

Disinformation: The Limits of Capitalism's Imagination and the End of Ideology

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1

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines *disinformation* as “the dissemination of deliberately false information, esp. when supplied by a government or its agent to a foreign power or to the media, with the intention of influencing the policies or opinions of those who receive it” and traces its English usage—the term itself is Russian in origin, coined in 1949—back to 1955.¹ In what follows, while I retain its crude sense of misleading information—that is, information pointing away from reality—I define *Dis-*

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1. *OED Online*, s.v. “disinformation, n.” March 2014, Oxford University Press, accessed May 21, 2014, www.oed.com/view/Entry/54579?redirectedFrom=disinformation&.

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information as a reflexive phenomenon rather than a conscious plan of propaganda in order to analyze what I understand as a deep historical eruption in the political topography of the United States, resulting in a collapse of the two-party system. Disinformation is systemic (a “malfunction”) and also serves within this rupture a set of class interests, precisely by erasing the very vocabulary of class, which it does from the Constitution forward by erasing the idea of “economic rights.” This idea will not emerge within the two-party system until FDR introduces it in his last State of the Union address in 1944, after which it is submerged, increasingly so, into the present moment.

Disinformation references both this collapse and the failed state of critical thinking in the United States today, which effectively cordons off the collapse from public attention. I define *critical thinking* as the acquired skill of analyzing the contradictory structure of discourse that itself does not appear to take account of these contradictions. The purpose of critical thinking is not only to tag these contradictions but also to offer cogent interpretations of their discursive function in national politics. Disinformation raises the question, what are the limits of our thinking in relation to crucial interrelated social, political, and economic issues? In other words, *Disinformation* is a term that inscribes the limits of capitalism’s imagination. In this context, I understand critical thinking as a public process. Critical thinking, or what passes for it, takes place in institutions such as schools, the mass media, and political parties, and is liberated, limited, or subverted by the epistemological parameters of these institutions—what can and cannot be imagined within their theories and practices.

I take it that critical thinking is fundamental to productive action. That is, the actions we take are dependent on the plans we are able to formulate, and those plans are in turn limited by what we can think. In this respect, the thesis of this essay is simple: the United States is in a historical position where within the collapsed two-party system it cannot think its way out of the persistent problems that plague it, precisely because mainstream public discourse has ruled out the language necessary to think critically about these problems—an increasing income gap between the rich and the rest, poverty, unemployment and underemployment, intensifying militarization (a defense budget that constitutes half of all federal discretionary spending²), a health care system ranked thirty-seventh in the world by the World Health

2. Jo Comerford, “Cashing in the War Dividend,” TomDispatch.com, October 20, 2009, www.tomdispatch.com/post/175115/war_is_peace.

Organization,³ environmental degradation, a political system dominated by corporate interests, and a failing educational system, to name the problems that come most readily to mind.

To begin thinking about the state of the union critically, we could begin by pursuing the proposition with which I began: the two-party system has become, in fact, a one-party state, a shadow play of corporate interests in which what appears to be the extreme opposition of Democrats and Republicans—whatever the former party advocates, the latter opposes—amounts ironically to a collaboration that insures the continuation of the corporate status quo. If there is a difference between the two parties, it is this: while the Democrats have a finger in the hole in the crumbling dike that is holding back the tidal wave of predatory capitalism (complete privatization of all resources), the Republicans are trying to tear the dike down. Thus, the Republicans provide a convenient alibi for the equally entrenched corporatism (neoliberalism) of the Democratic Party. Either way, though, the dike will collapse, sooner or later, unless it is substantially reconstructed within a framework of wealth redistribution based on a program of economic justice, where the phrase *equal opportunity* has a material referent. The mainstream focus, beginning in late 2013, on income inequality is no more than another rhetorical flourish. The most the Democratic Party can come up with in terms of policy in this area is to suggest a raise in the minimum wage, from \$7.25 to \$10.10 per hour—a raise, that is, from one level of poverty to another, which the Republican Party reflexively opposes.

As for foreign policy, there is little difference between the two parties beyond rhetorical flourishes. Both adhere to a great-power, expansionist foreign policy, of which war is the ready-at-hand tool, even as conventional forms of war give way to innovative forms of aggression (drones, cyberwar, global surveillance, the militarization of domestic police forces, for example). In fact, despite Republican rhetorical attempts to portray the president as a “sunshine soldier and summer patriot,”⁴ the Obama administration has developed the predatory drone program past the limits of the Bush years and thereby widened the scope of the “war on terror,” which

3. World Health Organization, “World Health Organization Assesses the World’s Health Systems,” June 21, 2000, www.who.int/whr/2000/media_centre/press_release/en/.

4. Thomas Paine, *The American Crisis* (1776), in *Thomas Paine: Collected Writings* (New York: Library of America, 1955), 91. The original reads famously: “These are the times that try men’s souls. The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of his country; but he that stands NOW, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman.”

now includes US citizens as potential targets. Writing in Salon.com near the end of Obama's first term, Glenn Greenwald catches the force of the Democrat-Republican collaboration:

The current President not only has seized the power to assassinate American citizens with no charges, but also to imprison people indefinitely with no charges, to bomb six different countries where no war is declared and where civilians are routinely killed, to invoke extreme, self-parodying levels of secrecy to hide what he does, and to prosecute wars even after Congress votes against their authorization. His cabinet is filled with people who, while in public life, advocated an aggressive attack on another country on the basis of weapons that did not exist, including his Vice President and Secretary of State [Hillary Clinton at the time]. His financial team is filled with the very same people who implemented the Wall-Street-subservient policies that led to the 2008 financial crisis.⁵

What Greenwald signals is the way policy, foreign and domestic, and policy makers translate faithfully across administrations. The 1969 Eugene McDaniels protest song "Compared to What?" made famous by Les McCann and Eddie Harris, comes to mind. Here are two of its verses:

I love the lie and lie the love
A-Hangin' on, with push and shove
Possession is the motivation
that is hangin' up the God-damn nation
Looks like we always end up in a rut (everybody now!)
Tryin' to make it real—compared to what? C'mon baby! . . .

The President, he's got his war
Folks don't know just what it's for
Nobody gives us rhyme or reason
Have one doubt, they call it treason
We're chicken-feathers, all without one nut. God damn it!
Tryin' to make it real—compared to what?⁶

5. Glenn Greenwald, "Dennis Kucinich and 'Wackiness,'" Salon.com, March 10, 2012, www.salon.com/writer/glenn_greenwald/.

6. The lyrics for "Compared to What?" can be found at www.allthelyrics.com/lyrics/les_mccann/compared_to_what-lyrics-1210340.html (accessed March 10, 2012). A video of Les McCann and Eddie Harris performing the song at the Montreux Jazz Festival in 1969 can be found at www.youtube.com/watch?v=MzvlivbptXk (accessed March 10, 2012).

Between 1969 and 2012, the song bears witness to the destructive consistency of national policy: “possession” and “war” without “rhyme or reason” are the names of the game, then and now. *Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose*. Except, of course, the weapons—such as drones—become more dangerous, and the climate changes. If the weapons don’t get us, the weather will. The chorus—“Tryin’ to make it real—compared to what?”—suggests this history as a hallucinatory state without a window on reality through which we might exit. The question is: Will the United States be able to frame this window with a dominant public discourse that lets the nation think its way out of this hallucinatory history?

The problem in our politics, then, is not, as the pundits have it, the polarization of the two parties but their unanimity in allegiance to a corporate agenda. This collusion is succinctly illustrated by the automatic budget cuts, or “sequester,” that went into effect on March 1, 2013, and were subsequently lifted in early 2014 when Congress agreed on a minimalist budget. While each party publicly blamed the other for the sequester cuts, which threatened to force an already sluggish economy back into recession, the *New York Times* reported the following on February 23, 2013:

What makes this debate over blame so odd is that both sides’ fingerprints—and votes—are all over the sequestration concept. The point of sequestration, in fact, was to define cuts that were so arbitrary and widespread that they would be unpalatable to both sides and force a deal.

That won Republicans’ support for increasing the government’s debt limit in 2011, and averted the nation’s first default. The Republican-led House and Democratic-led Senate each passed the accord overwhelmingly, and Mr. Obama gladly signed it.

The idea for sequestration did come from the White House, as news accounts made clear at the time. Jacob J. Lew, then Mr. Obama’s budget director and now his nominee for Treasury secretary, was the main proponent.⁷

Foreign policy will not change until domestic policy does, because the two are in a dialectical relationship, grounded in the narrative of American Exceptionalism. I define *exceptionalism* as a mode of imagining a his-

7. Jackie Calmes, “Fault-Finding Grows Intense as Cuts Near,” *New York Times*, February 23, 2013, www.nytimes.com/2013/02/24/us/politics/fault-finding-grows-intense-as-cuts-near.html?pagewanted=all.

tory outside of history, as a way of reading history ahistorically in order to create a coherent narrative—one that appears to be without contradiction—that we call the *Nation*. Given their complementary relationship, the fundamental unanimity in foreign policy of the two parties should suggest their fundamental agreement on domestic policy, in spite of the rhetorical polarization. Nothing will change in the economic sphere, then, until a progressive discourse enters mainstream US politics. The suggestion of such a discourse is framed in a poster advertising Occupy May Day 2012, from which I cite the text and a representation of its layout, minus the image of an African American physician reading a text on a clipboard he is holding, presumably with the following symptoms:

Feeling Sad and Depressed?

Are you anxious?

Worried about the future?

Feeling isolated and alone?

You might be suffering from CAPITALISM

Symptoms may include: homelessness, unemployment, poverty, hunger, feelings of powerlessness, fear, apathy, boredom, cultural decay, loss of identity, extreme self-consciousness, loss of free speech, incarceration, suicidal or revolutionary thoughts, death.

