

What Happens in Batman Begins

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*Warning: Naturally, spoilers follow — for both Batman Begins and The Dark Knight Rises.*¹

We begin in the 1980s, when the global forces of evil have decided to institute a new economic policy on the world. Their nefarious plan dramatically exacerbates inequality, making the rich filthy rich while the poor suffer terrible levels of unemployment.

The difference is that in the Batman universe, Gotham's leading billionaire (Thomas Wayne) can't stand the suffering and begins investing in the city when the government won't. He builds a giant Keynesian supertrain in a desperate attempt to get the city back to work. But, in an ironic twist, he ends up murdered by one of the desperate poverty-stricken citizens he's trying so hard to help.

The murder of the billionaire shocks the surviving billionaires, leading them to reverse their neoliberal policies. Instead of getting tough on crime, they decide to indulge criminals, with a deep willingness to treat criminality as merely a mental health problem.

As the billionaires retreat from power, organized crime steps in, taking their place in buying off judges and unions and cops. Instead of being run by Wayne Enterprises, the city ends up being run by mob boss Carmine Falcone.

But a few rogue elements in the police and DA's office refuse to be bought off. They free the man who murdered Thomas Wayne in exchange for his testimony against Falcone. Bruce Wayne, the billionaire's son, is so haunted by his personal demons that he can't stand this trade-off. When his childhood-friend-turned-rogue-ADA points out the selfishness of his position, he confronts Falcone. When Falcone explains that Bruce will always live in fear of what he does not understand, Bruce sets off on a quest to understand criminals.

His search concludes in a far eastern terrorist training camp, which turns out to be backed by the same global forces of evil that invented neoliberalism. It's the year 2000 and they have a new plan: attacking Gotham with the hope of inspiring enough fear that the city will destroy itself.²

Bruce, still haunted by the execution of his parents, refuses to become an executioner himself and, instead of joining the plot, sets fire to the camp before returning to clean up Gotham his own way. He begins by putting together a case against Falcone and re-seizing control of Wayne Enterprises by buying up its shares on the public market.

In doing so, he begins a reversal of history that eventually culminates in *The Dark Knight Rises*. His attack on Falcone leads to a new era of tough-on-crime, which dethrones the organized criminals and allows the wealthy to seize power again. The wealthy quickly reinstitute neoliberalism and buy back Bruce's shares on the public market, putting Wayne Enterprises back in their hands. But the global forces of evil step in once again to "restore balance" by letting Bane to release the organized criminals.³ Bruce Wayne goes back to being an innocent child of privilege and the trilogy ends exactly where it started.⁴

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1. *Batman Begins* is very clearly the mirror image of *The Dark Knight Rises* (some scenes are almost word-for-word the same), so understanding one can help us understand the other.
 2. Yes, in this trilogy 9/11 really was an inside job, from the same folks who brought you Reaganomics.
 3. Democrats, Republicans, organized crime, or billionaire financiers — whoever tries to seize power, the global forces of evil continue to hold the reins from behind-the-scenes, making sure nobody changes the system too much.
 4. Exactly, right down to how Robin (who see as a small boy in the first film, the same way we see Bruce in flashbacks) ends the film frustrated by the system (the same way Bruce was frustrated by Rachel) and is about to head out in a quest of his own, following the same path Bruce Wayne took. Thus the cycle continues.