

States of Fantasy: Barack Obama versus the Tea Party Movement

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The U.S. political landscape underwent a sea change when Barack Obama, a former community organizer who seemingly came from nowhere, ran a presidential campaign that resembled a populist grassroots movement. Obama's campaign cohered around two aims: to bring an end to President George W. Bush's unconstitutional state policies—abridgment of civil rights, preemptive strikes, renditions, internment of detainees at Guantánamo Bay—and to oppose the war in Iraq. Drawing together disparate constituencies that traversed traditional party lines, Obama's "movement" successfully realized what had previously seemed an endlessly deferrable American Dream.

In an essay that he published the week after Obama's election entitled "Use Your Illusions!" Slavoj Žižek criticized the cynics who ignored what Žižek described as Obama's manipulation of the "power of illusions." Comparing his election to other world historical events, like the French Revolution, the successful slave revolt in Haiti, and the fall of the Berlin Wall, that defied historical explanation, Žižek concluded that Obama's victory was a "sign of history" because, like these other world historical events

and against all odds, it really happened. “But the true struggle” will actually truly begin, Žižek cautioned, with “the battle for what this victory will effectively mean, especially within the context of two other much more ominous signs of history: 9/11 and the financial meltdown.”¹

Although it has taken place within the terrain Žižek specified—9/11 and the global financial meltdown—the struggle that has ensued over the significance of his election has involved a contest for control over the “power of illusions.”² One month after his inauguration, a Tea Party movement emerged. Bankrolled by powerful Republican lobbies and promoted by Fox News, the Tea Party movement included members who had suffered real economic and emotional losses in the wake of 9/11 and the financial meltdown. In the contest of fantasies that ensued in the wake of President Obama’s election, the architects of the Tea Party appropriated the organizing components of Obama’s successful grassroots campaign—its anti-war initiative and its status as a constitutional movement—as models and targets.

After the trauma of the financial collapse, the Tea Party constructed the fantasy of an autonomous political sphere whose members were organized around a Contract from America. The Tea Party movement reactivated the politics of fear that the Bush administration had turned into a principle of governance to negotiate the economic and political dissatisfactions that the Obama administration was unable to address. Their allegiance to military, economic, as well as cultural American exceptionalism, which was prompted by the loss of the fantasy of American omnipotence, led them to interpret the economic setbacks and cultural change from the standpoint of the loss of Real America.

The primary context for the Tea Party’s interpretation of the economic collapse was the Global War on Terror. Its effectiveness as a political bloc depended on two basic factors: the extent to which the weakening of the Global War on Terror’s conventional articulations led social elements to enter a “crisis” state of unfixity, and the extent to which the Tea Party’s new articulations borrowed from and reworked traditional frameworks.

1. Slavoj Žižek, “Use Your Illusions,” *London Review of Books*, November 17, 2008, available at <http://www.haitianalysis.com/international-relations/slavoj-izek-use-your-illusions>.

2. The irony of this needs to be noted. Despite cosmetic changes, like renaming the War on Terror “overseas contingency operations,” the Obama administration has pursued the same military tactics—“Drone assassinations,” “special operations,” “detaining of unlawful combatants,” and unauthorized surveillance—as his predecessor, thereby turning himself into “Bush with a human face.”

This populist project isolated partially organized social groupings and popular ways of thinking that had not been adequately represented within either political party. Then they attempted to link or to articulate these elements together to form a new political bloc. Tea Party populism specifically drew upon slogans forged by disparate political constituencies to displace the blame for the financial disaster from the global capitalist system and projected it onto secondary causes—overly lax regulation, the corruption of the big financial institutions, the un-Americanness of the liberal elite.

The Republicans claimed that the Tea Party was part of the contemporary response to the economic failure. But the group in fact dates back to Reagan's silent majority. The Contract from America combined the themes of Ronald Reagan nationalism—nation, family, duty, authority, standard traditionalism—with neoliberal watch words—self-interest, competitive individualism, antistatism, free market, strong state. Tea Party populism reshaped the traditional themes of family and nation to respond to actual political anxieties, but within the frameworks of already constituted social ideologies. The movement set honest, hardworking Americans who went to church, raised their families, and believed in American exceptionalism in opposition to a constituency comprised of politically correct atheists who advocated for abortion, supported legislation to teach perverted sexual practices in the classroom, and worked to undermine the American way of life. The Tea Party used mass fears to attack these elite attitudes, and after successfully linking bulwarks of postwar social democracy, like social welfare and health benefits, to liberal elitism, they made it clear that they now rested on unsteady foundations.