Until the moment when the US public can admit that it is “suffering from CAPITALISM,” mechanisms will not be developed to redistribute wealth in equitable ways, and this, in turn, substantially inhibits any broad-based social change beyond the area of certain formal political rights.⁸ In fact, the very idea of wealth redistribution cannot currently be seriously thought in the US public sphere, where the key term *class* is erased from our political vocabulary except as an epithet in which the Republican Party accuses the Democrats of “class warfare” anytime the latter suggest, however timidly, that the economic playing field needs a bit of leveling.⁹ Thus, a presidential campaign like Barack Obama’s in 2008, which was predicated on the promise of progressive “change,” proffered an empty promise, a cipher, and constituted an act of Disinformation. That is, the key word *change* had no referent.

8. I want to thank Jonathan Senchynne for bringing this poster to my attention. An image of the poster can be found by searching “you might be suffering from capitalism.”

9. See Editorial, “A Call for Fairness,” *New York Times*, September 19, 2011, www.nytimes.com/2011/09/20/opinion/a-call-for-fairness.html.

In an op-ed piece in the Sunday *New York Times* on January 31, 2010, Frank Rich remarks, “The historian Alan Brinkley has observed that we will soon enter the fourth decade in which Congress—and therefore government as a whole—has failed to deal with any major national problem, from infrastructure to education. The gridlock isn’t only a function of polarized politics and special interests. There’s also been a gaping leadership deficit.”¹⁰ My use of *Disinformation* implies the fact of forty years of two-party systemic stasis masquerading as democratic process but takes exception that this gridlock is a function of the causes that Rich notes: polarized politics and a “leadership deficit.” These are only epiphenomena, not the primary cause of the problem. The primary cause of the US paralysis in addressing, let alone solving, its social, economic, and political problems—for clearly one must address a problem with accurate terms before one can solve it—is Disinformation: the absence of a precise political language adequate to articulating the problems the country faces and then to addressing them. The language exists, as the May Day poster suggests, but it lies outside the boundaries of capitalism’s imagination, at least in the mainstream discourse of the United States.¹¹

Disinformation and information exist side by side. Both are near at hand. There is certainly no end of books, blogs, articles, and political organizations critical of US foreign and domestic policy, as the sources of this essay witness. But whereas information is something we must consciously process through research of one kind or another (reading, listening, observing, and comparing what we gather), Disinformation processes us like a dream, in the classic Freudian sense, where the dream is a structure of contradictions in which the dreamer never recognizes the contradictory structure. Information requires dialogue. Disinformation is a mesmerizing monologue, often masquerading as dialogue. US political campaigns have degenerated into this kind of drama, as has all too much of what passes for public discourse today.

While misinformation is merely a mistake in reportage, which is typically retracted in the next day’s news, or a distortion of the truth, conscious

10. Frank Rich, “The State of the Union Is Comatose,” *New York Times*, January 30, 2010, www.nytimes.com/2010/01/31/opinion/31rich.html.

11. Western Europe, Canada, and the Scandinavian countries, for example, have made the limits of capitalism’s imagination more flexible, because a notion of economic justice is an integral part of their political systems. See, in particular, Thomas Geoghegan, *Were You Born on the Wrong Continent? How the European Model Can Help You Get a Life* (New York: New Press, 2010).

(spin) or unconscious, for particular ends, such as the Bush administration's fiction of "weapons of mass destruction," Disinformation is a deep, historical process erasing history itself, culminating in a disruption or blockage of critical thinking, in which particular fictions, through repeated and widespread use in our major institutions (schools, media, government, and political parties), substitute *reflexively* for facts. But—and here is the crux of the matter—Disinformation is not ideology. It is, rather, ideology's mirror image, in the sense that while Disinformation appears as ideology's double, it is the reverse of ideology: whereas ideology is a *narrative* that retains certain ties to reality, Disinformation is rhetoric utterly detached from, while substituting for, reality, yet *apparently* not cynical in intent if in effect. That is, ideology bears a relation to reality even as it displaces reality. I am using *reality* here in its most material sense: who eats; who starves; who has health care; who sickens and dies without it; who is tortured; who, for reasons of privilege (a matter of location, whether material or geographical or ideological), escapes torture; who works at a living wage; who cannot find work or works for wages at or below the poverty line; who receives an education that helps propel or keep him or her in the materially advantaged classes; who is denied such an education; et cetera.

The French Marxist Louis Althusser notes that while ideologies "constitute an *illusion*, we admit that they do make *allusion* to reality, and that they need only be 'interpreted' to discover the reality of the world behind their imaginary representation of that world." Here is his classic definition: "Ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence."¹² In contrast, Disinformation constitutes an illusion that makes no allusion to reality, or it makes an allusion to what it fantasizes as reality. Disinformation approximates what Jean Baudrillard calls "simulation" or "simulacra": "The transition from signs that dissimulate something to signs that dissimulate that there is nothing, marks the decisive turning point. The first implies a theology of truth and secrecy (to which the notion of ideology still belongs). The second inaugurates an age of simulacra and simulation." Like the simulacrum, Disinformation "bears no relation to any reality whatever."¹³ Yet, and here I may depart from Baudrillard,

12. Louis Althusser, *Essays on Ideology* (London: Verso, 1984), 36. Althusser formulates his theory of ideology in contrast to Marx's theory in *The German Ideology*, where ideology "is conceived as a pure illusion, a pure dream, i.e. as nothingness" (33). In this reading, ideology and Disinformation approximate one another. Hereafter, this work is cited parenthetically as *Ideology*.

13. Jean Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, ed. Mark Poster, 2nd ed. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), 173.

it does immense violence to reality in offering hallucinatory solutions to actual problems.¹⁴

The “war on terror” is one example of a fiction of Disinformation. The “war on terror” has no particular object or end; it is everywhere and can be anything. Paradoxically, it has innumerable centers: Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia, with infinite possibilities of places and persons. With the institution of the National Defense Authorization Act of 2012, which gives the president authorization to indefinitely detain US citizens suspected of terrorism, even the United States has become a potential center of the “war on terror.” This potential is buttressed by the Obama administration’s legal rationalizations for the extrajudicial killing of US citizens whom it deems are aiding and abetting terrorist organizations.¹⁵ Presented to the public as ubiquitous, the “war on terror” is implicitly presented as beyond debate, a given, like the air we breathe. It functions to mobilize public attention to ratify the continued militarization of the United States and to distract public attention from crucial social issues. In contradistinction to the fictions of misinformation, like “weapons of mass destruction,” which can be countered by a presentation of evidence, there is no evidence to counter fictions of Disinformation, like the “war on terror.” They can be countered only by a revolution in historical thinking. At the same time, to the extent that misinformation is grounded in Disinformation, as the misinformation of “weapons of mass destruction” was grounded in the Disinformation of the “war on terror,” it can remain exceptionally resistant to information.

So, to take another example, every national health care system around the world that provides its populations with universal, affordable health care is based on the elimination of profit from the system.¹⁶ However, in the US health care “debates” of 2009–10, there was never any public discussion of the destructive part profit plays in the limiting of health care to large segments of the population precisely because it drives up costs. The

14. There is a sense in Baudrillard that the world is now a simulacra. That is, that there is nothing we can call reality, although in the very act of denying reality, one clearly must invoke it. This essay, I hope clearly, is not a brief against reality. Quite the contrary. It is a brief for it.

15. Charlie Savage, “US Law May Allow Killings, Holder Says,” *New York Times*, March 5, 2012, www.nytimes.com/2012/03/06/us/politics/holder-explains-threat-that-would-call-for-killing-without-trial.html?ref=Sunday.

16. See T. R. Reid, *The Healing of America: A Global Quest for Better, Cheaper, and Fairer Health Care* (New York: Penguin, 2009), Kindle ed., loc. 493–500: “The United States is the only developed country that relies on profit-making health insurance companies to pay for essential and elective care.”

result is a 2700-page health care bill, named, with unintentional irony, one supposes, The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, written largely by corporate lobbyists, without, arguably, any effective cost controls.¹⁷

Kathleen Hall Jamieson, director of the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania, notes that “most ‘typical families’ are unlikely to see their health care costs fall by the . . . \$2500” that the bill promises. With average family health care costs through an employer estimated as of September 2011 at more than \$15,000 a year, even a \$2500 drop would not make health care affordable for most families—taking into account employer contributions but also increasingly high deductibles and workers’ contributions, as well as rising co-pays—particularly when one considers that health care premiums increased at three times the rate of workers’ earnings in 2011 and median family income in the United States in 2010, according to a 2012 report by the Federal Reserve, was \$45,800, down from \$49,600 in 2007.¹⁸ While the rise in health care costs has slowed

17. The ceilings for out-of-pocket expenses and deductibles, for example, seem very high. See UC Berkley Labor Center, “Summary of Provisions Affecting Employer-Sponsored Insurance,” April 2013, laborcenter.berkeley.edu/healthpolicy/ppaca12.pdf.

