

Columbus Day, Wall Street and Alabama immigrants

By [Debra Dean Murphy](#)

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In 1992 political strategist James Carville coined the catchphrase that won Bill Clinton the presidency: “It’s the economy, stupid.” Clinton made good on his word to address the deficit and high unemployment and through both skill and luck presided over unprecedented economic growth and prosperity.

The two wars started by his successor, along with the financial meltdown precipitated by the collapse of Lehman Brothers in 2008, eroded all such gains and any optimism about America’s short- and long-term economic future.

So Carville’s slogan is as timely as ever, though now it’s been distilled into the panicky particular of “Jobs! Jobs! Jobs!” Pundits and politicians of all stripes reflexively chant the mantra and everyone knows that the presidency will be won next year by the candidate with the most compelling plan for tackling the nation’s high unemployment.

In the soundbyte world we live in pithy slogans always get a lot of traction but the deeper realities they may point to almost never do. And while the numbers don’t lie—unemployment is alarmingly high, especially given that many of the jobless aren’t factored into the published statistics—neither do they illuminate the deeper problem, one that the [“Occupy Wall Street”](#) protestors are coalescing around: “It’s about power, stupid.”

It’s always been about power. The colonization of the Americas undertaken by the crowns of Europe was a centuries-long experiment in the wielding of power and the dispossessing of the poor for political and financial gain. Our sanitized versions of Christopher Columbus the brave explorer are slowly, thankfully giving

way to more truthful accounts of what the decimation of native peoples wrought. (The colonization of the imagination is one of the most insidious of takeovers to recognize and undo).

In our own time the “jobs” rhetoric from both the right and the left ignores the power grabs and power differentials that led to the hemorrhaging of American jobs in the first place. The simple truth is that multinational corporations could make more money for their shareholders by outsourcing jobs to third-world countries so that is what they did. This was not a moral dilemma for CEOs; it was a “sound business decision.” And the gospel according to free-market capitalism (the USA’s true religion) preaches that what is good for American business is good for America.

(On a related note: for all the adoration heaped on Steve Jobs this past week ([iDolatry?](#)), Apple has a pretty abysmal record on workers’ rights. But our collective commodity fetish—which knows no political partisanship—makes this unwelcome news).

So all the flowery rhetoric about “putting Americans back to work” is bullshit that no one gets called on. Conservatives keep summoning the ghost of Ronald Reagan, even though “trickle-down economics” has proved to be a straight-up failure. Liberals talk the talk but can’t walk the walk on lifting up American workers because of their own political indebtedness to Wall Street gazillionnaires.

[Meanwhile in Alabama](#) the people who clean toilets and pick produce and mow lawns are disappearing, fearful for their lives and for their children’s lives as the state’s new anti-immigration law has gone into effect. The whites who are taking their places don’t seem to want the jobs so much: “Some of them work out a little bit,” says one tomato farmer, desperate for pickers. “Some might work three hours and they quit.”

The [cruelty of the Alabama law](#) is interesting to ponder on Columbus Day. Granted, most of us “celebrate” the holiday by taking advantage of department store sales or sleeping in

if we have the day off, but here we are 500+ years later, still disregarding the humanity of those “not like us”; still assuming a superiority based on geography; still misappropriating the scriptures most of us say we live by.

Elected

leaders will be of no help on this, nor will the corporate media’s coverage of the presidential campaign over these next twelve long months. Candidates for office will not speak truthfully on the issues of immigration and jobs (and their connection) for truthful speech will not get you elected in this country. And whether you’re a Democrat or a Republican it’s the imperial presidency you seek and imperial interests will always trump the interests of those with no power.

Which is what I take to be the primary complaint of those occupying Wall Street and now other cities around the country.

Their improvisational, street-theatre style (unintelligible to much of the media) seems to me a strategic counter-witness to the rigid managerialism of the corrupt corporate powers they seek to expose: the revolution will not be on PowerPoint. And their disparate demands (another source of criticism by the corporate suits) simply reveal the enormity of the problem created by unchecked greed.

And finally for many in the crowd I suspect it’s trickle up economics they mean to champion—a radical re-visioning of what it means to live in the kind of community where there’s more than enough for everyone.

To that we should all say: more power to them.

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