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Magic and politics
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sion onto the Africans. Soon the very existence of fetishes was being held out as proof that Africans were profoundly confused about spiritual matters; European philosophers began arguing that fetishism represented the lowest possible stage of religion, one at which the fetishist was willing to worship absolutely anything, since he had no systematic theology at all.

Before long, of course, European figures like Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud began asking, *But are we really all that different?* As Marx noted, Western history is a story of our creating things and then falling down before our own creations and worshipping them like gods. In the Middle Ages we did it with wafers, chalices, and reliquaries. Now we do it with money and consumer goods. Hence Marx's famous argument about *commodity fetishism.* We are constantly manufacturing objects for our use or convenience, and then speaking of them as if they were charged with some strange, supernatural power that makes them capable of acting on their own accord—largely because, from an immediate practical perspective, that might as well be true.

When a commodity trader reads the *Wall Street Journal* and learns that gold is doing this, oil or pork bellies doing that, or that money is fleeing this market and migrating somewhere else, does he *believe* what he reads? Certainly he doesn't think he does. There would be absolutely no point in taking the trader aside and explaining that gold and oil are really inanimate objects that can't do anything. The response would be pure exasperation. *Obviously it's just a figure of speech. What do you take me for, some kind of moron?* But in every practical sense, he does believe it, because every day he goes out on the trading floor and acts as if it were true.

parts made business deals. This was back in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when the Europeans were after gold, mostly before they began trading in slaves. It seems that in many African port towns at that time, it was possible to improvise a new god to fit the commercial occasion; you could bring together some beads, feathers, and bits of rare wood, or just pick up any peculiar or significant-looking object you happened to find along the beach, and then consecrate it with a mutual oath. More elaborate fetishes that served to protect whole communities could consist of sculptures, often strikingly beautiful, into which the contracting parties could force nails, thus angering the newly created god to ensure it was in a proper mood to punish transgressors. But for a mere business deal with a foreigner, even an interesting piece of driftwood would do.

The act of swearing the oath transformed the object into a divine power capable of wreaking terrible destruction on anyone who violated his new commitments. The power of the new god was the power of their agreement. All of this was just one step away from saying the object was a god because the humans said it was, but everyone would insist that, no, in fact, the objects were now vested with terrible invisible power. And if some unexpected catastrophe did befall one of the contracting parties—which was not at all uncommon as Europeans were constantly getting wrecked in storms or dying of malarial fever—someone could always say it never would have happened had the dead men not somehow broken their word.

Did African merchants really believe in the power of their fetishes? Many seemed to think they did, even if they often acted as if fetishes were just a convenient commercial expedient. But the world of magical charms is full of such paradoxes. What is absolutely certain is that Europeans, used to thinking in theological terms, simply could not get their minds around this practice. As a result they tended to project their own confu-

I.

Politicians are by definition dishonest. All politicians lie. But many observers of American politics agree that over the last few years, there has been something of a qualitative change in the magnitude of political dishonesty. In certain party precincts, at least, there seems to have been a conscious attempt to change the rules to allow for a level of flagrant, over-the-top lying about political opponents that we rarely see in other countries. Sarah Palin and her "death panels" pioneered the new style, but Michele Bachmann quickly took things to even more spectacular heights with her wild claims of government plots to impose sharia law on the United States or secret plans to abandon the dollar and replace it with the Chinese yuan. Mitt Romney didn't top either Palin or Bachmann in the grandeur and magnificence of his lies, but he did try to make up for it in volume, having based his entire presidential campaign on an endless string of fabrications. Many of the lies coming out of the Republican side are, in fact, so brazen that it's hard to see them as anything but conscious provocations. It's as if their candidates have begun daring the media and the Democrats to openly call them liars.

What are we to make of this? First of all, it can hardly be a coincidence that all three of the above-mentioned politicians are deeply religious. Sarah Palin and Michele Bachmann are evangelicals; Romney has been a Mormon bishop. In these religious circles, belief and lies are matters referred inward to one's internal state. That is why the religious supporters of such politicians remain untroubled when the media reveals their statements to be untrue. If anything, their supporters are likely to react indignantly toward any journalist who suggests lying is the result of conscious dishonesty. Charismatics and evangelicals embrace a form of Christianity in which faith is almost all there is to it. If you are speaking about people of faith, the ones who have opened themselves to the divine spirit, then there can be no questioning the purity of their intentions. And then some secular liberal elitist media type is calling them *liars*?