18. Kathleen Hall Jamieson, “Explain Broken Promises,” in “How Can Obama Rebound?,” *New York Times*, July 18, 2010, www.nytimes.com/2010/07/18/opinion/18obama.html?pagewanted=all. For the statistics on family health care costs, see Reed Abelson and Nina Bernstein, “Health Insurers Push Premiums Sharply Higher,” *New York Times*, September 28, 2011, www.nytimes.com/2011/09/28/business/28insure.html?pagewanted=all. The *Times* article is based on a report from the Kaiser Family Foundation (see Kaiser Family Foundation, “Pulling It Together: Rising Health Care Costs Are Not Just a Federal Budget Problem,” September 3, 2011, kff.org/health-costs/perspective/pulling-it-together-rising-health-costs-are/). The US government website explaining the Affordable Care Act stipulates, “Starting in 2014, if your income is less than the equivalent of about \$88,000 for a family of four today, and your job doesn’t offer affordable coverage, you may get tax credits to help pay for insurance.” Note the “may” here without further explanation, including the amount of such tax credits if indeed one qualifies for them. This statement also begs the question of what the government considers “affordable” family health care coverage. See www.healthcare.gov/foryou/family/index.html (accessed July 19, 2010). (Since I accessed it, this site is no longer available. For an explanation of tax credit subsidies for the Affordable Care Act, see Julie Appleby and Kaiser Health News, “Will You Qualify for an Obamacare Subsidy,” www.pbs.org/newshour/rundown/2013/09/will-you-qualify-for-an-obamacare-subsidy.html [accessed October 13, 2013]. See also Nathan Newman, “Obamacare’s Secret Subsidies Make It Better than You Know,” *The Blog*, October 10, 2013, www.huffingtonpost.com/nathan-newman/obamacares-secret-subsidi_b_4078125.html.) My median income figure from the Federal Reserve is reported by Binyamin Applebaum, “Family Net Worth Drops to Level of Early ’90s, Fed Says,” *New York Times*, June 11, 2012, www.nytimes.com/2012/06/12/business/economy/family-net

since 2011, wages have remained stagnant. Median family income, then, is effectively at the line the federal government sets for low-wage income for a family of four (twice the poverty wage) and the Economic Policy Institute figures as the line of “material deprivation” (see notes 36 and 37). An editorial on increasing poverty in the New York City suburbs of Long Island, dated July 8, 2012, noted, “About 468,000 people in Suffolk and Nassau, out of a total population of about 2.7 million, live in households earning up to 200 percent of the poverty line, or about \$45,000 a year for a family of four. They are barely scraping by, but are often ineligible for programs like food stamps and subsidized housing and child care because their incomes are too high.”¹⁹ These households are effectively living at what is the *real* poverty line (the line of “material deprivation”) but are unable to access the state and federal benefits accorded to the households living at the *official* line. Now that the Supreme Court has declared that the Affordable Care Act is constitutional, though it has left the decision whether to expand Medicaid or not up to the states, it remains to be seen beginning in 2014 whether or not the provisions in the act will help these households afford comprehensive health insurance, if they do not already have it.²⁰

As the deadline for the first round of enrollments in the act’s insurance exchanges neared its end, the *New York Times* published an article

-worth-drops-to-level-of-early-90s-fed-says.html. According to the US Census Bureau, in distinction to “family income,” “Real median *household* income was \$49,445 in 2010, a 2.3 percent decline from 2009 . . .” (Carmen DeNavas-Walt, Bernadette D. Proctor, and Jessica C. Smith, *Income, Poverty, and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2010*, issued September 2011, www.census.gov/prod/2011pubs/p60-239.pdf; my emphasis).

19. Editorial, “Struggling in the Suburbs,” *New York Times*, July 8, 2012, www.nytimes.com/2012/07/08/opinion/sunday/struggling-in-the-suburbs.html.

20. Households with an income of \$45,000 a year will not be eligible for expanded Medicaid, now that New York State has elected to expand the program, because the cutoff for these funds is 133 percent of the official poverty line, \$31,721. That means that those households that do not have job-related health care and are not eligible for Medicaid and whose incomes are below \$88,000 a year would have to apply for federal subsidies to help them purchase private insurance. All of this promises to be a bureaucratic nightmare. On July 16, 2013, the *New York Times* published an article by Roni Caryn Rabin and Reed Abelson, “Health Plan Cost for New Yorkers Set to Fall 50%” (www.nytimes.com/2013/07/17/health/health-plan-cost-for-new-yorkers-set-to-fall-50.html?hp), which predicted that the Affordable Care Act would bring about a steep drop in health insurance rates for individuals in New York State, where rates are currently astronomical. But there is no mention whatsoever in the article of what deductibles and co-pays will be in the plans that will be offered on the insurance exchanges, nor is it clear exactly what the new rates will be and if, with deductibles and co-pays, they will be affordable.

on March 27, 2014, with the following title: “Deadline Near, Health Sign-ups Show Disparity.” The “disparity” refers to the discrepancies in health care costs among those enrolled, “depend[ing] almost entirely on where a person lives, with some policies deemed ‘affordable,’ some ‘unaffordable,’” though all the evidence presented in the article is anecdotal. Further, deductibles, out-of-pocket expenses, and co-pays—all significant expenditures—appear not to be figured into the costs, at least with any rigor. The article notes the indeterminate state of the outcomes of the Affordable Care Act:

The White House said on Thursday that more than six million people have signed up for private plans, a significant political milestone for the Obama administration. Independent analysts estimate that an additional 3.5 million Americans are newly insured under Medicaid—figures the law’s backers hail as a success.

But those numbers may not reveal much. Federal officials do not know how many of those who selected plans were previously uninsured, or how many actually paid their premiums. Independent experts warn that the intense focus on national numbers is misguided, and that it will take years to fully assess the law’s impact, much less deem it a success or a failure.

“The whole narrative about Obamacare—‘Will they get to six million? What is the percentage of young adults going to be?’—has almost nothing to do with whether the law is working or not, whether the premiums are affordable or not, whether people think they are getting a good deal or not,” said Drew Altman, president of the Kaiser Family Foundation, whose analysts are closely tracking the measure.²¹

According to the Kaiser Family Foundation, then, the narrative of Obamacare is Disinformation; that is, it has no referent: it “has almost nothing to do with whether the law is working or not,” which I take to mean that it has nothing to do with whether the law is providing affordable health care and, I venture, everything to do with selling corporate insurance and creating the impression that the Obama administration supports national, affordable health care. Polls tell us, however, that a large majority of Americans are not buying the narrative, though not necessarily for the right reasons, given

21. Sheryl Gay Stolberg and Robert Pear, “Deadline Near, Health Signups Show Disparity,” *New York Times*, March 27, 2014, www.nytimes.com/2014/03/28/us/politics/deadline-near-health-signups-show-disparity.html?_r=0.

the equal and rhetorically opposite Republican obfuscation of the health care issues. Combined, Democratic and Republican Disinformation have raised the incoherence of the health care “debates” to new levels.

In an interview with Democracy Now on March 27, 2012, while the Supreme Court was hearing arguments concerning the constitutionality of the Affordable Care Act’s individual mandate to purchase insurance, Dr. Stephanie Woolhandler, cofounder of Physicians for a National Health Program, summed up the affordability problems of the Affordable Care Act:

Well, I want to say, our organization, Physicians for a National Health Program, did not take a position on the Supreme Court deliberations. Some of the members opposed the mandate and did weigh in in the amicus brief. Some were more ambivalent and felt that there was some good in the bill. What we all agree on, however, is that the bill is not a solution. It will leave 27 million Americans uninsured when it’s fully implemented. It’s going to leave tens of millions of Americans woefully underinsured, with gaps in their coverage like copayments and deductibles, so they’ll still be bankrupted by illness. And it’s not going to control cost. So we still need single-payer national health insurance regardless of what happens at the Supreme Court.²²

Distracted by misinformation about “death panels” and “socialism,” the public could not focus as the Democratic Congress and the Obama administration whittled away the public option to virtually nothing. The distraction was aided and abetted by the major media, which kept specific discussion of the ever-diminishing public option off the front pages and the nightly news, so that while the phrase *public option* was always before the public, the ways in which it had shrunk were rarely elaborated. The persistence of this misinformation was driven by the Disinformation that in the

22. See Democracy Now, “Healthcare Debate: As Supreme Court Hears Landmark Case, Does Law Do Enough to Fix Health Crisis?,” March 27, 2012, www.democracynow.org/2012/3/27/healthcare_debate_as_supreme_court_hears. In March of 2014, the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation issued a report titled *The Coverage Gap: Uninsured Poor Adults in States that Do Not Expand Medicaid*, which notes, “In [the twenty-four] states that do not expand Medicaid, nearly five million poor uninsured adults have incomes above Medicaid eligibility levels but below poverty and may fall into a ‘coverage gap’ of earning too much to qualify for Medicaid but not enough to qualify for Marketplace premium tax credits” (kff.org/health-reform/issue-brief/the-coverage-gap-uninsured-poor-adults-in-states-that-do-not-expand-medicaid/). Clearly, this “coverage gap” could add significantly to the number of uninsured Americans under the Affordable Care Act.

United States inhibits, indeed prohibits, any *widespread*, systematic critique of capitalism.

Prior to his September 10, 2009, address to Congress outlining his health care plan, a CBS news poll of 1,097 adults taken from August 27–31, 2009, registered that 60 percent of those polled felt that the president had not explained his health care reform plans clearly, while only 31 percent felt he had. Polling after his address indicated that public comprehension of Obama's projected plan had not fundamentally changed.²³ The persistence of the status quo in this respect reflected a continuing problem of public comprehension based on the administration's equivocation about health care reform, particularly the ever-shifting place of the public option. The way Obama placed his proposal for a public option in his address to Congress completely marginalized it by offering the option only to those who did not have or could not buy private insurance:

But an additional step we can take to keep insurance companies honest is by making a not-for-profit public option available in the insurance exchange. Let me be clear—it would only be an option for those who don't have insurance. No one would be forced to choose it, and it would not impact those of you who already have insurance. In fact, based on Congressional Budget Office estimates, we believe that less than 5% of Americans would sign up. . . . I have insisted that like any private insurance company, the public insurance option would have to be self-sufficient and rely on the premiums it collects.²⁴

Obama's presentation of the public option here turns it into a negative: "No one would be *forced* to choose it." Forced to rely on private money, then, and restricted to the uninsured, the public option would become virtually a private option, one that in terms of economies of scale could not compete with big insurance. In point of fact, almost invisible in Obama's health care speech to Congress, the public option was ultimately eliminated from the Affordable Care Act.