Overall, the Tea Party's fantasmatic construction of the post-9/11 U.S. nation displaced the cause of all disorder onto an external source. The movement explicitly linked economic policies to homeland security in constructing the core issues in the new consensus. They produced an imaginary inclusion through the construction of an outside figure who personified some of the greatest threats to the national order. The Tea Party's fantasies turned groups and antagonisms intrinsic to American political culture—political correctness, inner-city crime—into foreign elements that threatened the American way of life. Since they believed that the United States was an essentially coherent, autonomous, and unified national space, it followed that any interruptions must be caused by foreign agents. Antagonism to Obama operated as a trigger, which made the disintegration of the nation and the inevitability of national recovery imaginable. The renormalization of the financial system thereafter coexisted with populist efforts to

condemn President Obama for failing to provide the security needed to protect the system and to portray him as a representative of a liberal elite who poses a threat to “our” fundamental way of life.

In calling the Tea Party a fantasy, I do not mean that we need only to expose its fantasmatic myth about the cause of the financial collapse to reveal the underlying truth. Following Žižek, I would argue that instead of offering an escape from reality, fantasies actively construct social reality itself as an escape from some traumatic dimension. Fantasy does not merely stage the fulfillment of the already constituted subject’s wishes; fantasy constructs the frame enabling us to desire something. It is through fantasy that the objects of desire are given, and it is through fantasy that we learn how to desire. The fantasy frame is constructed so that we experience our world as a wholly consistent and transparently meaningful order.

Fantasies produce a figure, the subject who is supposed to believe in them, as the precondition of their credibility. Political commentators who believe they can dismantle the power of the fantasy by exposing its factual inaccuracies believe that credibility rises and falls with the truth of the factual state of affairs. But racism and religion proliferate through their extravagant contempt for factual accuracy. While the fetishist ignores or mistrusts argumentation, the cynic accepts the truth of argumentation by ignoring the symbolic efficacy of the fetishist.

The fetishism that lies at the heart of fantasy is grounded on the active disavowal of knowledge. Fetishists are interested in the facts as the occasion to display how their fantasies can reorganize the facts. Tea Party goers rephrase the fetishist’s conventional formulation of “I know this is not true but I believe it nonetheless” into the statement “I know this fantasy isn’t true. But since I cannot otherwise make any sense of this crisis, I need to believe it just the same.”

Just as Obama overwhelmed opposition by building on the fantasy of a return to America’s virtuous idealism with respect to human rights for all in all circumstances, even those of national “enemies,” so too the Tea Party goers build on their own fantasy. Whereas their belief in the “audacity of Hope” enabled participants in Obama’s movement to bombard Bush’s homeland security state with demands that he end state policies that violated the United States Constitution—preemptive strikes, the opening of the detention center at Guantánamo Bay, unauthorized domestic surveillance—the Tea Party goers forged a Contract from America through which they reaffirmed their primary loyalty to the security legislation spelled out in

Bush's Homeland Security Act. Their mirroring and mimicking of Obama's movement constituted an effort to transpose his election into a mere illusion.

After eradicating the line separating information from entertainment, the Tea Party movement demonstrated how their spectacles possessed the capacity to undermine the significance of facts. Proclaiming that populist energies migrated to their movement, Tea Party goers have turned the representatives of the Obama movement into cynical pragmatists more interested in fact-checking than in envisioning alternative futures. Their image-making machines stripped the attribute of "audacity" away from Obama's party of hope to exercise a monopoly over the public imaginary. This parasitic mirroring of the Obama movement produced a matrix of cultural despair out of which a whole series of new populist identities—Glenn Beck, Sarah Palin's *Going Rogue*—emerged.

The participants in the Tea Party movement identified their opposition to Obama's changes in financial and healthcare policies with the Boston patriots' iconic revolutionary act of dumping crates of tea overboard to protest the British tyrant George III's unfair taxation. But they redeployed figures instituted to conduct George W. Bush's Global War on Terror—illegal aliens, detainees, U.S. Intelligence interrogators, terrorists—as the underpinning for lurid fantasies that supplied imaginary explanations for real economic and emotional distress.

