniece_sanders)

expansion). You see? The bill passed! The corporate bailout stayed in, because it had to stay in. They were right all along!

Of course, there is always another option, one that Democrats have already begun to test. Throughout the years, the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society, the publishing arm of the religious group known as Jehovah's Witnesses, has made a number of apocalyptic predictions. Most notably, it predicted that the Hebrew patriarchs would be resurrected bodily in 1925, inaugurating the thousand-year earthly reign of Christ, and again it predicted that Christ's thousand-year reign would commence in 1975. Both of these predictions were widely seen by members to have failed, and each time a steep drop in membership ensued. But still the remaining members of the group maintain that it continues to be divinely guided and that strict adherence to its latest teachings is the only way members can be assured of salvation.

The "don't pay attention to our glaring mistakes, we never actually made them" strategy was on full display before the coronavirus fully hit. You could see it during Joe Biden's debate with Bernie Sanders, during which he repeatedly lied about his own record in supporting the Iraq War. The Democratic establishment has gone along with this, because of course many of them also supported that disastrous undertaking, and major news media organizations have elected not to comment on it, because while they critique Fox News' dishonesty they have implicitly adopted the most radical caricature of postmodern attacks on "truth," and consider truth to be fully subordinate to the needs of powerful Democrats, embodied most fully in the near radio silence about the credible allegations of sexual assault leveled by Tara Reade against Biden.<sup>15</sup> In theological terms, these politicians are diabolist dupes, unaware that their reasonable compromises, in destroying the lives

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<sup>15</sup> <https://soundcloud.com/katie-halper/tara-to-post>

of the poor, do the work of infernal powers, to whom they remain bound by the chains of their own pride.

An apocalypse is, fundamentally, a revelation or forced disclosure: The Greek term *apocalypsis* means an uncovering, an unveiling. In its most fundamental religious usage, it refers both to the book by John of Patmos describing his vision and to the events of that vision, which would reveal the resurrected Christ, his lordship over the universe, and the ultimate destiny of every person. This reflects, I think, a long awareness that crises<sup>16</sup> tend to lay bare the workings of power and the characters of people. The Democratic establishment has been unveiled to us as the delusional cult of money it always has been—a conclave of mad prophets exhorting us to seek no further for the kingdom of God than the steps of the New York Stock Exchange. Meanwhile, the Republicans have been unmasked as an even more ferocious death cult of the same,<sup>17</sup> willing to burn countless hecatombs<sup>18</sup> of poor and elderly people in blood rites<sup>19</sup> to satiate their pecuniary wicker man. In a very real sense, one of our chief responsibilities is to see this apocalypse through, to finish tearing away the veil that conceals the diabolical allegiances of our rulers (whether you view this in a metaphorical or a literal sense) and hides from sight the needs and sufferings of ordinary people upon which the present order is built. In doing so we will also reveal the degree to which these wealthy neoliberals are fundamentally unnecessary: Their disregard for life is not the downside to their tough but necessary realpolitik but pure defect, a gap in their humanity. And in caring for one another, in filling the void with genuine love, we show what kind of future we might build for one another. We can build a world

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<sup>16</sup> <https://www.currentaffairs.org/2020/03/the-politics-of-emergencies>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2020/03/26/fox-news-trump-dan-patrick-coronavirus/>

<sup>18</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hecatomb>

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.currentaffairs.org/2020/03/notes-on-a-nightmare-3-a-disturbing-turn-in-right-wing-thought>

in which the sick are cared for,<sup>20</sup> in which the hungry are fed,<sup>21</sup> in which the captive are free.<sup>22</sup> These are not utopian impossibilities: They are real courses of action that have been thoroughly thought out by many generations of left-wing activists and intellectuals. Our lives need not be bound to the market's ersatz divinity—what is best in us comes not from the wealth we hoard but from the love and support that we give. We have barely scratched the surface of human cooperation; we cannot now imagine what we will be able to accomplish in love together. As a prophet with AIDS says in the final monologue of Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*, “You are fabulous creatures, each and every one. And I bless you: More Life. The Great Work begins.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> <https://www.currentaffairs.org/2019/12/a-way-to-think-clearly-about-medicare-for-all-debates>

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.currentaffairs.org/2017/11/a-public-option-for-food>

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.currentaffairs.org/2019/11/getting-past-punishment>

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.npr.org/programs/death/readings/plays/kushner2.html>