In complete contrast to the facts on the ground about health care reform, which never dealt with the issue of corporate profit, on March 21,

23. CBS/*New York Times* Poll, "The Health Care Debate Continues," September 24, 2009, www.cbsnews.com/htdocs/pdf/poll_health_care_092409.pdf.

24. "Obama's Health Care Speech to Congress," published in the *New York Times* on September 9, 2009, www.nytimes.com/2009/09/10/us/politics/100bama.text.html?page_wanted=print.

2010, minutes after the passage of the bill by the House of Representatives (the Senate had passed the act in December of 2009), President Obama, in a formal public statement, presented this corporatist bill as a populist triumph, invoking Lincoln's Gettysburg Address:

Tonight, at a time when the pundits said it was no longer possible, we rose above the weight of our politics. We pushed back on the undue influence of special interests. We didn't give in to mistrust or to cynicism or to fear. Instead, we proved that we are still a people capable of doing big things and tackling our biggest challenges. We proved that this government—a government of the people and by the people—still works for the people.²⁵

"This," Obama went on to say, "is what change looks like. . . . In the end, what this day represents is another stone firmly laid in the foundation of the American Dream. Tonight, we answered the call of history as so many generations of Americans have before us. When faced with crisis, we did not shrink from our challenge—we overcame it. We did not avoid our responsibility—we embraced it. We did not fear our future—we shaped it."

This speech, with its invocation of "the American Dream" and "we, the people," what we might or used to think of as ideology, has become *at this point in time* a prime example of what I have been defining as Disinformation. While there are certainly issues, which I have cited, that call into question the affordability claims of the Affordable Care Act, thus suggesting these claims may be misinformational rather than disinformational, those issues are being erased or displaced in Obama's speech by a fiction of Disinformation, known popularly as the American Dream, of which the positive good of profit is the unassailable foundation. Whereas this Dream, which is dependent on the promise of an expanding middle class, had some purchase on reality at the end of World War II, it has lost that purchase entirely, as the statistics on wealth distribution in this essay show. James Surowiecki focuses the contrast between then and now succinctly: "Throughout the postwar era, high corporate profits were coupled with rising wages and strong economic growth. Today, there's a growing divide between the fortunes of corporate America and those of the majority of Americans."²⁶

25. Kaiser Health News, "Transcript: President Obama's Speech after House Passes Health Reform," March 22, 2010, www.kaiserhealthnews.org/stories/2010/march/21/transcript-of-obama-speech-post-house-vote.aspx.

26. James Surowiecki, "The Financial Page: Boom or Bubble?," *New Yorker*, May 27, 2013, digital ed.

This is the Wall Street/Main Street divide, due in significant part to massive deunionization in the private sector and an attendant stagnation in wages. Most of the jobs being added in today's sluggish economy are low paying. Indeed, with half the country living at or below the actual poverty line of \$45,000 for a family of four, with 85 percent of the national wealth concentrated in 20 percent of the population, and with over 40 percent of that wealth concentrated in the upper 1 percent, it can be argued that the term *middle class*, still prominently wielded by Democrats and Republicans to address their imagined constituencies, has no substantial referent, or at best a disappearing one, while the term *poverty*, which has an increasing referential base, is rarely uttered by either party. Importantly, in this matter of the increasing corruption of referential language by Disinformation, the health care speech implicitly conflates political victory and social progress, utterly merging the two, thus making social progress impossible precisely because to achieve political victory in the United States today requires maintaining the corporate status quo: the more things change, the more they stay the same. That, in a nutshell, is the ironic meaning of Obama's mantra of "change."

2

In the *New York Times* essay "Hip, Hip—if Not Hooray—for a Standstill Nation,"²⁷ Peter Baker confirms the national stasis by way of normalizing it. Remarking that "[i]f anything has defined the second half of Mr. Obama's term, it has been the politics of paralysis," Baker goes on to note that because of the polarized politics in Washington, this paralysis is "the reality of American governance in the modern era," a style of governance that, inevitably, it would seem, finds its origin and justification in the founding of the United States: "For all the hand-wringing about how the system is broken, this is the system as it was designed and is now adapted for the digital age. All the high-minded vows to put politics aside for the greater good ignore the fact that the system is built on politics, with the idea that politics, however ugly, eventually can produce a greater good, however imperfect." To support this argument for the fundamental integrity of the system of US governance at the present moment, Baker, unsurprisingly, references the founding fathers:

27. Peter Baker, "Hip, Hip—if Not Hooray—for a Standstill Nation," *New York Times*, June 18, 2011, www.nytimes.com/2011/06/19/weekinreview/19paralysis.html?pagewanted=all.

Moreover, it's useful to remember that the founders devised the system to be difficult, dividing power between states and the federal government, then further dividing the federal government into three branches, then further dividing the legislative branch into two houses. The idea, James Madison wrote, was to keep factions from gaining too much power, presuming that "a coalition of a majority of the whole society could seldom take place on any other principles than those of justice and the general good."

Baker is citing Federalist No. 51, where Madison recapitulates the argument he made in Federalist No. 10 for controlling factions. At the end of 10, Madison reasons, without apparent irony, that the best way in a republic to keep either majorities or minorities from their predatory habits is through a proliferation of factions, which will, his argument suggests, provide a system of checks and balances in civil society reflecting the constitutional framework.²⁸ That is, to summarize Madison, factions are the cure for factionalism.

All of this sounds logical enough if, like Baker, one abstracts the argument from the historical contexts. But at the moment Baker is writing, the current moment, we find the United States in a situation where 85 percent of the wealth is concentrated in 20 percent of the population;²⁹ where 45,000 people are dying every year because they can't afford health insurance,³⁰ and 700,000 are going bankrupt because of medical bills;³¹ where the World Health Organization ranks US health care 37th out of 191 countries, though it "spends a higher portion of its gross domestic product than any other country" on health care;³² where, as of December 2010,

28. Bernard Bailyn, ed., *The Debate on the Constitution: Federalist and Antifederalist Speeches, Articles, and Letters during the Struggle over Ratification* (New York: Library of America, 1993), pt. 1, p. 410. Hereafter, this work is cited parenthetically as *Debate*. Whether or not Madison is aware of the irony in Federalist No. 10 is indeterminable. But it is worth noting that the branches of government instituted by the Constitution are themselves factional. In effect, what Madison gives us in Federalist No. 10 is a theory of fighting fire with fire.

29. G. William Domhoff, "Wealth, Income, and Power," *Who Rules America?*, last modified February 2013, sociology.ucsc.edu/whorulesamerica/power/wealth.html (accessed August 4, 2011).

30. Andrew P. Wilper et al., "Health Insurance and Mortality in US Adults," *American Journal of Public Health* 99, no. 12 (December 2009): 1–8; www.npcpa.org/pdfs/2009_harvard_health_study.pdf.

31. Reid, *The Healing of America*, 428.

32. World Health Organization, "World Health Organization Assesses the World's Health Systems."

the actual unemployment rate (unemployed, underemployed, and those no longer looking for work) was at 17 percent;³³ where, the National Center for Children in Poverty reports, as of 2011, 21 percent of US children were living in poverty and 42 percent were living in low-income families.³⁴ Fractioning this demographic on the basis of race and ethnicity, 27 percent of all white children, 31 percent of Asian children, 61 percent of all black children, 62 percent of Hispanic children, and 57 percent of American Indian children were living in low-income families in 2008.³⁵ According to the Economic Policy Institute, as of a 2006 report, the United States currently had the highest child poverty rates among Western democracies.³⁶ Because of continuing wage stagnation and the weakening of existing social safety nets, these statistics remain fundamentally unchanged as of 2014. Whether the Affordable Care Act will significantly improve the disastrous health care outcomes given here remains to be seen.

Whereas the federal poverty level for a family of four with two children was \$22,314 in 2010—and families and children are defined as low-income if the family income is less than twice the federal poverty threshold—a majority of Americans, according to one survey, believe it takes at least \$35,000 annually to provide adequately for a family of four, a figure that moves the poverty threshold up substantially.³⁷ Even that seems an

33. Economic Policy Institute Economic Snapshot, “State of Working America Preview: 17% of Workers Cannot Find the Amount of Work They Want,” December 1, 2010, www.epi.org/economic_snapshots/entry/17_of_workers_cannot_find_the_amount_of_work_they_want/. While as of May 2014, the unemployment rate continued to fall from its recession height, the *New York Times* on May 4, in an editorial titled “A Better Economy, Still Far from Good,” noted, “That the unemployment rate fell to 6.3 percent in April from 6.7 percent a month earlier is due mainly to the fact that the number of people looking for jobs fell. The percentage of Americans 16 and over who are working or looking for work was just 62.8 percent, the lowest level since the late 1970s” (www.nytimes.com/2014/05/05/opinion/a-better-economy-still-far-from-good.html).

34. National Center for Children in Poverty, “Child Poverty,” www.nccp.org/topics/child_poverty.html (accessed August 4, 2011).

35. Michelle Chau, *Low-income Children in the United States: National and State Trend Data, 1998–2008*, report for the National Center for Children in Poverty, Mailman School of Public Health, Columbia University, www.nccp.org/publications/pub_907.html (accessed August 4, 2011). The report notes, “Children living independently, living with a spouse, or in group quarters are excluded from these data. Children ages 14 and under living with only unrelated adults were not included” (4).

36. See Sylvia A. Allegretto, “US Government Does Little to Lessen Child Poverty Rates,” Economic Policy Institute, July 19, 2006, www.epi.org/publication/webfeatures_snapshots_20060719/.