Arguably, the turning point in Obama's campaign took place when he exploited the subprime mortgage crisis to persuade the majority of Americans to divest their credibility in Bush's Global War on Terror and reinvest it in the ambition to make a transgenerational dream come true. Obama's bailout of financial institutions and his proposed changes in the healthcare contract quite literally affected Americans' most intimate sense of secure belonging—jobs, health, and home. The leaders of the Tea Party movement characterized these measures as the continuation by economic means of the terrorist attack on the homeland on 9/11/2001.

Although it has had the most disastrous consequences, it was actually Bush's inauguration of the Global War on Terror that successfully established a state fantasy that was as encompassing and inclusive as that of the cold war. Rather than restricting it to the dimensions of the Persian Gulf, as had his father, George W. Bush's declaration of a Global War on Terror extended the reach of the U.S. war mentality across the planet. It also conscripted the two most unruly constituencies within the domestic order—Christian Fundamentalists and the militia movement—to its war effort, and

incorporated what one Bush official described as the victim mentality of the Democratic Party within the emotional logic of the state.

In declaring a Global War on Terror as the state's response to 9/11, George W. Bush accomplished what his father had not. This apocalyptic event enabled him to bring closure to one epoch and to install a very different order of things. In responding to this event, the Bush administration recruited the apocalyptic imagination of the Christian Fundamentalist to supply higher authority for the state's global war against Muslim extremists. The administration also recruited paramilitary forces from domestic militia movements to carry out special military operations under banners like Operation Infinite Justice and Operation Enduring Freedom that turned foundational tenets of scriptural belief into the authorization for the use of deadly force. After transforming Christian Fundamentalism into a theological dimension of the Reason of State and incorporating the militia movement into a legitimate expression of state force, the Bush administration went on to represent the nation in whose name it fought as a homeland whose members were united through their collective participation in the newly declared Global War on Terror.

The homeland security measures that Congress passed to support the War on Terror fostered a symbolic pact whereby U.S. citizens affirmed their patriotism through the willingness to surrender certain civil rights in the name of biopolitical security. It was the state's description of the weapons which endangered the aggregated population as "biological" that in part authorized the state's biopolitical settlement. But after the Obama administration redescribed the Global War on Terror as "overseas contingency operations," the state abrogated the fantasmatic power to project insuperable political contradictions onto a universal enemy—the terrorist. Following the dismantling of this fantasy structure, the paramilitary movements and the Christian Fundamentalists that President Bush had subjected to the imperatives of the homeland security state have reemerged with collective fantasies of their own.

Because state fantasies construct a perfect order, they are always accompanied by symptom figures onto whom all the imperfections of the existing order must be projected. There would be no system without the symptom as the element that stitches up the inconsistencies of an ideological system and gives consistency to being. But the symptom figure does not exist in the social symbolic order. As the embodiment of elements that cannot be integrated within that order, it demarcates that order's limits of tolerance and coherence. After the symptom is constructed as the cause of

the disorder, a coherent account can be given to the unified order and the seemingly endless series of failures, incompletions, and contradictions that constantly interrupt it.

As the principle of organization for the subject's enjoyment, the symptom gives satisfaction. Even after the symptom is interpreted, the subject may cling to it. The interpretation may not disrupt the subject's attachment to it. After 9/11, the terrorist was a symptom figure who facilitated the stitching up of inconsistencies of the entire ideological system. "The terrorist" summed up, gave coherence to, and offered a solution to a range of popular concerns.

When Obama removed the universal enemy, the whole system of managed fear that this symptomal element had organized began to come apart. In the wake of the financial disaster in 2008, the Tea Party movement put Obama into the place of the symptom figure he removed. For Tea Party goers, Obama was the most visible symptom of the loss of the American way of life.

