

The New Millerites 2

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THE NEOLIBERAL MILLERITES:

A HOST OF HARRY CAMPINGS

In 1994, a con-man named Harold Camping predicted that the “Armageddon” mentioned in the New Testament’s *Book of Revelations* would occur. He was wrong. Instead of being relegated to disrepute, he spent the next 17 years accumulating more followers and over \$100 million from their purses. He grew his following and filled his coffers before predicting the end of the world *again*, this time for May of 2011. He was wrong again. Though his following diminished, many stuck with him...again. He has now predicted the end of the world yet again...and some people are still taking him seriously. Why?

I call this the “Millerite Syndrome”—a peculiar thing that is surprisingly common in myriad contexts: a belief system is proven wrong over and over again, yet adherents dig in their heels, and stick to their guns. With religion, this is standard operating procedure: obstinacy born of ego, face-saving measures, the concord fallacy, and sheer defiance. Economic ideology is no different. Those who still—preposterously—subscribe to supply-side economics after its blatant failure over the past three decades...and following the economic catastrophe of 2008...are an analogue of Harold Camping followers. Claims that trickle-down economics will someday happen are analogous to claims of the Rapture: It’s always just around the corner, just have faith...and wait. Trust us. And so instead of preparing for Judgement Day, supply-side followers endorse enormous tax-breaks for the super-rich and for Big Business in the hopes that the favor will somehow, someday, benefit the rank and file.

Such agonizingly stupendous feats of Reality Denial seem always to come from cult followings—and, therefore, unsurprisingly, almost always from right-wing movements: Denial of anthropogenic climate change, denial of evolutionary theory, denial of biblical scholarship, denial of Keynesian economic principles...and on and on. All of it: denial of the conclusive refutation of sanctified beliefs. Supply-side economics is an obvious example of this phenomenon: It is a scam that millions of Americans continue to buy into. Give gigantic tax-breaks to the nation’s most affluent (allowing them to hoard cash that they don’t need) and to large corporations (even if they are already highly profitable)...and wait. Wait for those centers of highly concentrated wealth to somehow translate that largess to the general welfare.

Of course, such a happy occurrence never comes to pass. Instead of those benefits “trickling down” to the working class, the un-need favors only succeed in creating massive deficits for the State...thereby forcing it to de-fund desperately-needed social services while allowing basic public infrastructure to crumble. Here, investment in vital public works needs to be neglected in order to subsidize those pointless tax-breaks. The State must thereby forego crucial opportunities to create employment, help the disenfranchised, and spur the economy *from the demand side*. Of course, to understand this, one must recognize that demand-side economic policy has ALWAYS worked while supply-side economic policy has NEVER worked.

In a well-educated society, certain things would not be at all controversial. That such things are still treated as if the “jury is still out” reveals how ill-informed the electorate remains. Tens of millions remain oblivious to the fact that the fiscal multiplier for public investment (demeaningly dubbed “government spending” by free market fundamentalists) is *always* far higher than the fiscal multiplier for cutting taxes for the super-rich and Big Business. It is this same Reality Denial that keeps tens of millions thinking that

the horrendously inefficient, disastrously ineffective, egregiously unfair FPSTI should be kept in place instead of implementing the far more efficient, far more effective, far more humane, State-provided universal public healthcare—like the rest of the developed world. It is this same kind of Reality Denial that keeps people listening to Harry Camping. It is the Reality Denial of the Millerites.

Reality Denial has become an art form amongst True Believers—compelling them to dutifully recite their catechism on the sublimity of regressive taxation, the evils of ROTA and public investment, and—of course—the glories of free market fundamentalism. Harold Camping would be in awe of such staggering cognitive dissonance. So creationists still argue against evolutionary theory, industries that profit off of pollution refuse to acknowledge anthropogenic climate change, pro-lifers continue to insist that a zygote is a *human being*, gun-nuts drone on about 2nd Amendment myths, corporatists persist in declaring that trickle-down economics *works*, Neocons insist that most Muslims are hell-bent on installing a global caliphate, Christian fundamentalists peddle the fable that most of the Founding Fathers were devout Christians, and Millenarians claim that we need to repent because the end of the world is just around the corner.

For those of us who are moderately well-educated, such obstinacy is exasperating to observe. One must wonder: How is it possible that millions could remain so egregiously ignorant about even the most elementary matters? The capacity for human stubborn-ness seems to be cosmic in proportion. Can so many people be that susceptible to right-wing propaganda? Is groupthink that prevalent in our society? Yes. And yes.