37. For the Census Bureau figures on poverty, see Sabrina Tavernise, “Soaring Poverty

exceptionally low figure, if by “adequately” we include the costs of health insurance and postsecondary education. In an interview on the September 14, 2011, edition of *Democracy Now*, Heidi Shierholz, a labor economist at the Economic Policy Institute, commented on the official poverty threshold:

So the poverty threshold is, by anyone’s measure, extremely low. So, to give you an idea, for a family of four, the poverty threshold is just over \$22,000. So anyone thinking about trying to live on \$22,000 with a family of four will immediately realize that that’s not a really reasonable cutoff for material deprivation. And poverty researchers actually use, in many cases, twice the poverty line to have a more reasonable idea of what the—a sort of cutoff for material deprivation, for, you know, below this—above this number, you have what you need to make ends meet.³⁸

What Shierholz’s calculation suggests is that the 42 percent of American children who are officially living in “low-income” families are in fact living at the poverty line, the line of “material deprivation.”

Given the statistics I am citing and the rising costs of both private and public postsecondary education, it is not surprising that, according to the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, approximately only 28 percent of Americans over the age of twenty-five have a four-year college degree.³⁹ Fur-

Casts Spotlight on ‘Lost Decade,’” *New York Times*, September 13, 2011, www.nytimes.com/2011/09/14/us/14census.html?pagewanted=all. For the survey, see the US Conference of Catholic Bishops, “US Poverty Quiz,” lovingjustwise.com/quiz.htm (accessed August 4, 2011).

38. See *Democracy Now*, “U.S. Census Reports Reveals One in Six Americans Are Poor, One in Five Children Live in Poverty,” September 14, 2011, www.democracynow.org/2011/9/14/us_census_reports_reveals_one_in.

39. See Alex Richards, “Census Data Show Rise in College Degrees, but Also in Racial Gaps in Education,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 23, 2011, chronicle.com/article/Census-Data-Reveal-Rise-in/126026/. In a front-page story on June 12, 2013, the *New York Times* reported a rise in this figure to 33.5 percent for Americans age 25–29. The *Times* continues, “College attendance has increased in the past decade partly because of the new types of jobs that have been created in the digital age, which have increased the wage gap between degree holders and everyone else. The recent recession, which pushed more workers of all ages to take shelter on college campuses while the job market was poor, has also played a role.” But the story goes on to note, “Despite the recent improvement, higher education experts emphasized that college completion rates were still distressingly low, with only about half of first-time college freshmen who enrolled in 2006 having graduated by 2012, according to the National Student Clearinghouse.” Further, the story reports, the rise in degree holders is class-based: “Only about 1

ther, there is an absolute correlation between education and income levels: according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, in 2010 the median weekly income of a high school graduate was \$626, as compared to the median weekly income of a person with a bachelor's degree, which was \$1038.⁴⁰ While “[t]he United States used to lead the world in the number of 25- to 34-year-olds with college degrees, as of 2010 it ranks 12th among 36 developed nations.”⁴¹ But technological developments may make the logic of these statistics obsolete. Nobel Prize-winning economist Paul Krugman notes, “Today . . . a much darker picture of the effects of technology on labor is emerging. In this picture, highly educated workers are as likely as less educated workers to find themselves displaced and devalued, and pushing for more education may create as many problems as it solves. . . . Education, then, is no longer the answer to rising inequality, if it ever was (which I doubt).” Unsurprisingly, Krugman’s answer, if we are to have “anything resembling a middle-class society,” is “redistribution” of wealth in order to provide “a strong social safety net, one that guarantees not just health care but a minimum income, too.”⁴² Krugman might have used the term *living wage*.

There is also an absolute correlation between poverty and incarceration in the United States.⁴³ The United States has both the highest rate of incarceration in the world and the largest prison population in terms of absolute numbers, comprising the population of the “prison-industrial complex.” By far the largest percentage of the prison population is composed of the poor. According to a 2002 report by Human Rights Watch, 63 percent of the prison population is composed of blacks and Hispanics,⁴⁴ who, as a group, along with American Indians, compose a disproportionate percent-

out of 10 Americans whose parents were in the lowest income quartile held four-year college degrees by age 24 in 2011; the comparable share for people from the highest quartile was about 7 in 10.” See Catherine Rampell, “Data Reveal a Rise in College Degrees among Americans,” *New York Times*, June 12, 2013, www.nytimes.com/2013/06/13/education/a-sharp-rise-in-americans-with-college-degrees.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0.

40. Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Earnings and Employment Rates by Educational Attainment,” last modified May 22, 2013, www.bls.gov/emp/ep_chart_001.htm.

41. Tamar Lewin, “Once a Leader, US Lags in College Degrees,” *New York Times*, July 23, 2010, www.nytimes.com/2010/07/23/education/23college.html.

42. Paul Krugman, “Sympathy for the Luddites,” *New York Times*, June 13, 2013, www.nytimes.com/2013/06/14/opinion/krugman-sympathy-for-the-luddites.html.

43. Jeffrey Reiman, *The Rich Get Richer and the Poor Get Prison: Ideology, Class, and Criminal Justice*, 8th ed. (Boston: Pearson, 2007).

44. See Human Rights Watch Press Backgrounder Release, “Race and Incarceration in the United States,” February 27, 2002, www.hrw.org/legacy/backgrounder/usa/race/.

age of the lower-income brackets in the United States. Seventy percent of parents in prison do not have a high school diploma.⁴⁵ Jeffrey Reiman theorizes the situation, noting that “the practices of the criminal justice system keep before the public the *real* threat of crime and the *distorted* image that crime is primarily the work of the poor. The value of this *to those in positions of power* is that it deflects the discontent and potential hostility of Middle America away from the classes above them and toward the classes below them.”⁴⁶ That is, the mainstream rhetoric of criminality serves to sublimate issues of race and class into the issue of “crime prevention” or “safety,” thus doing the work of Disinformation, which functions to cast public debate in precisely counterproductive terms.

All of the inequalities implicit in the foregoing statistics promised only to be intensified by the Budget Control Act of 2011, which, like the Affordable Care Act before it, is a major example of Disinformation in the way it was sold rhetorically. So, for example, in his public remarks on August 2, 2011, upon the passage of the act, President Obama referred to it as a “compromise” following “a long and contentious debate.” If we think of a “debate” as having at least two clearly defined and differing positions, then the act did not result from a debate but from a feeble attempt by the Democrats to modify somewhat the Republican monologue on cutting spending without raising revenues through taxing the rich and corporations, an attempt that failed. In his *New York Times* op-ed column of July 7, 2011, Krugman raised the question of the lack of differentiation between the Democratic and the Republican positions on debt reduction:

It’s getting harder and harder to trust Mr. Obama’s motives in the budget fight, given the way his economic rhetoric has veered to the right. In fact, if all you did was listen to his speeches, you might conclude that he basically shares the G.O.P.’s diagnosis of what ails our economy and what should be done to fix it. And maybe that’s not a false impression; maybe it’s the simple truth.

One striking example of this rightward shift came in last weekend’s presidential address, in which Mr. Obama had this to say about the economics of the budget: “Government has to start living within its means, just like families do. We have to cut the spending we can’t

45. Christopher J. Mumola, “Incarcerated Children and Their Parents,” Bureau of Justice Statistics Special Report, August 2000, NCJ 182335, www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/iptc.pdf.

46. Reiman, *The Rich Get Richer and the Poor Get Prison*, 4; emphasis in the original.

afford so we can put the economy on sounder footing, and give our businesses the confidence they need to grow and create jobs.”

That’s three of the right’s favorite economic fallacies in just two sentences. No, the government shouldn’t budget the way families do; on the contrary, trying to balance the budget in times of economic distress is a recipe for deepening the slump. Spending cuts right now wouldn’t “put the economy on sounder footing.” They would reduce growth and raise unemployment. And last but not least, businesses aren’t holding back because they lack confidence in government policies; they’re holding back because they don’t have enough customers—a problem that would be made worse, not better, by short-term spending cuts.⁴⁷

Krugman’s remarks represent what an actual “debate” would have sounded like if one had taken place. Disinformation gives the appearance of debate when none has actually occurred.

Likewise, Obama’s use of the word *compromise* to characterize the process that led to the passage of the Budget Control Act betrays the actual situation, which is more accurately described as a “capitulation” by Democrats to Republicans—that is, if one believes that there are still two political parties in the United States. If, however, one believes, as I have argued, that the two-party system has devolved into a one-party, corporate state, then what appears as capitulation is, in fact, a systemic “collusion” or “collaboration” between what passes only formally for two parties. In his essay, quoting Melinda Burns, Baker points to a crucial mechanism driving the one-party state: “The real outcome of most lobbying—in fact, its greatest success—is the achievement of nothing, the maintenance of the status quo.”⁴⁸ Both the Affordable Care Act and the Budget Control Act achieved just that, the corporate status quo, while presidential rhetoric represented them as progress driven by the democratic process of “debate” and “compromise.” Such representation, precisely because it is reflexive not intentional, is Disinformation. The contradictory results of a *New York Times*/CBS news poll taken just after the Budget Control Act point to a dis-informed public:

There were signs that the repeated Republican calls for more spending cuts were resonating with the public: 44 percent of those polled

47. Paul Krugman, “What Obama Wants,” *New York Times*, July 7, 2011, www.nytimes.com/2011/07/08/opinion/08krugman.html?emc=eta1.

48. Baker, “Hip-Hip.”

said the cuts in the debt-ceiling agreement did not go far enough, 29 percent said they were about right and only 15 percent said they went too far. More than a quarter of the Democrats polled said that the cuts in the agreement did not go far enough.