The Tea Party goers who disrupt town hall meetings, demand that Obama give proof of his U.S. citizenship, propagate rumors of death panels, plot the "teabagging" of Obama, demand state secession, declare Obama the Antichrist, issue ultimatums, refuse to permit their children to listen to the president's schoolroom address, and bring their guns to anti-Obama rallies have refused to give up their psychic attachments to the Global War on Terror. The Birthers' propagation of the belief that Obama lacks a valid birth certificate reimagines him as an illegal immigrant whose endangerment of the people's biopolitical welfare will be accomplished through the formation of "death panels." The Deathers' conjuring of death panels to decide on their continued viability has identified U.S. citizens as equivalent to the detainees targeted for coercive interrogation during the War on Terror. These fantasies have also tacitly constructed President Obama as himself a "terrorist," an enemy of the state whose healthcare policy threatens the biopolitical security of the homeland.

The architects of the Contract from America have capitalized on the generalized domestic insecurity that emerged after the subprime crisis and have directed it onto the belief that President Obama is involved in a worldwide conspiracy designed first to destroy the U.S. Constitution and subsequently to exploit and imprison "mainstream" U.S. citizens. Reduced to the political demand underwriting it, this fantasy can be restated as a collective desire to be seceded from President Obama's polity.

Whether or not such a fantasy is factually true is of little importance,

since their fantasies are structured at the site of the impossible demand that the Tea Party scenarios act out. Political fantasies are always factually untrue, even as they reveal the truth of the participants' very real fears. What matters to the Tea Party movement is the way their demands are organized in response to the enframing anxiety over the Obama administration's imagined threat to their survival. Rather than becoming signatories to Obama's proposed changes in the social contract, Tea Party members resituate the "subject who is supposed to believe" within the provenance of the Contract from America.³

Political theorists are reluctant to address the role that fantasy plays in the mobilization of social groups, and most "liberal" commentators on the so-called Tea Party movement have dismissed it as an episode in psychopathology. Representatives of the Obama administration have written off the Tea Party's fantasies as proof of the delusional world in which the lunatic fringe of the Republican Party has become entrapped. But in their disdain for the irrational excesses of the Tea Party movement, they fail to recognize that the movement responsible for sweeping Obama to the presidency was itself striated and sutured by fantasy.

The commentators who arrogate the power to describe what should and should not be considered proper grassroots politics, and who administer judgments grounded in a set of preestablished norms about what politics should and should not be, may have rejected politics itself.⁴ I do not

3. The Contract from America Web site (www.contractfromamerica.com) restricts its venue to economic concerns. But the Tea Party movement includes Birthers (<http://www.birthers.org/>); Deathers (see http://current.com/items/90557963_from-birthers-to-deathers-gop-tactics-for-opposing-obama.htm); Christian Patriots who call themselves "Oathkeepers" (www.oathkeepers.org/), who believe Obama is intent on building concentration camps; and Christian Fundamentalists, like Hal Lindsey, who believe that Obama is the Antichrist (www.snopes.com/politics/obama/antichrist.asp). Since members of the Tea Party movement overwhelmingly believe that Obama's secret agenda involves destroying America's founding principles, it's their patriotic and "ethical imperative" to want him to fail. They have used the economic panic as the basis for retrieving the certitudes of the War on Terror to conduct their campaign against him.

4. Commentators like Frank Rich, Rachel Maddow, and Arianna Huffington welcomed Obama as a needed antidote to the population's readiness to believe in the declarations of Bush's faith-based presidency. They have ritualistically derided Tea Party goers for violating what Rich described as the basic premise of a self-regulating democracy, namely the ability to distinguish factual truths from falsehoods. But Paul Craig Roberts indicated the significance of state fantasy in the political production of truth in an op-ed entitled "Why Propaganda Trumps Truth," www.informationclearinghouse.info/article23498.htm. Observing that pundits cannot explain why so many Americans still believe that Sad-

think that the Tea Party movement should be discounted as delusional or that this populist movement should be ignored. Such reactions cede far too much political ground. The fantasies through which a population ratifies (or refuses) a different political order constitute an essential dimension of that order's effectiveness. Rather than turn away from the presence of fantasies in politics, whether of the Right or the Left, commentators should analyze them and political strategists should meet them on their own terrain—not with hysterics but with effective counterfantasies. This is what the Obama administration, momentarily, seems to have forgotten.

