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[www.afgazad.com](http://www.afgazad.com)

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## America's growing anti-intellectualism

**Paul Rosenberg concludes his analysis of critical deficits leading to the "Occupy" movement sweeping the nation.**

Paul Rosenberg  
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The first high-profile article to offer a sensible explanation of Occupy Wall Street came from anthropologist David Graeber, author of the recently-published book, *Debt: The First 5,000 Years*. In his op-ed, "Occupy Wall Street rediscovers the radical imagination", he wrote:

"We are watching the beginnings of the defiant self-assertion of a new generation of Americans, a generation who are looking forward to finishing their education with no jobs, no future, but still saddled with enormous and unforgivable debt... Just as in Europe, we are seeing the results of colossal social failure. The occupiers are the very sort of people, brimming with ideas, whose energies a healthy society would be marshaling to improve life for everyone. