

# Sucker

Don LaCoss

Last summer, I was talking to a carnival-ride operator at one of those small, itinerant outfits that was crisscrossing its way across the Midwest. The carny looked to be in his mid-50s and said that he had worked all sorts of jobs with different wandering funfair amusement shows since his first gig as a travelling circus roustabout at age 14.

With a foxy gleam in his eye, he told me that the most important thing he had learned from all his decades of midway huckstering was that “America’s greatest natural resources were its stupidity and its willingness to be fucked-over daily,” an interesting variation, I thought, on the 140 year-old apothegm that “there’s a sucker born every minute.”

The story goes like this: in the fall of 1869, a pair of workers digging a well behind Stub Newell’s barn in the village of Cardiff (near Syracuse, New York) uncovered the petrified corpse of a man more than ten feet tall. The giant’s physical features were clearly visible and lifelike, right on down to the toenails, veins, nostrils, and even skin pores; his contorted body suggested that he died in great pain, his right hand claspng at his abdomen as if mortally wounded.

Immediately, the “Cardiff Giant” was seized upon by Christian fundamentalists across the United States as evidence of the Old Testament’s claim about an existence of a prehistoric race of giants that once roamed the earth—at the time, archaeologists, paleontologists, and atheists had been challenging the claims of Christianity with increased vigor, so the timing of the exhumation of an ancient giant from the Book of Genesis was triumphantly hailed and widely publicized as God’s perfectly timed rebuke to unbelievers.

“This is not a thing contrived of man, but is the face of one who lived on the earth, the very image and child of God,” exclaimed a respected preacher in the pages of *Popular Science Monthly*. Godless scientists, however, asserted that it was a statue fashioned by Phoenicians whose ships had apparently visited upstate New York in antiquity.

Cashing in on the notoriety, farmer Newell set up a tent at the petrified man’s graveside, charging 25 cents a head (about \$3.75 in today’s money). Within two days, the price of admission was doubled in order to take advantage of the growing crowds. Very quickly, a joint-stock syndicate was formed, and it bought the giant from Newell for \$35,000 and took the show on the road to make the most of the giant’s remains. Price for an admission ticket was now \$1.

When his \$60,000 bid for a three-month exhibition lease for the giant was turned down by the investment group, the highly successful entrepreneur, exploitationeer, and spectacular con-artist P.T. Barnum hired a team of craftsmen to make him his own Cardiff Man out of plaster and wax. Barnum exhibited his copy as authentic and denounced the original as a shoddy counterfeit; his celebrity status ensured plenty of free publicity and drew throngs of paying customers away from the syndicate’s original giant fossil exhibit.

Eventually, the competing showmen were forced to publicly confess that both were fakes—the original had been part of an elaborate scheme cooked up by Stub Newell’s cousin George Hull, who had paid to have it carved in a gypsum quarry in Iowa, shipped by train to Cardiff, and then colluded with the farmer to have it buried for a year before it was “discovered” by the well-diggers.

None of the businessmen involved in this fraud—all of whom, it seems, made a great deal of money on their respective rip-offs—were ever prosecuted for their participation in this massive hoax. Although the famous quote has

long since been attributed to Barnum, it was probably banker David Haunnum, the head of the investor's syndicate, who actually said in the heat of the Cardiff Giant craze that "there's a sucker born every minute."

The Cardiff Giant swindle is small beer, of course, when compared to the Obama regime's \$2.5 trillion "Financial Stabilization Plan." Obama is cheered as the man with the plan to correct the contemporary capitalist system's latest catastrophic contractions and spasms, and the fact that he does so while relentlessly evoking Abraham Lincoln—one of the most blood-stained, anti-democratic, pro-industrial State-fetishists in US presidential history—seems of little concern.

Likewise, there is no criticism at all of capitalism in toto, that sprawling, ugly system that inevitably continues to precipitate the illusions of booms and the very real devastations of busts with grinding regularity. Instead, there's all this talk of "recovery"—apparently, it is the violent neoliberal markets of the Clinton era that are being nostalgically used as the Golden Age point of reference, although it was precisely Clintonian Bubble racketeers like Robert Rubin and Lawrence Summers whose service to the richest stratum of society midwived this most recent meltdown in the first place.

