BOOK REVIEW

The Disinformation Age: The Collapse of Liberal Democracy in the United States

By Eric Cheyfitz, New York: Routledge, 2016, 308 pages. ISBN-13: 978-0415789356.

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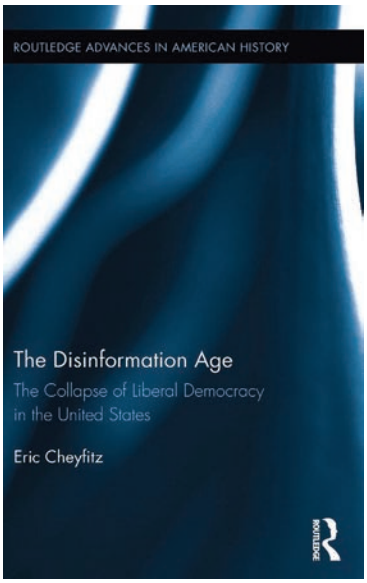

As of this writing, the GOP-controlled Congress is working to pass a tax bill forwarded by the GOP-controlled Trump administration that is being hailed by many news sites as a massive giveaway to the wealthiest few at the expense of lower and middle-income people. It is also a backdoor method to erode the Obama-era Affordable Care Act, since Republicans failed miserably at passing a bill to dismantle the popular health insurance program, in an effort to support one of Trump's top campaign promises. At the end of the day, there are no surprises here because the patterns are predictable. In theory, liberals tend to favor social programs for the more marginalized in society, which require tax dollars to fund, while conservatives favor cutting taxes for their wealthy buddies while social programs gradually shrink, all the while pretending that everyone will benefit. Meanwhile, trickle-down economics has long been discredited from the International Monetary Fund, to Forbes Magazine. The homeless population grows, disproportionately high rates of American children live in poverty among developed nations, and the income gap between rich and poor continues to expand as the middle class continues a downward spiral. None of this is news. But the problems are beyond "liberals are the good guys and conservatives are the bad guys." The promises of a liberal democracy that encapsulate the American Dream are in other words, more fiction than fact. The question is why do so many still believe in it?

Eric Cheyfitz's illuminating new book offers an explanation, and he does it through the metaphor of George Orwell's now-classic book, *Nineteen Eighty-Four (1984)*. In Orwell's 1949 book, which describes a world where war is peace, freedom is slavery, and ignorance is strength, the parallels with our current Trumpian moment are more than a little disturbing. But according to Cheyfitz, it would be a mistake to think that this "doublethink," or what I would call our collective cognitive dissonance, is anything new. What's been called the "Information Age," beginning around 1980, is really an age of disinformation that "blur[s] the boundary between fact and fiction" (pg. 7). Despite the rhetoric of the U.S. as a land of equal opportunity, for example, American economic inequality is no accident, but is at the core of the American project going back to the founding fathers, and is only part of larger narratives that fictitiously construct the U.S. as a place of exceptional democracy. American exceptionalism is, he tells us, a "hallucinatory structure…[that] the two dominant political parties continue to deploy…Indeed, one might say that the

more hallucinatory the narrative becomes, the more fervently the two parties invest in its rhetoric" (pg.8-9).

Cheyfitz's arguments—as well as the solutions he offers—are historically based, and embedded "implicitly and explicitly in Native American history and epistemologies" (pg. 9). His analysis is theoretically dense at times, especially in chapter one in what he calls the end of ideology, where he invokes the French political theorist Louis Althusser to frame his contention that the two political parties are really just a single corporate party. In chapter two, he traces the history of the erasure of economic justice from the Constitution, which leads him to study (and counter) the exceptionalism narratives of American innocence in chapters three and four, in the literary form of the jeremiad. Here we encounter the Christian Pequot historian William Apess, who wrote about American imperialism in the early nineteenth century, calling out its genocide against American Indians and African slavery. Cheyfitz compares Apess to the scathing critique of modern American life of Reverend Jeremiah Wright, whose congregation includes Barak Obama. The jeremiad promises redemption for God's chosen people, and although Apess and Wright rail against the state, they still presume national redemption is possible, a claim Cheyfitz counters through a reading of Herman Melville's rebuke of American innocence in his 1855 book *Benito Cereno* at a time when genocide poses as Manifest Destiny.

In chapter five, titled "Barak Obama and the Erasure of Race", Cheyfitz shows how Obama perpetuated narratives of American innocence while erasing race as a critical category in national policy debates. Performing the work of instilling confidence in an economy that was about to collapse, the illusion of equal opportunity that a black president inspired (what Cheyfitz calls "normative color-blindness") "is a strategy of avoidance that quickly becomes a position of denial of race conflict in the United States" (pg. 197). Instead, race conflict is conflated with class conflict, while police violence against African Americans continues to spiral out of control.

All of this leads Cheyfitz to a critical interrogation of capitalism in chapters six and seven. Here he argues that the failure of national confidence in a failing capitalist economy results in increased militarization of the state out of fear of potential civil unrest due to rising income inequality, connecting the "war on terror" with disinformation as a form of distraction. The problem with capitalism is its inability to imagine anything beyond itself. Returning to Melville, Cheyfitz engages the 1857 novel to draw parallels between confidence and con-game, likening the U.S. economy to a Ponzi scheme which is built upon a foundation of Native American genocide, the still "as yet unspoken/unspeakable ground of American Exceptionalism" (pg. 13).

Finally, in chapter eight, Cheyfitz ruminates on what a just society looks like. Recognizing capitalism's failures, not the least of which includes the degradation of the environment that it creates, Cheyfitz offers a way out of the insanity of capitalism. He finds the only realistic antidote is in indigenous philosophy and knowledge found in the Americas. He draws from the best of native epistemologies in both the North and South to find the possibility of an environmentally and economically sustainable society.

Cheyfitz is among a growing chorus of voices who are turning to indigenous worldviews for answers to the seemingly intractable problems of modernity. This among other things is what I like about the book the most. It's a dense read and probably not for the casual reader, but let's face it: academics are some of the most difficult to convince of the legitimacy of indigenous knowledge. It is for them that this book seems to be written. ■

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