



THE LONG HISTORY OF “DOUBLETHINK”

A Response to Djelal Kadir’s “Agnotology
and the Know-Nothing Party: Then and Now”

Professor Djelal Kadir’s paper is a strong statement on one of the most powerful weapons the State possesses. The ability to control what people know, what they don’t know, and what they don’t know they don’t know, once was the privilege of the gods. Prometheus, the rebellious titan, was severely punished by Zeus for stealing from Olympus and giving to mankind the fire, or the knowledge of how to produce fire, which until then was the exclusive property of the immortals. The biblical Yahweh decreed the perpetual banishment of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden because of their thirst for knowledge, or at least Eve’s curiosity to unveil what the Tree of Wisdom was hiding from them. Such a sentence was worse than a death penalty, for it meant the exile from the perpetual happiness they enjoyed in paradise. It is no wonder that born-again Christians and other species of fundamentalists are fearful of anyone who defies the divine dictum: refrain from questioning and you will be admitted into the realm of blissful unknowingness, the heaven of agnosy where the ignoramus will forever live in oblivion. This fear of knowledge is, I have no doubt, the driving force in the growing consensus among US politicians of the need to promote a kind of university which focuses on STEM disciplines in detriment of the Humanities, for the latter instills in the youth curiosity, critical acumen, the capacity to discern what is right and what is wrong, what is true and what is false, the ability to read between the lines of the populist discourse that embraces ignorance as the apex of happiness: “I love

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the poorly educated! They are the smartest people, the most loyal people!," as Prof. Kadir reminds us Donald Trump recently declared in public. While Trump has become the paladin of illiteracy, he is far from being the only voice demanding what I would call a "blue collar" education that prepares the youth to follow the path of the unquestioning and obedient laborer. Thus, for example, presidential hopeful Senator Marco Rubio not long ago claimed at a Republican debate that philosophy majors would be better off going into welding. The value of a vocational degree, he argued, was greater than the payoff that comes with contemplating the cosmos: "For the life of me, I don't know why we have stigmatized vocational training [...] Welders make more money than philosophers [...]. We need more welders and less [sic!] philosophers."¹¹

Prof. Kadir accurately diagnoses the malady that has afflicted the United States ever since it was founded as a city upon a hill, a "model" society privileged by the Lord as the New Canaan of the New World, a promissory land where the Puritans were called to amend providential history by creating a perfect commonwealth with the Bible as its sole guide in all public and private affairs. A community of the chosen endowed with divine protection: "We shall find that the God of Israel is among us, when ten of us shall be able to resist a thousand of our enemies; when He shall make us a praise and glory that men shall say of succeeding plantations, 'may the Lord make it like that of New England.'" John Winthrop's words have resonated in US political speech, on both domestic and foreign affairs, ever since they were first pronounced onboard the *Arbella* in the year of the Lord of 1630, and George W. Bush's famous words in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, "You are either with us, or you are against us" are a good illustration of the Manichean rhetoric already deployed by Winthrop. Winthrop's sermon provided the cornerstone of a political project that finds its justification in the uncontested fact that: "God Almighty in his most holy and wise providence, hath so disposed of the condition of mankind, as in all times some must be rich, some poor, some high and eminent in power

1. Marco Rubio on Tuesday, November 10th, 2015 in the fourth GOP primary debate (Clayton Youngman).

and dignity; others mean and in subjection.” Thus, the rightful claim to the land by the “elect” and their unwavering will to defend their right from the hostile hordes of the enemy—and there are many “foes” to this providential design—are deeply inscribed in this foundational declaration of the legitimacy and holiness of the Puritan errand into the American wilderness—to paraphrase Perry Miller—an errand of “regeneration” that would require perpetual violence and bloodshed for its fulfilment, as Richard Slotkin convincingly argued in his classic study *Regeneration through Violence: The Myth of the American Frontier* (1973). In this respect, the newly elected US administration articulates its rhetoric in terms that fully evoke Winthrop’s foundational speech and, like G. W. Bush, divides the world into friends and foes, as made explicit by the newly elected US ambassador to the United Nations, Nikki Haley, whose first public statement reads: “Our goal with the administration is to show value at the UN, and the way to show value is to show our strength, show our full voice. Have the backs of our allies and make sure our allies have our backs as well [...] For those who don’t have our backs, we’re taking names, and we will make points to respond to that accordingly” (Roth).