What the Republican Right is performing is a theological version of an essentially magical style of political performance: they are whisking a universe into being through acts of conscious faith. The limit is that—as long as the other side isn't stupid enough to echo Bob Dole's famous "stop lying about my record!"—the magic works only on those who already see them as morally superior.

For liberals, of course, all this means that Republicans live in a dream world of their own devising. They see themselves as the "reality-based community," the folks that doggedly insist on gathering facts and figures and examining the world the way it really is.

The origin of that phrase is telling in itself. It comes from a *New York Times Magazine* essay by onetime *Wall Street Journal* correspondent Ron Suskind. Called "Faith, Certainty and the Presidency of George W. Bush," the essay is, for the most part, an elaboration on the same point I just made, namely that for Bush's fans, the purity of his inner convictions was what really mattered. But the passage that made Suskind famous was one in which he reports a conversation with an unnamed "senior adviser to Bush" that, he says, "gets to the very heart of the Bush presidency":

> The aide said that guys like me were "in what we call the reality-based community," which he defined as people who "believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality." I nodded and murmured something about enlightenment principles and empiricism. He cut me off. "That's not the way the world really works anymore," he continued. "We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And

You have to ask whether she believes there's any way she can realize her dearest ambitions other than within a world she already believes to be a scam; you also have to ask whether she believes that trying to change things, or even loudly pointing out that the whole thing is a scam, might get her seriously hurt. (As the recent fate of Occupy Wall Street revealed, even when middle-class white people go out on the streets to speak unpleasant truths in today's America, violence is a genuine possibility.) And then you have to ask whether everyone else believes violence will happen if they themselves try to change things—or just whether everyone thinks everyone else believes that's what will happen to them. The hall of mirrors is endless.

II.

Amid all the routine distortions, opportunistic half-truths, and fanciful ideologies that now make up the political discourse, any honest interlocutor has to wrestle with the question of how self-deception functions as a self-administered belief system. Students of the art of propaganda have long noted its close formal mimicry of empirical science, but the problem of mendacious packaging doesn't account for the deeper quandaries of self-conscious belief in one's own preferred form of propaganda. The conventional formulation of the problem asks how some people can make themselves believe something that looks illusory to other people. But this formulation assumes people can't be wrong about what they believe. Is it possible to think that you do believe something when, in fact, you don't, or to think that you don't believe something when, in fact, you do?

Actually, there is an entire strain of thought dedicated to understanding how this might be possible. The term *fetishism* appears to have been coined by European merchants working in West Africa, in order to explain how their African counterlightenment empiricism to its opposite, the academic Left has left itself with the notion that performance really is everything.

The intellectual trends ran from the emergence of "performance theory" itself in the late eighties, to the nineties rise of actor-network theory, with its insistence that even the objects of scientific inquiry are created by political processes of negotiation, persuasion, alliance-building between scientists, institutions, objects, animals, and microbes. But the essence of the matter is: during the period when the American (and by extension North Atlantic) economy became increasingly based on the production of financial bubbles of one sort or another, its intellectuals simultaneously seem to have decided that absolutely everything is simply the product of political performance. The bubble economy was a kind of apotheosis of political magic.

But as any genuine magician (or successful politician) can tell you, it's not really that simple. True, we all accept that a president is above all someone who knows how to act like a president; we endlessly criticize candidates for any perceived inability to perform the part. But if a candidate openly stated that performing was her *only* qualification to be president, her chances of election would stand at nil. In the real world, all the games of double- and triple-think remain with us. All we have done is come up with different reasons to resist having to think about them.

At least Ron Suskind's (possibly imaginary) Bush adviser was aware that faith is not enough when it comes to creating new realities: you need military force too. The ultimate difference between the magician and the politician is exactly that: the knowledge that he can, if it ever really becomes necessary, call on men with weapons—whether armies or police. This is his ace up the sleeve.

Political realities are always a murky combination of fear, desire, and double- and triple-think. You have to ask whether your average citizen believes the given political order is just, or whether she believes that everyone else believes it to be just.

> while you're studying that reality—judiciously, as you will—we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that's how things will sort out. We're history's actors … and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do."