The two most dangerous features of ignorance are (1) ignorance of one's own ignorance and (2) the illusion of knowledge. Both features involve delusion. The thing about hyper-dogmatism is that it doesn't announce itself *as dogmatism*. Rather, it masquerades as wisdom. Such ersatz certainty renders self-diagnosis quite unlikely. So people often carry on under the impression that they are splendidly “in the know” even as they are breathtakingly nescient. The tragedy is that many people afflicted with this debilitating condition have prodigious amounts of untapped (nascent) capability. They possess potential that may never be realized because they already think they've achieved sublime erudition. Ask a Tea Partier if they understand all there is to know about macro-economics, and one will be met with a resounding, “Yes, of course. Lower taxes, small government, free market, economic freedom. Period.”

The humiliating implosion of Neoliberalism in 2008 should have been sufficient to demonstrate to any honest, clear-headed person that Neoliberalism was a sham. Like the S&L crisis of the late 80's and the fall-out from Hurricane Katrina, the financial melt-down of 2008 was a resounding demonstration of the disastrous consequences of right-wing economic policy. Nevertheless, as much as True Believers dislike being proven wrong, like all humans, they will engage in even the most outlandish psychological contortions in order to avoid feeling humiliated. After all, ideology is like a drug: dogma-junkies cling to their sense of certainty like a drug addict to his next fix. They become as dependent on their dogma as an alcoholic does on his bottle.

The calamity of 2008 had very clear causes—a straight-forward explanation about which there was near-universal consensus among bona fide economists and sociologists. It was a loud and clear signal to civilized society of what can happen when private wealth / influence becomes too highly concentrated, and is allowed to run amok, without regulation, oversight, transparency, or accountability. 2008's catastrophe was irrefutable evidence that the hyper-financialization of an economy, replete with un-checked corporate power, will not only ruin an economy, but undermine democracy. Hyper-speculation—a primary cause *and* symptom of drastic wealth inequalities—has burned us many times before (1929 being the most glaring case). Yet...in spite of all this, tens of millions of those who were *screwed by* right-wing economic policy somehow persist in *endorsing it*. Like religious fanatics with a sacred doctrine, they ardently believe in the Neoliberal catechism, have quarantined themselves off from irrefutable facts and mountains of conclusive evidence...and are thus utterly immune Reason.

Alas, no matter how many times Neoliberal apologists are proven completely wrong about their lofty claims, they insist on sticking to their guns. Such a staunch incidence of Reality Denial seems only to occur in cult followings. A cult, then, is precisely what Neoliberal economic ideology has become. Nothing else could possibly account for the degree of obstinacy we observe. (Some even have the audacity to propose that the disaster of 2008 happened because economic policy wasn't right-wing *enough*. INGSOC would have been in awe of such brazen Doublethink.) Corporatist sympathizers, then, are the analogue of Harry Camping sympathizers if for no other reason than that nothing could possibly convince them that their beliefs are demonstrably false.

Touting the alleged virtues of *lack of* ROTA has become a holy sacrament for corporatists and their loyal followers. The mind-bending degree of cognitive dissonance required to maintain such a stance (with a straight face) is astonishing to behold—just like the hidebound fealty to Harold Camping after his failed predictions. Alas, such mind-bending obstinacy is the symptom of cult behavior: the Millerites will always be Millerites because that's their *modus operandi*. So they will fight for private jet owners to avoid taxes, for hugely profitable banks to avoid ROTA, for large corporations to find tax havens, and for ways the ultra-wealthy can hoard as much as possible...all in the name of helping the rank and file. This all requires neglecting basic public infrastructure and leaving the disenfranchised out in the cold to fend for themselves...but that's all fine and dandy in the right wing's utopia of anarcho-capitalism. It is obscene, yet when the Neoliberal Millerites push such reprehensible policy stances, rarely are they called out for being despicable human beings.

But then we must remind ourselves, they are human beings—subject to the same foibles and idiosyncrasies as the rest of us. Nobody likes to feel humiliated; and so some people will engage in stupendous feats of cognitive dissonance in order to preserve an illusion of dignity. Delusion is the sad outcome of this face-saving process. We all like to save face; but when one needs to save face at all costs, one has truly gone down the rabbit hole. So Republicans will continue to insist that tax-breaks for the super-rich and for large corporations are imperative, regardless of the fact that it has been proven over and over and over that such measures don't help the rank and file. A well-informed citizenry would be appalled at this conduct. An ill-informed citizenry is duped into cheering for it.