But by a ratio of more than two to one, Americans said that creating jobs should be a higher priority than spending cuts.⁴⁹

Simply put, following Krugman's argument for a Keynesian approach to job creation (government spending), the poll's call for more spending cuts contradicts the poll's call for more job creation, unless a majority of the public thinks, contrary to all historical evidence, that spending cuts can somehow magically lead to jobs. In the remainder of his remarks following the passage of the Budget Control Act, President Obama gave credence to this magical thinking by promising to turn his attention, now that the act had passed and the debt ceiling raised, to job creation. But how would jobs be created, in the wake of draconian spending cuts? Indeed, the provisions of the act, which authorized a special committee of Congress to make at least \$1.2 trillion in across-the-board budget cuts over the next ten years, promised more cuts to come. But the committee predictably failed to arrive at an agreement, which led to the "sequester" (the automatic imposition of the cuts), at the same time that the prospect of raising significant revenue remained and remains virtually nil. Both the health care "debate's" erasure of any substantive discussion of the problem of profit and the debt-reduction "debate's" erasure of the issue of government spending to create jobs and help ease the foreclosure crisis are only two examples of what we might call *the illusion of critical thinking and problem solving*.

Commenting on the illusory phenomenon of the Budget Control Act in an interview on Democracy Now, economist Dean Baker remarks,

Well, I mean, what's really infuriating is this is *unbelievable nonsense*. I mean, we had a collapse of epic proportions when the housing bubble burst. We're sitting here with 25 million people unemployed, underemployed or out of the workforce altogether, and that's what caused the budget deficit. That's what's astounding. It's amazing President Obama doesn't just get up there and say that. In fact, he deliberately misrepresented the story to the nation a week ago Monday, when he said that we had a deficit of over a trillion dollars, then

49. Michael Cooper and Megan Thee-Brennan, "Disapproval Rate for Congress at a Record 82% after Debt Talks," *New York Times*, August 4, 2011, www.nytimes.com/2011/08/05/us/politics/05poll.html.

the economy collapsed. No, that's not true, and he knows that. The deficit was relatively small until the economy collapsed. So we're looking at the wrong problem. So, it's very hard to be very happy about this, because we have an enormous problem that people in Washington aren't paying any attention to, and instead *we're focusing on a problem that isn't there and making things worse*.⁵⁰

Focusing on a problem that makes no sense, a problem that is, in effect, "unbelievable nonsense" because it "isn't there"—that is, has no referent in reality—is precisely what I mean by Disinformation, the simulacra of solutions.

3

Following Peter Baker's quote from Madison in Federalist No. 51, within the historical context I have been describing, we might ask, what does the state of the union at the present moment have to do with "a coalition of a majority of the whole society" coming together to further "principles" "of justice and the general good" when the United States appears as no more than a congeries of factions at this point in history, incapable, because of Disinformation, of a necessary debate about what a just society might be? Baker's abstraction of the present moment from the facts on the ground, that is from history, is paralleled, indeed, I would say determined, by his abstraction of Federalist No. 51 from its own historical moment in the post-Revolutionary United States. In Federalist No. 10, Madison makes that moment perfectly clear when he notes at the end of his essay on faction that the way the Constitution is designed to deflect the rise of any single faction will counteract "a rage for paper money, for an abolition of debts, for an equal division of property, or for any other improper or wicked project" (*Debate*, pt. 1, p. 411).

We are indebted to Charles A. Beard's revolutionary *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States* (1913) for pointing us to the class politics that generated the Constitution, politics that have been in plain sight historically but, like Poe's purloined letter, have been continually overlooked as they are today because they call into question a key component of American Exceptionalism that denies the force and function of

50. A transcript of the interview with Baker can be found at www.democracynow.org/2011/8/3/economist_dean_baker_predicts_really_bad (accessed September 27, 2011); my emphasis.

class in order to forge the democratic imaginary of the nation.⁵¹ While still in print, Beard's book is, it would appear, seldom read in the curricula of secondary and postsecondary education. The habitual overlooking of such a text, particularly at a time when, as the statistics I have been citing suggest, we should be engaged in a national debate about class and inequality in the United States, is a function of Disinformation, a function of the limits of capitalism's imagination.

In particular, Beard points us to the passage in Federalist No. 10 that raises the issues of class and economic inequality that confronted the new nation facing a crisis in debt and credit from top to bottom. This crisis engaged the decentralized national government under the Articles of Confederation, unable to finance a huge Revolutionary War debt. It engaged poor soldiers returned from the war, paid, in part, in land scrip, which they were forced to sell to land speculators at low prices because of need; small farmers in debt for their land to these speculators; and the property-less themselves (slaves, women, and poor white men). Here is the key passage:

The diversity in the faculties of men from which the rights of property originate, is not less an insuperable obstacle to a uniformity of interests. *The protection of these faculties is the first object of Government.* From the protection of different and *unequal* faculties of acquiring property, the possession of different degrees and kinds of property immediately results: and from the influence of these on the sentiments and views of the respective proprietors, ensues a division of society into different interests and parties. . . . But the most common and durable source of factions, has been the various and *unequal* distribution of property. Those who hold, and *those who are without property*, have ever formed distinct interests in society. Those who are creditors, and those who are debtors, fall under a like discrimination. A landed interest, a manufacturing interest, a mercantile interest, a monied interest, with many lesser interests, grow up *of necessity* in civilized nations, and divide them into different *classes*, actuated by different sentiments and views. The regulation of these various and *interfering* interests forms the principal task of modern Legislation, and involves the spirit of party and faction in the

51. Charles A. Beard, *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States* (1913; repr., New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2003). Hereafter, this work is cited parenthetically as Beard.

necessary and ordinary operations of Government. (*Debate*, pt. 1, pp. 405–6; Beard, 14–15; my emphasis)

Beard sums up this conflictive context that generated the Constitution as follows:

Suppose . . . that substantially all of the merchants, money lenders, security holders, manufacturers, shippers, capitalists, and financiers and their professional associates are to be found on one side in support of the Constitution and that substantially all or the major portion of the opposition came from the non-slaveholding farmers and the debtors—would it not be pretty conclusively demonstrated that our fundamental law was not the product of an abstraction known as “the whole people,” but of a group of economic interests which must have expected beneficial results from its adoption? (Beard, 17)

The beneficial results from a propertied point of view were, among others, a strong central government that could raise money through taxes to fund the national debt and pay off the principal and interest to wealthy bond holders. Such a government could raise a standing army that could insure Indian removals from western lands and meet Indian resistance with force, thus raising the price on these lands for the speculators who owned them. This new government could control the national currency and thus interdict the states from printing cheap paper money that reduced the debt of small property holders; and it could legislate import tariffs on foreign goods, thus honing the competitive edge of domestic manufactures (*Debate*, pt. 1, p. 9).

The national symbol of this conflict of interest between debtors and creditors was Shays’s Rebellion. Although it was successfully suppressed by the Massachusetts militia in early 1787, Shays’s Rebellion “gave the nationalists [those pressing for a strong central government] the edge they needed. It provided the spark on which to advance the nationalist cause and play on the fear of others,” thus leading to the Constitutional Convention of May–September 1787.⁵² Those fears, as articulated at the end of Federalist No. 10, had largely to do with what the elite, epitomized in the figure of George Washington, understood as a push for economic equality: “The news coming out of Massachusetts in late 1786 frightened Washington. And scores of nationalists, led by General [Henry] Knox, played on the

52. Leonard Richards, *Shays’s Rebellion: The American Revolution’s Final Battle* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 127. Hereafter, this work is cited parenthetically as Richards.

fears of their former commander in chief. From New Haven, former aide David Humphreys told Washington that the malcontents were animated by ‘a licentious spirit prevailing among the people: a leveling principle; a desire of change; & a wish to annihilate all debts public & private’” (Richards, 129).

Although Leonard Richards, whose valuable work on Shays’s Rebellion I have been citing, does not understand the rebellion as a class conflict because elite members of the western Massachusetts towns involved joined the rebellion of farmers in debt and otherwise economically pressed, he comes to the same conclusion as Beard: “the Constitution was the handiwork of a small segment of governing elite, and everyone knew it” (Richards, 147). “Most of the delegates [to the Constitutional Convention] were merchants, lawyers, large landholders, and major slaveholders. The final document would say ‘We the People,’ but ordinary ‘people’ had no say in its creation” (Richards, 132).

Class conflict, then, is not defined simply by the classes of the groups in conflict but by the interests involved. In fact, Richards understands Shays’s Rebellion as a response to the 1780 Massachusetts constitution, written by eastern Massachusetts mercantile interests: “The Constitution of 1780 undoubtedly consolidated power in the hands of the mercantile elite and the eastern part of the state. It shifted power from the rural back-country to Boston, from the poor to the rich, and from town meetings to the state senate and the governor’s office” (Richards, 74). Antidemocratic in its thrust (in the sense of its limits to rule by the people), at the heart of this constitution lay exorbitant property requirements for both holding office and voting (Richards, 72).

As noted, the protection of inequalities in property is at the heart as well of Madison’s conception of government in Federalist No. 10: “the first object of Government . . . [is] the protection of different and *unequal* faculties of acquiring property.” The word *faculties* is crucial because it denotes an inherent predisposition in some for “acquiring property,” which may be “nurtured” or “natural” (*OED*) but in either case is used here to render a class system inevitable and thus in an important way “natural.” In this regard, the faction that Madison most fears is a “majority”—shall we say in current parlance the 99 percent, which “the form of popular government . . . enables it to sacrifice to its ruling passion or interest, both the public good and the rights of other citizens” (*Debate*, pt. 1, pp. 407–8). We might well ask here how a majority can constitute a faction in a democracy, where, by definition, the majority is supposed to rule; and the answer is, of course, the United States of America was conceived not as a democracy but as a

“Republic, by which I [Madison] mean a Government in which the scheme of representation takes place, opens a different prospect, and promises the cure [for faction] for which we are seeking” (*Debate*, pt. 1, pp. 408–9).