The members of the Tea Party constituency perceive themselves as normal, law-abiding, church-going citizens who are practicing the American way of life. The Tea Party's Contract from America recalls Newt Gingrich's Contract with America. The clauses in the Tea Party's Contract from America recall the bill of particulars spelled out in Gingrich's Contract with America in a way that designates the Republican Party as the representatives of their demands. Moreover, the Tea Party's collective refusal to become signatories to Obama's change in the provisions of the biopolitical contract has supplied the Republicans who refuse to endorse his health-care bill with an activist base they can claim to represent.

When an interviewer recently asked him about the Tea Party movement, Noam Chomsky focused his attention on its substantive effects. "Eighty percent of those who believe the country's going in the wrong direction get answers [from the Tea Party]: The rich elites are running the country. They don't care about you. They only care about giving what you work for away to illegal immigrants, gays, whatever. . . . When they put up a healthcare program, it's not to give you health, it's to kill your granny—and that's an answer. . . . Those with real grievances are being given answers. Unless an answer can be given to these people—an answer they can understand—we can be in for trouble."⁵

dam Hussein was behind 9/11, years after it became obvious that Iraq had nothing to do with the event, Roberts opined that Americans developed elaborate rationalizations based on Bush administration propaganda that alleged Iraqi involvement and became deeply attached to their beliefs. "Their emotional involvement became wrapped up in their personal identity and sense of morality. They looked for information that supported their beliefs and avoided information that challenged them, regardless of the facts of the matter."

5. "Noam Chomsky Compares Rush Limbaugh and Fox News to the Nazis," October 6, 2009, as posted on John Lott's Web site, <http://johnrlott.blogspot.com/2009/10/noam-chomsky-compares-rush-limbaugh-and.html>.

State Fantasies

In keeping with Chomsky's line of thought, I want to propose that the so-called Tea Party movement supplies a good example of the role fantasy has played in establishing the differences between the Bush and Obama administrations.⁶ In the remainder of this essay, I shall attempt to spell out what I consider to be the political stakes of the Tea Party fantasies, describe their relationship to healthcare legislation, and conclude with an analysis of their relationship to America's "racial contract."

As I am using the term, *fantasy* does not refer to a mystification but to the dominant structure of desire out of which U.S. citizens imagine their relationship to the state's policies. Rather than associating fantasy with a delusion that requires critique, I align my discussion of state fantasy with Jacqueline Rose's insight that "fantasy—far from being the antagonist of public, social, being—plays a central, constitutive role in the modern world of states and nations."⁷ Rose begins her meditation on the relationship between fantasy and the state with the observation that theories of political culture were usually constituted out of the exclusion of fantasy. One of the reasons that political theorists were (and remain) reluctant to acknowledge fantasy as a crucial dimension of political reality has to do with the belief that fantasies threaten the state of things with psychic dissolution. Political theorists excluded fantasy as an analytical category because the traits they defined fantasy as lacking—seriousness, grounding in fact, foundation in established political theory—were considered prerequisite to theorization of political culture. But in *States of Fantasy*, Rose transposes all of these disqualifying criteria into proof of the inextricable correlations between states and fantasy.

Remarking that the anomalies inherent to the modern state can be illuminated by putting them in dialogue with Freud, Rose turns to psycho-

6. I have elaborated the framework of analysis within which I shall explain the so-called Tea-Party movement in *The New American Exceptionalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009). That book is primarily concerned with the irreconcilable rifts within U.S. political culture that opened up during the lengthy period of transition from the termination of the cold war to the inauguration of Obama, and with the disparate state fantasies that emerged to organize U.S. citizens' relations to these antagonisms.

7. Jacqueline Rose's *States of Fantasy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996) has broken ground in explaining the significance of state fantasies to the political culture of the modern nation-state: "It is the central argument of her book that there is no way of understanding political identities and destinies without letting fantasies into the frame" (3). Hereafter, this work is cited parenthetically as *SF*.

analytic theory to explain that, despite the efforts of political theorists to suppress them, the state depends upon its subjects' affective investments in fantasy for its legitimation. She then proposes that psychoanalytic theory supplies especially useful analytic concepts for explicating what she describes as the "symptom" of modern statehood, the fact that there is something inside the very processes upholding the modern state which threaten and exceed it.

