

What Happens in The Dark Knight Rises

July 29, 2012

[Original link](#)

*Warning: Naturally, spoilers follow.*¹

The film begins by asking: what happens if conservative law-and-order policies actually worked? The answer, we quickly learn, is that it destroys the people behind them. Without anything to fight, Bruce Wayne is just a reclusive withered husk, while Commissioner Gordon is actually going to be fired. Given that these are two of the film's most sympathetic characters, we naturally tend to deplore this situation. And so the film's first key point: the champions of law-and-order do not truly want to succeed at their stated mission.

In a world without (street) crime, the police become merely the errand-boys for the wealthy, not bothering to refocus their efforts on corporate or economic criminals (like Daggett). Gordon sighs at having such quotidian assignments as tracking down wayward members of Congress; meanwhile no one even considers punishing the same Congressman for sexually harassing Selina Kyle. As a result, economic inequality grows unchecked and Gotham's citizens are saved from physical attack only to suffer economic depredation (some literally moving into the sewers in the desperate search for a job).

The whole thing is the mirror of the beginning of the first film, in which Wayne's Keynesian Supertrain project to boost the city's economy is felled by random street crime. Now the ending of street crime is ultimately felled by the failure to create an economy that works for all. ([Ra's al Ghul](#): "Over the ages, our weapons have grown more sophisticated. With Gotham, we tried a new one: Economics. ... Create enough hunger and everyone becomes a criminal.")

With the state having withered away to little more than a nightwatchman for the wealthy, private charity is all that's left to fill the widening gap between the horribly poor and the terribly wealthy. But this is ultimately a failure, because most of the wealthy philanthropists are more concerned with their own self-image than actual impact. Worse, those who are making a difference are forced to cancel their charitable programs when the downturn (and questionable business decisions) cause their profits to slump.

Into this Rawlsian nightmare walks Bane, a thug who escaped Middle Eastern extraordinary rendition to train with Arab terrorists before heading to Gotham. There he's building an underground vanguard party, constructing a new society literally underneath the decadent old one.

Bane's activists crash the Gotham Stock Exchange (which is exactly like the NYSE except with a gaudy ticker on the door), using their proletarian roles

(bike messenger, shoe shiner, cement mixer) to seize control of the markets and expropriate the wealth of Bruce Wayne, the city's richest man. Having a real enemy revitalizes Wayne, leading him to return to action as Batman and attempt to catch the criminals.

But with the Gordon Era on its way out, the police are more concerned with stopping the vigilante Batman than the expropriators, letting them get away. Thus just as Batman's success in stopping crime made himself unnecessary, his clumsy failure is what allows him to return.

The activists strike a tactical alliance with certain deluded members of the capitalist class, using their expropriation to engineer a hostile takeover of Wayne Enterprises, eventually allowing them (with a small amount of violence) to take possession of a nuclear weapon.

That way, when the vanguardists use proletarian sabotage to secede and declare independence, the US can't intervene and instead leaves the newly-independent city to its own devices.² (Once again, Wayne has made it possible for his enemies to succeed — they never could have done it without his nuke.) Bane quickly dismantles the repressive state, releasing the prisoners locked up without parole under the harsh law-and-order regime. In the resulting anarchy, the people quickly do what the old establishment wouldn't: string up the bankers (sometimes literally) and redistribute their wealth. (Their show-trials are the mirror to the establishment's treatment of organized crime under the Dent Act, harshly punishing the criminals and seizing their assets with limited due process.)

Emphasizing that all power ultimately comes from the force of the fist, the police try to reassert their control in a climactic street brawl against Bane's vanguardists. However, the situation only gets worse for them as it's revealed that Talia, the daughter of the Arab terrorist leader, has arranged the nuke to detonate unavoidably.

Batman apparently finally realizes that he's only creating the crime he tries so hard to stop (as [The Joker told him](#), "I don't want to kill you! What would I do without you?...you complete me"), so he fakes his own death as he disposes of the bomb. He ends the film in Italy, apparently leading a normal life with an attractive reformed catburglar.³

As Neil Kandalgaonkar [notes in comments](#):

If Bruce Wayne had never used his resources to 'improve' matters, Gotham would be a thriving (albeit often corrupt) city. Instead it has suffered from terrorist attacks killing prominent city officials, destroying most bridges, devastating several public buildings, giant smoking holes in the ground, and even ruined the real estate value of the more desirable neighborhoods.

The predictable result, not shown in the movie, is capital flight from a city which embraced law and order by any and all means, and

instead got anarchy and ruin. The billionaire vigilante himself flees the city, having secured his fortune with offshore banking accounts.

1. Thanks especially to [Aaron Bady's review](#) for clarifying my thinking on some of these points.
2. Unlike with Cuba, Vietnam, Nicaragua, etc.
3. Admittedly, this move is somewhat undercut by the fact that before he left he decided to set up a sequel series by sending a promising young cop (whose middle name turns out to be Robin) on a mission that ends with Robin watch a top policeman prefer to let the entire population of the city die rather than disobey outdated bureaucratic orders. Disgusted, Robin throws away his badge and sets off to continue Batman's tactics of vigilantism, inheriting the Batcave.