While Madison never defines what he means by “public good,” I think we are safe in assuming within the context of Federalist No. 10 and the economic forces that prompted and drove the Constitutional Convention that it must be in line with “the first object of government,” which is, as noted, to protect the economic hierarchy in place. This assured that questions of economic justice raised by Shays’s Rebellion would not be addressed and that consequently, though not necessarily inevitably, up to the present moment in US history, we have not had a central debate about the relationship between political and economic rights. Can one, in fact, have the former rights without the latter? The United States was formed in a refusal to address this question. This refusal has haunted US history from 1787 to the present moment. It haunts it now more than ever before. This refusal marks the limits of capitalism’s imagination and generates the dynamic of Disinformation. Disinformation begins to take its modern, pervasive form from 1980 forward. This form coincides with the continual shrinking of the middle class so that the American Dream, based on the promise of the continuing expansion of that class, loses its form as ideology, that is, loses its referent and becomes Disinformation. It is at this precise moment, I am arguing, that we come to the end of ideology, the end of a functional national narrative in the history of the United States.

4

Apropos of my earlier comments on Althusser and Baudrillard, allow me to emphasize and expand what I understand as the substantial difference between ideology and Disinformation. Disinformation is the dead end of ideology. It is the place where ideology no longer serves as a unifying national force, but reality does not intrude or only intrudes in fragments, like pieces of a puzzle the polity cannot solve. As noted, such is the case in the Obama health care reform and debt reduction speeches cited previously. In the former, a populist fiction displaces the facts of corporate health care reform. In the latter, the president’s “thank[s to] the American people for keeping up the pressure on their elected officials to put politics aside and work together for the good of the country” functions in the same fantastic way—that is, to project an image of popular democracy when corporate power is pulling the strings.

Similarly, as virtually every US citizen learns in school, from the mass media, and the two major political parties, we live in a classless society, where individual effort (not historical access to wealth tied to race, gender, and class) is the sole engine of success. Thus disinformed, we are taught implicitly to blame ourselves individually if we fail to succeed. Critical perspectives on the violent and unequal ways wealth has been distributed historically in the United States (beginning with the Constitution itself, Native American genocide, slavery, Jim Crow, redlining, the subversion of the union movement beginning in the 1980s, globalization, etc.) are substantially erased from mainstream public discourse as ongoing issues and thus from public policy decisions that might otherwise focus on the central issue of economic inequality substantially rather than rhetorically.

But this US ideology of Self-Reliance (anyone can make it in America with hard work) is now Disinformation if we realize the way wealth is distributed in the United States today, where, as of 2004, “[i]n terms of financial wealth (total net worth minus the value of one’s home), the top 1 percent of households had . . . [a] 42.2 percent” share.⁵³ Where once this narrative of Puritan self-discipline had some efficacy in the world, at least for white men, it has no potency in a world of formal Constitutional equality but where 85 percent of the wealth is concentrated in 20 percent of the population. Yet this credo of Self-Reliance remains part of the national exceptionalist narrative that continues to deny the barriers of class and in doing so helps buttress an increasingly destructive status quo.

At the beginning of his speech introducing the American Jobs Act to Congress on September 8, 2011, President Obama evoked the ideology of Self-Reliance as reality:

These men and women [Americans] grew up with faith in an America where hard work and responsibility paid off. They believed in a country where everyone gets a fair shake and does their fair share—where if you stepped up, did your job, and were loyal to your company, that loyalty would be rewarded with a decent salary and good benefits; maybe a raise once in a while. If you did the right thing, you could make it. Anybody could make it in America.⁵⁴

53. Domhoff, “Wealth, Income, and Power.”

54. For a full text of the speech, see The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, “Address by the President to a Joint Session of Congress,” September 8, 2011, www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/09/08/address-president-joint-session-congress.

The president immediately notes that “for decades now, Americans have watched that compact erode.” However, he does not note, indeed cannot note within the limits he is systemically allowed, that the compact, always violated more or less in the moment of its articulation, always, that is, ideological, has been totally erased. To cite it, then, implying it still has a referent in the world, is an act of Disinformation, particularly in a speech that insists on an exceptionalist context: “These are difficult years for our country,” Obama intones at the end of his address. “But we are Americans. We are tougher than the times we live in, and we are bigger than our politics have been. So let’s meet the moment. Let’s get to work, and let’s show the world once again why the United States of America remains the greatest nation on Earth.”

But by what indicators can the president make this oft-repeated claim? In point of fact, the United States does not lead the world in any of the indicators that measure the health and welfare of its population.⁵⁵ In point of fact, it leads the world only in military spending (“It now spends as much as the next 14 countries combined”)⁵⁶ and the sale of arms, where in 2008 it controlled 68.4 percent of the global arms trade.⁵⁷ This kind of investment necessarily predicts an agenda of endless war not only abroad but at home as well, with the proliferation of the domestic security apparatus: policing, prisons, and surveillance. As noted, domestic and foreign policy are inseparable. Obama’s signing of the National Defense Authorization Act makes that connection perfectly clear. The prison-industrial complex extends from California to Guantanamo Bay and beyond: Iraq, Afghanistan, and who knows how many “black sites,” fostering the suspension of human rights in the name of “freedom.” Disinformation does the work of severing the connections between foreign and domestic warfare and puts in the place of critical analysis the now exhausted mantra of “liberty and justice for all.”

The primary difference between ideology and Disinformation obtains in the imbricated matters of coherence and reference. With all its inter-

55. See David J. Rothkopf, “Redefining the Meaning of No. 1,” *New York Times*, October 9, 2011, www.nytimes.com/2011/10/09/opinion/sunday/gdp-doesnt-measure-happiness.html?pagewanted=all: “When Newsweek ranked the ‘world’s best countries’ based on measures of health, education, and politics, the United States ranked 11th. In the 2011 Quality of Life Index by Nation Ranking, the United States was 31st.”

56. Comerford, “Cashing in the War Dividend.”

57. Thom Shanker, “Despite Slump, U.S. Role as Top Arms Supplier Grows,” *New York Times*, September 7, 2009, www.nytimes.com/2009/09/07/world/07weapons.html.

nal contradictions, ideology, as noted, presupposes a *system of ideas that references reality however allusively*. The anthropologists Jean and John Comaroff define *ideology* as follows:

Following Raymond Williams, who seems here to have *The German Ideology* in mind, we use it to describe “an articulated system of meanings, values, and beliefs of a kind that can be abstracted as [the] ‘worldview’” of any social grouping. Borne in explicit manifestos and everyday practices, self-conscious texts and spontaneous images, popular styles and political platforms, this worldview may be more or less internally systematic, more or less assertively coherent in its outward forms. But, as long as it exists, it provides an organizing scheme (a master narrative?) for collective symbolic production. Obviously, to invoke Marx and Engels once again, the regnant ideology of any period or place will be that of the dominant group. And, while the nature and degree of its preeminence may vary a good deal, it is likely to be protected, even enforced, to the full extent of the power of those who claim it for their own.⁵⁸

For the Comaroffs, ideology is one of “the two dominant forms in which power enters—or more accurately is entailed in—culture.”⁵⁹ The other is *hegemony*, a term most frequently associated with the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, who, in his prison writings, defines it as “[t]he ‘spontaneous’ consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group.”⁶⁰ Following Gramsci’s use of *spontaneous* and the Comaroffs’ interpretation, I would say that hegemony is ideology naturalized.⁶¹ That is, hegemony is ideology that is not recognized as such but assumes the position of reality. On the other hand, Disinformation, as I am using it here, is the antithesis of ideology or hegemony: it is neither systematic, nor a “worldview,” nor a “master narrative”; rather, it might be read as the disordered wreckage of both. Perhaps, paradoxically enough, we might call it a system of incoherence, a system that leaves gaps in thinking, across which ideological

58. Jean and John Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism, and Consciousness in South Africa*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 24.

59. Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution*, 22.

60. David Forgacs, ed., *The Antonio Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings 1916–1935* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 306–7.

61. Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution*, 24.

bridges cannot be built. Yet, if we persist in believing that we are walking across these gaps, we are only falling deeper and deeper into the abyss.

“This pattern of presenting inconsistent positions with no apparent recognition of their incoherence,” psychologist Drew Westen comments, “is another hallmark of this president’s [Obama’s] storytelling.”⁶² As noted, this is precisely how Freud describes the unconscious in the dream-work. The journalist Thomas Frank puts his finger on the force of Disinformation without naming it as such when he notes, “People getting their fundamental interests wrong is what American political life is all about. This species of derangement is the bedrock of civic order; it is the foundation on which all else rests.”⁶³ *Derangement*, with its sense of psychosis and detachment from reality, is the key word here. In contrast to ideology, Disinformation is precisely a form of derangement. There is also certainly a pointed paradox in Frank’s formulation where the disorder of derangement “is the bedrock of civic order.” We might ask ourselves how long such a contradiction can hold.

In what is the Obama style of Disinformation, the president, in his December 1, 2009, speech announcing his escalation of the war in Afghanistan, promised both an infusion of 30,000 troops with the object of bringing the war to a *successful* conclusion and a withdrawal of all US forces beginning in eighteen months.⁶⁴ Bob Schieffer, of CBS news, commenting on the speech immediately after it concluded, remarked on the contradiction of simultaneous commitment and withdrawal: “How do you on the one hand say, ‘we need to send these troops over there, it’s critical, this is in our national security interest to do this’ but then say, ‘but we’re only going to keep ’em there for eighteen months.’”⁶⁵ This key policy speech points to the systematic structure of Disinformation, which is based on profound contradictions that go largely unrecognized or, even when they are recognized, do not receive sustained attention and analysis in the public sphere. Schief-

62. Drew Westen, “What Happened to Obama?,” *New York Times*, August 7, 2011, www.nytimes.com/2011/08/07/opinion/sunday/what-happened-to-obamas-passion.html?pagewanted=all.

63. Thomas Frank, *What’s the Matter with Kansas: How Conservatives Won the Heart of America* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2004), 1–2.

64. Obama’s speech on Afghanistan, www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/12/01/obama-afghanistan-speech-text-excerpts_n_376088.html (accessed March 9, 2012).