Every day, the corporate mass media obediently repeats whatever the latest official explanation is for what is happening. The strategy here is to maintain as thoroughly as possible the persistent delusion that capitalism works, and that it is free, normal, rational, natural, inescapable, and without alternative. And, so the public is treated to a series of "bad apple" analyses of the problem—everything is working just fine except for this one group of aberrant capitalists who crossed the line, we are told.

But it is not the real-estate companies who are at fault, or the financial sector, or insurance corporations, or the automobile manufacturers, or whatever or whoever the hell else the culprit du jour happens to be—it is the entire machine. And, this machine will continue to brutalize and savage us all until we stop it.

In the last issue of *Fifth Estate*, we said that capitalism is not dying, but rather it is mutating and re-energizing. Obama & Co.'s malarkey about "stimulus to correct for the economic downturn" is a preposterous euphemism for what's going on here this is not gentle prodding by the State until the supposedly autonomous market-capitalist economy can be goaded towards some more acceptably stable and predictable previous form.

In actuality what we are experiencing here is just one more of a series of harrowing state-capitalist "contradictions" that will destroy a lot of us as it re-aligns and restructures itself into yet another short-term Chicago School Bubble. This is exactly what the capitalist hierarchy always does and always will, pressure the bourgeois-liberal State for help between cave-ins (capitalism cannot exist without active State support), thereby evolving into more coercive and ruthlessly hegemonic mechanisms that have been engineered for maximum profitability until the next mega-breakdown.

And, this next collapse is bound to happen as the resources needed to build the next Bubble become further exhausted and the ensuing ecological fallout multiplies, but no one seems to be talking about that these days either. In other words, the only persons who will "recover" are those who always do: the multinational plunder-baron elite, the class that will enrich itself on the next Bubble at the expense of the rest of us.

Oh, sure, you can expect a minimum number of new neo-Keynesian (and, bizarrely, faith-based) social-democratic programs to quickly appear to provide some token public aid, but these are designed to only do as little as it takes to smooth the angry burr off of people's revolutionary edges, so that the most recent scenes of uprising seen in Haiti, Guadeloupe, Martinique, Guyana, Iceland, Ireland, Russia, Lithuania, Latvia, Bulgaria, Germany, Hungary, and Greece don't erupt in the US. (Ultimately, mild social welfare Band-Aids and more aggressive pre-emptive arrests by police are cheaper than paying troops to shoot crowds in the street.) But this new Bubble is going to be a lot smaller than the one Greenspan blew and there'll be no room in there for the popular classes. Again.

It is the dogged reluctance of so many ordinary people to recognize and admit that it is the entire capitalist order that is at fault here that brought the Cardiff scam to mind for me. Andrew Dickson White, a liberal teacher who wrote about the fossilized giant in his autobiography in a section titled "A Chapter in the History of Human Folly," summed up the affair nicely when he wrote: "There was evidently a 'joy in believing' in the marvel, and this was increased by the peculiarly American superstition that the correctness of a belief is decided by the number of people who can be induced to adopt it—that truth is a matter of majorities. It had become so entwined with their beliefs and their interests that at last they came to abhor any doubts regarding it." I can think of no better explanation for

why so many working and poor people seem convinced about Obama's scheme for capitalist salvation than their own "joy in believing," as well as their subsequent deep-rooted denial to accept the gruesome truths about "free" markets and the scoundrels who dominate and benefit from them.

For everyone reading these words, there is no joy in capitalism worth trying to continue to believe in—everyone you know and love is being exploited, neglected or otherwise abused by this gangsterism. Now is the time to stop making excuses for capitalism like the long-suffering enabler of a violent, irresponsible, and self-destructive drunk. The ruptures of crisis open up spaces of opportunity, and this would be an ideal time for people to take advantage of the circumstances. It is time to be subjects of history by making it our own rather than cheerfully continuing to be its objects.

# fifth Estate

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