Rose illuminates the basis for the state's dependence on fantasy with the following questions: "When and why do men obey? Upon what inner justifications and upon what external means does this domination rest?" (*SF*, 5). This is where fantasy comes in. The state cannot initiate rationally purposive action that the individual citizen can logically explain—it can only do so in terms of the inner meaning it holds for citizens or the subjective beliefs they attach to it. A modern state may represent itself as sovereign, but in the absence of any metaphysical guarantees, this self-representation only intensifies the need to make itself appear sovereign. Over and above its monopoly of legitimate violence, the modern state relies on fantasy for the authority that it can neither secure nor ultimately justify.

Refusing to position the concepts of state and fantasy as facing toward public and private worlds, Rose displaces the word *state* from its settled meaning within political discourse—as the authorized regulatory agency of a polity—and restores an alternative meaning of *state* as a psychic condition that is accompanied by a loss of authority (*SF*, 7). After the "state" is reassigned these forgotten significations, Rose explains, its private and public aspects cease to remain opposites and instead become the outer and inner faces of the state of fantasy:

If the expression "states of fantasy" does not appear to yoke opposites together, it is because state—in thrall to fantasy—one might say, has gone over to the private side of its semantic history and shed its public face. In fact the word "state" has a psychological meaning long before its modern day sense of polity. . . . To take a relatively modern instance . . . *he was fully conscious of his state* and had high hopes of being cured in an asylum. Here "state" is almost a synonym for "insanity." Think of the expression "in a state"; it has the same feel—you never have to spell out, especially if you are the sufferer, what it exactly means. As if to be "in a state" is precisely to lose the capacity to travel with any clarity through the world of words. "States of confusion," "states of panic," "states of dissociation" . . . were "states of mind" distinguished by their passivity from

other mental acts and operations in which the mind was assumed to retain a grip on itself. (*SF*, 11)

The decisive shift in the political fortunes of the modern state takes place at the historical moment when the ruler, instead of embodying the state, serves a separate constitutional and legal state that it is his duty to maintain. Once real authority is no longer vested in the person of the ruler, it disembodies itself. It is this disembodiment, Rose concludes, that renders the state itself a fantasy. The state thereafter relies on a ghostly, fantasmatical power no reason can fully account for to enact its authority.

But according to Rose, it would be wrong to deduce from this change in the historical status of its state that the modern state is any the less real for the fact that it relies on fantasy for an authority it can neither secure nor ultimately justify. Percy Bysshe Shelley called poets “unacknowledged legislators” because he believed that only poetry could resolve the legitimation crises that resulted after the Enlightenment stripped the state of its metaphysical guarantees. Poets accomplished this resolution by exercising the sovereign power of the poetic imagination, which Shelley considered the counterpart to the sovereign will of the state.

According to Rose, state fantasies continue to accomplish the feats Shelley restricted to poets. If citizens are subjected to the state through their belief in the state’s authority, it is state fantasy that supplies this belief. State fantasies incite an operative imagination endowed with the power to solicit the citizens’ desire to believe in the reality of its productions.

The state’s policies get internalized through state fantasy work. State fantasies lay down the scenarios through which the state’s rules and norms can be experienced as internal to the citizens’ desire. Fantasy endows the state’s rules and laws with the authority of the people’s desire for them. Fantasy does so by investing the state’s rules with the desire through which the state’s subjects imagine themselves to be the authors of these rules and laws as well as their recipients. The state’s subjects’ capacity to recognize a series of events as belonging to the same symbolic order also requires the guidance and supervision of state fantasies. These fantasies align the people’s beliefs with the regulative discourse through which the state is empowered to bring the chaos of political events into order.

State fantasies have played these constitutive roles within U.S. political culture, I would add, by inciting within the citizens who take them up the desire to organize their identities out of the political antagonisms within U.S. national culture. To accomplish this cultural work, the core elements of

these state fantasies must find empirical validation in everyday life. But the chief test of a state fantasy concerns its ability to supply the relationship with the national order that U.S. citizens want to have. Successfully produced state fantasies effect that relationship by inducing citizens to want the national order they already have. The legislative dimension of these fantasies does not refer to their capacity to entice U.S. citizens to establish imaginary relations to the real state of things. This operative component of state fantasy involves obtaining U.S. citizens' acquiescence to the processes whereby the state superimposes the legal identities through which it seeks to manage the everyday practices and the self-representations of its citizens.