And yet, as Prof. Kadir also reminds us, there has always been a countercurrent of resistance and contestation to the European appropriation of the New World for its imperial designs. Henry David Thoreau’s call to civil disobedience against the illegitimacy of the Mexican War is a good example of the dissenting voices that have opposed America’s Manifest Destiny and its systematic erasure of the Other, whether Native American, Mexican, Black, Catholic, Communist, or whatever escapes the narrow straightjacket of racial and ideological conformity. Two examples from the colonial period come to mind. One is Fray Bernardino de Sahagún and his monumental *Florentine Codex*, and the other is Roger Williams and his exceptional *A Key into the Language of America*. Sahagún and Williams defied the European hegemonic project of erasure of all things Native. Hernán Cortés decreed the systematic destruction of all Aztec codices and any other cultural artifact the Spaniards could lay their hands on, well aware of the fact that depriving the Aztecs of their historical memory was the best tool to subjugate the powerful nation and subordinate it

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to his imperialist enterprise. Meanwhile, Bernardino de Sahagún undertook the herculean task of preserving meticulously Aztec civilization, from its folkways to its myths and its deities, a communal undertaking by which Bernardino and his native disciples managed, even if unknowingly, to subvert the Spanish imperialist agenda by proving the cultural sophistication of the Aztec people. Moreover, Bernardino does not hide his growing skepticism and disappointment with the colonial project. No wonder the colossal work remained mostly unknown until the 19th century and Bernardino himself was the subject of suspicion from both the Inquisition and the State.

For the Puritan settlers of New England, Native Americans were an unwanted blotch in the tabula rasa, or blank page, of the New World on which they were to inscribe the final chapter of their providential history. Furthermore, they saw in the Indians fiendish beasts lurking in the wilderness, true agents of Satan ready to thwart the Puritan's saintly errand of regeneration in the land God had graciously bestowed upon them. Dissent from the official discourse was irremissibly punished with banishment, perpetual exile from the heavenly city upon the hill. And yet, Roger Williams, perhaps the most orthodox of all Puritans in this foundational period, however refused to endorse the providential project, for he was well aware of the illegitimacy of the whole scheme. And not only did Williams contest the assumption that the natives did not have any right to the land they inhabited, but he also vindicated a complete separation of church and state, which obviously was anathema for the ecclesiastical authorities who applied the biblical rule to the government of the colony. Instead, Williams befriended the Indians, learned their language, and refused to act as a Christianizing missionary: Thomas Morton and his *New English Canaan* (1637) is another monument to resistance against imperialist agendas. Morton is the first known American colonist to denounce the strategy of land seizure and ethnic cleansing that the Pilgrim Fathers and the London Company that financed them very soon implemented in New England. In other words, he undertook a doomed battle against corporate America, a case that vividly resembles the current situation in the United States under the newly elected presidency. A presidency that follows

Rumsfeld's praise of misinformation and imposed ignorance by the state, as Professor Djelal Kadir reminds us in his article. While I write this brief response to Dejal in the aftermath of the Presidential Inauguration on January 20 2017, the country is immersed in a controversy that encapsulates in a nutshell the election process for the 45th US President, one of the most divisive in history, perhaps only second to the election of Abraham Lincoln, which triggered the secession of seven Southern states and the subsequent Civil War. Like then, in the current political climate some states are hinting at seceding from the Union, California being the most outspoken in what has become to be known as the "Calexit." The day after the Presidential Inauguration, White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer angrily rebuked the press for showing pictures proving that the crowd attending the ceremony had been much smaller than in Obama's 2009 inauguration. Spicer argued that Trump had attracted "the largest audience to ever witness an inauguration—period—both in person and around the globe." Spicer later said he was not only talking about the crowds in Washington, D.C., but also people viewing on television and streaming video online (NBC News, January 27, 2017). A day later one of President Donald Trump's aides, Kellyanne Conway, defended the Press Secretary by arguing that Spicer had provided some "alternative facts" in his briefing, a concept that from a logical point of view is obviously absurd and yet, from a political point of view, is highly revelatory of the real agenda of the new presidency. In his novel *1984*, a book that is experiencing a second revival in the United States and elsewhere, George Orwell would call it *doublethink*. While I have my doubts about Spicer's, Conway's, and even Trump's knowledge of Orwell's dystopian classic, this new governing team has intuitively learned the usefulness of doublethink to manipulate the masses, and I am quite certain that in time they will perfect the strategy of this duplicity of thought and its best tool, the *Newspeak*, a controlled language whose grammar was designed by Orwell himself. Little wonder it is that Orwell's classic dystopia is currently experiencing a revival and climbing the best-sellers lists, at a time when the Know-Nothing Party and its racist agenda, as Prof. Kadir reminds us in his paper, is once again spreading its tentacles to asphyxiate the democratic institutions of the United

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States. As I write these closing remarks, the new administration has imposed overnight a ban to immigration from some countries that have been classified as dangerous for the safety of America. Like the Know-Nothing Party of old and its strategy of demonizing Irish and German Catholics seeking political asylum, as well Mexicans and Indians, the current presidency has decided to turn certain nationalities, and certain religious faith, into the scapegoat for all the evils that threaten the City upon a Hill and its divine errand into the wilderness. Interesting times, frightening times, but hardly new.

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