65. YouTube, “Bob Schieffer Questions the Logic of Obama’s Speech on Troop Deployment and Withdrawal,” www.youtube.com/watch?v=HKOpS0GacWI (accessed March 9, 2012).

fer's critique is an isolated moment of consciousness. Here, the contradiction is between a philosophy of guns and a philosophy of butter, a philosophy of endless war and one of perpetual peace. These philosophies are fundamentally incompatible, but Disinformation yokes them together, giving the *appearance* of compatibility or coherence. Orwell's "newspeak" comes to mind.

Obama accomplishes this yoking as well in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, "A Just and Lasting Peace." In an exceptionally positive review of the speech in her syndicated column on December 11, 2009, Kathleen Parker noted that the speech was "a meditation on American exceptionalism."⁶⁶ Indeed, it was an exceptionalist masterpiece of Disinformation in its erasure of the extralegal violence of both recent and past US history and in its implicit endorsement of the new Manifest Destiny, the "war on terror." Iraq's invasion of Kuwait is mentioned, but the US trumped-up invasion of Iraq is not. Thus, when Obama proclaims, "Those regimes that break the rules must be held accountable" or "I believe that the United States of America must remain a standard bearer in the conduct of war. That is what makes us different from those whom we fight," the words ring hollow, because in the post-Vietnam War era, that difference, to the extent that it existed in the World War II period (worked as ideology), has collapsed. And he backs up these empty proclamations with facts that have turned out not to be facts: "That is why I ordered the prison at Guantanamo Bay closed." The history of US global violence in the Americas, Asia, and the Middle East goes unspecified and is categorized as "mistakes," which are inevitably justified because "the plain fact is this: the United States of America has helped underwrite global security for more than six decades with the blood of our citizens and the strength of our arms." In an Orwellian mode intent on rationalizing US policy in Afghanistan, war becomes the way to peace in the speech: "the instruments of war do have a role to play in preserving the peace. . . . [T]hat peace is desirable is rarely enough to achieve it. Peace requires responsibility. Peace entails sacrifice." And, of course, what is implied but not stated here, "Peace demands war."⁶⁷

But, I want to emphasize, in keeping with my *systemic* analysis, this

66. Kathleen Parker, "An American Triumph at Oslo," December 11, 2009, www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/12/10/AR2009121003638.html.

67. "Obama Nobel Prize Speech: Full Text," TheWorldPost.com, last updated May 25, 2011, www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/12/10/obama-nobel-peace-prize-a_n_386837.html (accessed March 12, 2012).

style of Disinformation is not unique to Obama. The president is only the latest and currently most visible political figure to wave the exceptionalist rhetorical banner, the flourishing of which has a long history going back to the founding fathers. Evidence of the exceptionalist character of the Nobel speech is its appeal across party lines. In its online edition of December 10, 2009, the *Christian Science Monitor* ran the following headline, “Left and Right, Pundits Applaud Obama Nobel Peace Prize Speech.” Sarah Palin and Newt Gingrich both applauded the speech. Noting recent historical parallels to the speech, the *Monitor* quoted Walter Russell Mead, a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, writing at Politico.com: “Barack Obama’s acceptance speech for the Nobel Peace Prize was a carefully reasoned defense of a foreign policy that differs very little from George Bush’s.”⁶⁸

How can the public decide one way or another on plans or policies that the majority does not understand because those policies are incoherent and because that incoherency is not subjected to highly visible public scrutiny? The US health care and deficit “debates,” the Afghanistan “deliberations,” and Obama’s Nobel speech are only a few examples of what I would call a *de facto* situation of Disinformation. In this situation, government, the media, and a range of other institutions, including our schools, *systematically but reflexively* work in unison to keep the public in the dark. They do this *not* primarily by repressing information but by creating a situation in which the public cannot tell the difference between information and Disinformation or, more precisely, cannot tell when it is being disinformed. In such a situation, the public sphere is terrifyingly incoherent.

The incoherence of the public sphere cannot be separated from the subjects who constitute it, “we, the people.” For Althusser, the ideological state apparatus, which is ideology itself, is dependent on “the notion of the *subject*. . . . [For] there is no ideology except by the subject and for subjects” with the proviso that “*the category of the subject is only constitutive of all ideology insofar as all ideology has the function (which defines it) of ‘constituting’ concrete individuals as subjects*” (*Ideology*, 44–45; Althusser’s emphasis). To the extent, then, that we recognize each other as subjects (conscious agents of our beliefs), we are living wholly *within* ideology (*Ideology*, 46–47). For Althusser, this appears equivalent to what the

68. Linda Feldmann, “Left and Right, Pundits Applaud Obama Nobel Peace Prize Speech,” *Christian Science Monitor*, December 10, 2009, www.csmonitor.com/USA/Politics/2009/1210/left-and-right-pundits-applaud-obama-nobel-peace-prize-speech.

Comaroffs define as hegemony—that is, ideology naturalized, the unobtrusive wallpaper of our daily lives: “one of the effects of ideology is the practical *denegation* of the ideological character of ideology by ideology: ideology never says, ‘I am ideological’” (*Ideology*, 49; Althusser’s emphasis).

However, ideology is not only a system of subjective recognition but of reassuring subjection, a promise of stability in return for abjection at the hands of a “Subject” who “interpellates” (recognizes) “subjects.” Althusser uses the ideology of Judeo-Christian monotheism as an example, where God the Subject recognizes his subjects as they recognize Him (*Ideology*, 54). Ideology, then, both creates and stabilizes identity (substitute the corporation or the nation for God, if you will), anchoring it in the storm of reality. It provides “the absolute guarantee that everything really is so, and that on condition that the subjects recognize what they are and behave accordingly, everything will be all right” (*Ideology*, 55). On the other hand, Disinformation destabilizes, disintegrates, or disorients identity, for it lacks a Subject. Whereas ideology is aspirational, Disinformation displaces aspirations with anger born of confusion and despair. At this point, the Subject (the nation) begins to lose its power to interpellate subjects into the national narrative precisely because that narrative, which generates the Subject, has lost its coherence. Under these circumstances, the state will necessarily have to supplant the loss of hegemony (the national narrative) with physical force in the form of increasingly repressive laws generating the curtailment of civil liberties. From the Patriot Act to the National Defense Appropriations Act, this is precisely the state of the union.

As the above analyses suggest, ideology is at the farthest pole from Disinformation: ideology is a system of *arrangement*, a field of coherence, not *derangement*. Ideology constitutes social cohesion through contained conflict, whereas Disinformation disintegrates society or is the mark of such disintegration or derangement. Ideology kept its promises, at least up to a point, to that now virtually disappeared fraction we call the middle class, whereas Disinformation betrays its promises the moment they are made (the Obama health care reform speech and deficit/debt speeches) or simply disintegrates into the racist political fantasies of the Tea Party movement, as chronicled by John Avlon in a selection of the posters that appeared in its September 12, 2009, march on Washington:

“Don’t Make the US a Third World Country—Go Back to Kenya,”
 “We Came Unarmed (This Time),” “Christians Unite,” “Muslim Marxist,”
 “Mugabe-Pelosi in ’12,” “If you are a liberal or progressive Demo-

crat or Republican you are a communist. Impeach Obama!” “Obama the Exterminator: Killing Our Jobs, Killing Our Future, Killing Our Freedom,” “Radical Socialists are Damaged Hate-Filled Power Hungry Destroyers,” “Bury ObamaCare with Kennedy,” “King George Didn’t Listen Either,” “God Bless Glenn Beck and Fox News,” “Preserve Mom, Apple Pie and the American Way,” “Barack Obama Supports Abortion, Sodomy, Socialism and the New World Order,” “An Obamanation of Taxation! The Lifeblood of Tyranny!” “Obama Lied, Granny Died,” “NObama Healthcare Is America’s Nightmare” . . . “Don’t Touch My Medicare.”⁶⁹

Neither the Obama health care reform and debt/deficit speeches nor this deranged sloganeering have anything to do with ideology. While the Obama speeches use the populist rhetoric of the Gettysburg Address and the American Dream, while they use the figure of the mass of Americans pushing Congress to a resolution on the issues of debt and deficit, while they are formally coherent, the rhetoric is completely disconnected from the actualities of the Affordable Care Act and the Budget Control Act of 2011, so what this rhetoric premises and promises (affordable universal health care and economic rationality supported by the American people) is betrayed in the utterance. In other words, the Obama speeches have the *form* of ideology but not the substance.

In its own grotesque and quite obvious way, but like the Obama speeches, nevertheless, the sloganeering has no ground: it opposes “ObamaCare” because it identifies it as socialist, when, in fact, it is quite the opposite, while at the same time it defiantly warns the government “Don’t Touch My Medicare,” which, in effect, is a socialist program instituted and managed by the government. The conflation in the Tea Party movement of socialism, fascism, and communism—Obama is at once pictured as Che and Hitler—points not in the direction of ideology but of Disinformation, or what Thomas Frank terms “anti-knowledge.”⁷⁰ Whereas ideology, however imaginary, retains a certain relation to reality, Disinformation severs that relation, precisely because it is constructed outside the realm of referential speech. It is, in fact, a species of hallucination. It is this airless

69. John Avlon, *Wingnuts: How the Lunatic Fringe Is Hijacking America* (New York: Beast Books, 2010), Kindle ed., loc. 647–52.

70. See Avlon, “How Obama Became Hitler, a Communist and the Antichrist,” in *Wingnuts*, esp. locs. 843–49 and 1022–29; and Frank, *What’s the Matter with Kansas*, 248.

invisible dome of Disinformation that currently marks the limits of the United States. Outside the dome, reality is happening in various forms of production and destruction. Hallucinations, of course, produce shock waves in reality, fields of deadly force at home and abroad. The question remains: When will reality shatter the dome, and what form will it take?