No matter how demonstrably false a belief may be, people often insist on sticking to their guns if for no other reason than to salvage a modicum of pride—even after their hallowed ideology has been exposed as a sham, they will hold fast to even the most repugnant world views. But it is false pride they harbor—a pride shorn of integrity. In the face of being proven wrong (and even destructive), such adherents render themselves immune to shame. People sometimes resort to drastic measures in order to maintain the appearance of dignity. Why? *People don't like to be proven wrong.* Cognitive dissonance isn't an enjoyable exercise; it is a subconscious act of desperation. Like a neurosis, those who have succumbed to it typically aren't aware of their affliction—and manage to remain smug. They carry on as if they were completely perfectly in touch with Reality:

- Corporations should be afforded all the civil rights of humans
- A progressive tax-levying algorithm is tantamount to “theft” and will cause unemployment
- Curbing corporate malfeasance deters free enterprise and stifles innovation
- Those with the most power have the most power because they DESERVE the most power
- Big Business should be able to influence our elections and dictate legislation
- When corporations abuse their power, it's because there was *too much* ROTA
- If you're super-rich, you are a job-creator; so taxes on the super-rich fetter job creation
- There are no structural inequalities or barriers to entry here in the U.S. If you're disenfranchised, it's because your not as worthy as the privileged. If you're poor, you've probably brought it upon yourself. If you're rich, it's almost always because of merit.

The claims found in Millennialist prognostications are no more preposterous than these nutty nostrums. The urge to actually believe such hogwash seems no more potent—as both narratives seem to have an irresistible appeal to certain people. How else can one explain the outlandish fact that oil companies, despite elephantine profits, are still subsidized by tax-payer money? Or that large corporations, while making record profits, pay little or now taxes? Or that hedge-fund managers pay lower tax rates than their file clerks? Or that banking executives (who typically do nothing productive for society, and often do things that hurt society) pay lower tax rates than their secretaries? Or that farm subsidies originally meant for family famers go to huge corporations that don't need the help? WHY do we have enormous deficits? WHY do we have high unemployment? WHY do we have horrendous public infrastructure? WHY do we have horribly underfunded social services? WHY do we have such colossal wealth inequalities? Neoliberal economic policy.

Such blatantly defective belief systems require a staggering degree of cognitive dissonance. Whether one is buying into the propaganda of The Club For Growth, Americans For Prosperity, The Business Roundtable, The Chamber of Commerce, The American Enterprise Institute, The Heritage Foundation, or American For Tax Reform...or one is listening to the proselytizing of The Church of Christ, Jehovah's Witnesses, Pentecostals, or Seventh Day Adventists...the high level of credulity is the key. The parallels are obvious the moment we assess the ways in which devotees of either kind operate.

That anyone still takes Neoliberal polemic seriously is just as peculiar as observing the die-hard followers convinced that Harold Camping is still worth listening to. Of course, those who are familiar with even the elementary points of (bona fide) Biblical scholarship already understood that Mr. Camping was full of hogwash...just as anyone who understands the most fundamental principles of macro-economics already understood that Neoliberal doctrine was all balderdash. Just like Christian fundamentalists and their

prognostications of God's impending Kingdom, free market fundamentalists tailor their policies so as to usher in some anarcho-capitalist utopia. Intoxicating visions of the promised land characterize both dogmatic systems. The allure of such promises is too much for some to resist. All the while, their utopian visions are a mirage. Just as Harold Camping laughs all the way to the bank, corporatists laugh all the way to the bank. In one case, a charlatan cashes in on credulous followers; in the other case, private power becomes more and more concentrated in the United States even as the rank and file are more and more neglected.

Those who stubbornly cling to a beloved farce seem incapable of ever being convinced of its fraudulence. Once one has invested so much psychological energy into the anointed worldview, one has irrevocably committed oneself to the sanctified storyline. The leap of faith is irreversible, it seems. Even when confronted with irrefutable proof of its fraudulence (over and over and over again), fully-committed adherents will defiantly cling to their beliefs. After all, their utopia awaits; they mustn't lose Faith. And so it goes: Countervailing facts only render their Faith *more vehement*. Welcome to the world of the Millerite.

Trying to convince a Neoliberal ideologue that trickle-down economics will never happen is like trying to convince a Christian fanatic that Judgment Day isn't really ever going to come. Both attempts are contending with the same social pathology, the same recalcitrance, the same obstinacy. In each case, such a critique tampers with a sacrosanct house of cards—and must be summarily rebuffed. Tea Partiers are thoroughly convinced that taxes on the super-rich or on large corporations will destroy the country, deter job creation, and deprive everyone of their basic freedoms.

When faced with any compendium of hard facts that conclusively shows their beliefs to be flat-out wrong, staunch ideologues will be un-swayed. They will stick to their guns simply because they've invested so much in having been right all along. To challenge them, then, is heresy. Whenever critical analysis is deemed heretical, then all bets are off. Once one has gone through the looking glass, one has quarantined oneself from Reality. Bring this to the ideologue's attention, and one is merely affirming one's heresy. The narrative appears validated even as it is refuted. The 2008 economic disaster, clearly caused by right-wing economic policy, is proof that economic policy should move *even further* to the right! Get it?