For liberals, this passage confirmed everything they'd always wanted to believe. Buttons and T-shirts announcing "proud member of the reality-based community" soon appeared. The phrase became a shibboleth. But there is reason to believe that even here, things are not exactly what they seem. There have since been other journalists pointing out that Suskind's work often combines a suspiciously too-good-to-be-true quality with quotations whose sources, when they are identified, vehemently deny having said what he claims they said. Neither has anyone else ever claimed to have heard a Bush aide say anything remotely like this. It's possible that Suskind himself just made the whole story up.

Is the very idea of a "reality-based community" *itself* an extraordinary pretense? In fact, what is really striking about political debate in America today is that both the mainstream (read: extreme) Right and mainstream (read: moderate) Left have gone so far in creating their own realities that meaningful conversation has become impossible. There once was a time, for instance, when liberals and conservatives could argue about the root causes of poverty. Now they argue about whether poverty exists. Once they debated how to overcome racism. Now it's common to hear conservatives insist that, just as the only liars are those who accuse them of lying, the only racists are those who accuse others of racism. But the other side does the same thing. If a Christian conservative wants to discuss the dominance of mainstream U.S. culture by a secular-minded "liberal elite," or a Rand Paul supporter wishes to talk about the relation of the Federal Reserve and U.S. militarism, they will be met by a similar wall of incredulity.

It seems awfully strange for the mainstream Left to identify itself with the tradition of Enlightenment empiricism when its greatest avatars have spent the last generation trashing the very idea of objective reality. The liberal class does have its own equivalent to the church, after all, and it is the university. The university has its equivalent of theologians, who interpret the works of Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida with as much reverence as radical thinkers reserve for Karl Marx. And what do such authors do except trash the entire Enlightenment project?

Both the mainstream Democratic Left and the Republican Right, in other words, have long been working in the tradition of American humbug, hype, and hucksterism; but they have justified it in different ways. The Right has relied on a logic of faith and inner conviction; the Left once preferred a rhetoric of science, and now prefers some kind of poststructural anti-science—but both really come down to more or less the same thing.

Both are appropriate to the social base of their respective parties—the 1 percent that provides its funding, culture, and sensibilities. The Republicans are, notoriously, the party of business. It's hardly surprising that they idolize the inner confidence of the determined CEO and are willing to say whatever it takes to close the deal, and then to do whatever needs to be done to run the company. The Democrats are the party of what Barbara Ehrenreich long ago dubbed the "professional-managerial class"—a party of teachers, hospital administrators, lawyers, social workers, and psychotherapists. Hardly surprising, then, that the highest expression of their weltanschauung would be the works of Michel Foucault, for at least twenty years a god of contemporary U.S. academia, and a man who argued that professional discourses are forms of power that create the very realities they claim to administer.

Or that during the nineties and aughts, decades when the U.S. economy became more and more explicitly a financialized bubble economy, and Hollywood and especially Wall Street money poured into the Democratic party, the embrace of such ideas in intellectual circles became more and more extravagant.

I'm not suggesting any simple, one-to-one connection here. It's not as if left-leaning American academics were directly influenced by Wall Street funding. But the beauty of the system is that they didn't have to be. They lived just as much in a bubble-world as anyone else, and their existing theoretical dispositions, born of the everyday common sense of a professional world in which impression management is everything, reflected the logic of a bubble economy.

I well remember attending conferences and seminars just before the crash in 2008 where I listened to complex, jargon-filled presentations by students of cultural theory or science studies, or even radical political scientists. They claimed that the emergent logic of "preemption," "securitization," and "financialization" betokened not only the birth of unprecedented new forms of social power, but also a transformation of the very nature of reality itself. "We on the Left need to learn a thing or two from the neoliberals," I remember hearing one fresh-faced cultural studies grad student remark (cultural studies grad students often consider themselves the cutting edge of the global Left, even if they engage in no political activity), "because to be honest, in most ways, they're way ahead of us. I mean, these guys have figured out ways to create value out of nothing!"

At the time, I remember answering, "You know, Wall Street insiders have a term for that sort of thing. They refer to them as 'scams.'" But I don't think anyone was really listening. Most academic radicals had boxed themselves into a theoretical language according to which the very idea of a scam was almost meaningless. By flipping from science to anti-science, from En-