State Fantasies as Unacknowledged Legislators

Following the termination of the cold war in 1989, U.S. presidents and legislators have introduced four separate compacts with U.S. citizens—President George Herbert Walker Bush's New World Order, President William Jefferson Clinton's New Covenant, Newt Gingrich's Contract with America, and President George W. Bush's Homeland Security State—to replace the cold war settlement. These legislators either inaugurated or consolidated their compacts as a response to traumatic events—the Persian Gulf War, the conflagration of the Branch-Davidian Compound in Waco, the destruction of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001—where a radical discontinuity distinguished between what came before these catastrophes happened and what would follow in their wake. While the state was directly responsible for the production of the first two events, the state exploited the Oklahoma City bombing and 9/11 for state fantasy work.

As events that could not be incorporated within the normal order of things, these national traumas demarcated the sites at which alternatives to it became at once imaginable and desirable. A state fantasy successfully takes hold when it transposes these sites of trauma into the inaugural spaces within a newly configured order. While the fantasy is not reducible to the explicit terms laid out in a national compact, the fantasy nonetheless supplies the scenarios that are prerequisite to U.S. citizens' interiorizing the state's rules and norms.

I have described state fantasies as *legislators* because they occupy the site in between the supplanted and the emergent state of things and

enable the citizens who take these fantasies up to interiorize the state's newly forged contractual terms. I have described these fantasies as *unacknowledged legislators* for two intertwined reasons. These fantasies assume the legislating power of legitimation, and they take the place of an explicit contractual negotiation between the state and the people. Moreover, the legislation—in the sense of the reconfigured social arrangements that they put into place—is founded upon norms and rationalities that these fantasies deny explicit recognition. As unacknowledged legislators, these state fantasies produce the national subjects who want the state to govern them.

Rather than explaining the significance of these legal fictions or defending the reconfigured order of things, these fantasies enable the citizens who take them up to structure their desires within the terms of the fantasy. A state fantasy should not be construed as a specific, restricted instrument of governance. It sustains the continued symbolic efficacy of the entire order it legislates. A state fantasy becomes symbolically effective when it produces a relation with the order it legislates that makes it seem an enactment of the will of the individual national subject rather than an imposition of the state.

The work that the Tea Party fantasy performed as an unacknowledged legislator was evidenced on October 30, 2009, when Representative Virginia Foxx, a Republican member of the House of Representatives from North Carolina, articulated her opposition to “Obamacare” by explicitly linking healthcare legislation to the War on Terror: “I believe we have more to fear from the potential of that bill than we do from any terrorist right now in any country.”⁸ Newt Gingrich constructed the particular clauses of his Contract with America out of the enraged responses of Christian Fundamentalists and the militia to the BATF siege of the Branch Davidian compound at Waco. But the Tea Party’s Contract from America represented the demands of constituencies who share outrage over the traumatizing factual reality of Obama’s election.

The Tea Party Movement and the Racial Contract

A fantasy does not merely represent social reality. It also tries to shape it practically, so as to control the changes that cannot be incorporated within it. But every fantasy has its Real. At the core of the Tea Party

8. See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6d7amETRbdE>.

movement is a fantasy in which only the narrative of the white supervision of the black male can contain the trauma of its Real—the spectacle of a black man being in charge of himself and of the nation.

The election of Obama designated that part of their practical reality that the members of the Tea Party could not incorporate. They could not acknowledge the reality of Obama's presidency without undermining the viability of their prior construction of themselves. Obama's election meant that America no longer needed white Americans to reproduce its structures of power. Those operating within the Tea Party could not accept this matter-of-fact truth any more than they could acknowledge the reality of the non-white president to which it referred.

In the Tea Party, the relationship between the white defenders of the true America and the anti-American president became a nodal point. Tea Party goes interpreted his election as a breach of the racial contract. They would repair the breach of the racial construct through a series of mystified scenarios. The fear of the reversibility of white supremacy sustained the deep logic of each of these fantasies. The fantasies of death camps and other imagined indignities turned whites into the imaginary victims of real technologies of Euro-American racism. The terrifying prospect of the reversal of the colonial past made immigration seem akin to war and invasion.

Their affirmative use of the image of Hitler indicates their refusal to view the excesses of World War II as products of the order of racism. Unlike their Boston prototypes, the members of the Tea Party did not wear Indian masks, but they did paint a white mask over Obama's face. By acting within their own skin and fashioning a mask for Obama, the Tea Party rendered him part of another political space from that of Obama, who was implicitly constructed as part of another country, separate from themselves and impersonating the role of president.