Whether with Millennialism or Neoliberalism, loyal followers are essentially engaging in full-fledged cult activity. Any refutation of their sacred propositions is simply dismissed as wrong-headed sacrilege. Consequently, *confirmation bias* takes control: All phenomena are viewed through the prism of the sanctified ideology. Subscribers to the sham dutifully recite the catechism they've learned (see my essays on Neoliberal Newspeak). They faithfully regurgitate their scripted talking points...all the while under the impression that they're offering sound arguments for their untenable position.

We've heard the shtick a hundred times before: romanticizing corporate power, championing plutocrats as icons of democracy, conflating the economic elites with intellectual elites, apologizing for Big Business lobbying schemes, depicting the super-affluent as "job creators", fetishizing the so-called "free market", glorifying the private sector, denying the dangers of highly-concentrated private wealth, vilifying the State while encouraging corporate socialism, demonizing any/all taxes on the super-rich, caricaturing ROTA as tyrannical interference with noble endeavors, insisting that investment in public works is a nefarious attempt by scheming government bureaucrats to control our lives, denying the iniquities of structural inequality, treating public health as a consumer product, denouncing calls for social justice as communist subterfuge, and leaving the disenfranchised out in the cold to fend for themselves...all in the name of "freedom". It's just like listening to the deranged cant of an Evangelical preacher.

Such cult followers make their unfounded proclamations time and time again even as the world proves them wrong time and time again. The key is to do all of it *with a straight face*. If one exudes enough certainty, one can get away with saying almost anything. The impresarios of cult activity have known this

since time immemorial: from L.Ron Hubbard to Jim Jones, from Kim Il Sung to Pol Pot, from the Koch brothers to every right-wing celebrity pundit since William F. Buckley Jr. Say it with confidence, and people will be seduced by the charisma—regardless of the credence of the claims.

Neoliberal theology is no less preposterous than Evangelical theology. Both require a tremendous amount of credulity to take seriously; both depend on ignorance to seem credible. Both are tragically successful at mobilizing eager adherents. Both have been conclusively refuted on countless occasions in myriad ways. Yet both SOUND good to the ear of the thoroughly indoctrinated. To the untutored ear, free market fundamentalism sounds magnificent.

Nothing, it seems, could possibly convince a Neoliberal Millerite that his views are defective. Nothing. The rich mustn't pay taxes, funding crucial social services is tantamount to installing a Soviet-style tyranny, corporate power is wonderful, the market will ultimately solve all society's problems, the poor are poor because they've brought it upon themselves, the affluent are affluent because of sheer, raw merit: It's like listening to a Millenarian cite passages from *Revelations*. Do people really believe this stuff? You betcha.

For the Millerite, the prospect of ever abdicating his stance is untenable. Just as Harry Camping. If he encounters anything that exposes the coveted ideology as a sham, he will simply dig in his heels. The more obvious the refutation of his claims by FACTS, the more vociferous his defiance becomes. So, after the fall-out of 2008, millions of people will STILL vote for the G.O.P.—a wholly-owned subsidiary of the financial investment industry—thereby expecting the arsonist to save the burning house while writing the fire department off as the “real” arsonist. “I feel my freedom is threatened, so I will support those who abet corporate power,” proudly proclaims devout right-wing laity. To them, this stance makes *perfect sense*. According to Neoliberal doctrine, economic problems all happen because the big, bad State won't get out of everyone's way. Allow the rich to become richer, and the working class will benefit!

The analogy between Harold Camping's followers and Neoliberal apologists couldn't be more clear. Some people are constitutionally incapable of ever admitting that they are mistaken—and have been mistaken for quite some time. After all, they've built their identity and reputation upon a coveted belief system. Zealots like this are consequently impelled to salvage their identity—and engage in drastic face-saving measures—whenever their coveted claims are proven wrong. Progressives must realize, to point out the glaring defects in Neoliberal policy isn't merely to “disagree” with Neoliberals; its to blaspheme a sacred doctrine. The irony here is quite staggering: Neoliberal apologists treat Neoliberalism the same way Communist apparatchiks treated Communism. To speak out against it means you're “the enemy” plotting to destroy the nation.

Behold the Millerites: The only way to stick to their guns is to deny the mountain of evidence that proves them wrong. Just as with the credulous devotees of Harold Camping, the followers of Neoliberalism have forfeited their right to be taken seriously. Some people adamantly refuse to listen to Reason. Such people demand to be ignored by those of us in the Reality-based community. If they can't be swayed by irrefutable evidence, then there is no point including them in a discussion. Some rabbit holes seem to be a one-way threshold.