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To ward off acknowledging the truth of this state of affairs, the Tea Party movement created a fantasy that came to terms with the trauma of the financial crisis by retroactively attributing its cause to the changes in the

social contract emanating from Obama's election. This fantasy has cohered around the Tea Party's response to Obama's biopolitical legislation.

In the United States, the biopolitical order is regulated by what Charles Mills has called a racial contract that distinguished (white) persons who are full contractual parties to the social contract from (nonwhite) subpersons who are not.⁹ In the following account, Ghassan Hage designates the inequivalent practices of "national belonging" appertaining to persons and subpersons, which resulted from the racial contract: "The (white) nationalist who believes him or herself to 'belong' to a nation, in the sense of being part of it, means that he or she expects the right to benefit from the nation's resources, to 'fit into it,' or to 'feel at home within it.'"¹⁰ To inhabit the nation at the level of what Hage calls "active" governmental belonging is to imagine inhabiting what he refers to as the "state's will." Hage contrasts the active subjects of national belonging with those who belong passively to the nation. He describes the members of this latter category as populated by minoritized, nonwhite nationals who do not feel as if they inhabit the nation at the level of identification with its will. Unlike white nationals, who perceive themselves as the enactors or the agents of the state's will, these nonwhites experience their presence as object-like and subject to the managerial will of those who actively belong to the nation.

Hage goes on to describe the way that white nationals inhabited, experienced, and conceived of their nation and of themselves as a fantasy in which they imagine themselves enacting the state's will. The Tea Party movement is comprised of white nationals who reproduce the apportion-

9. In *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1997), Charles W. Mills defines the racial contract as that "set of formal or informal or meta-agreements (higher level contracts about contracts, which set the limits of the contract's validity) between one subset of humans henceforth designated as white and coextensive with the class of full persons, and that categorizes the remaining subset of humans as non white and of a different and inferior moral status, subpersons" (11). The "full persons" referenced in this definition are contrapuntal ensembles that require their differentiation from subpersons to achieve self-identity. In other words, no matter how universal the applicability of this category, the figure of the person necessarily requires its distinction from the necessary and related category of the subperson. Although the racial contract that underwrites the modern social contract is constantly being rewritten, it invariably establishes epistemological norms of cognition along racial lines. It prescribes for its signatories an epistemology of ignorance, a resilient combination of disavowal and nonknowledge that guarantees that whites "will in general be unable to understand the world they themselves have made" (45).

10. Ghassan Hage, *White Nation: Fantasies of White Supremacy in a Multicultural Society* (Sydney: Pluto Press, 1998), 45.

ment of the biopolity into persons and subpersons by turning that structure into the justification for their biopolitical governance.

Tea Party Patriots construe the election of Obama as the breach of the racial contract upon which this fantasy of national belonging is based. And they have turned Obama's efforts to redress these biopolitical inequalities into a site of contestation. Obama, like all heads of state, exercises his sovereign power through decisions made within the biopolitical sphere over whom the state would "make live" or "let die." The Birthers and Deathers within the Tea Party movement have created a fantasy in which they would wrest this decision-making power away from the president.

The Tea Party's Contract from America has turned President Obama's aspiration to change the provisions of the social contract related to the biopolitical sphere into an occasion to repair the breach of the racial contract. The Birthers and Deathers and other signatories to the Tea Party's Contract from America would accomplish this reparation by imagining themselves encountering Obama at the nation's border, where, after demanding Obama's papers and subjecting him to interrogation, they would restore the terms of the foundational racial contract.

Since Birthers and Deathers believe that the empowerment of black males is almost entirely dependent on white Americans' supervisory control, they do not believe that Obama, a nonwhite national, could possibly have attained power without subordinating his will to that of white nationals. Their fantasies have produced all too real scenarios—like the lynching of the census taker in Kentucky, plots to assassinate President Obama, and the violent disruptions of town hall meetings—through which such subordination gets accomplished. They will not surrender supervisory control over the biopolis to a race man.

The Obama administration cannot successfully respond to this Real fantasy without reappropriating the terrain usurped by the Tea Party movement.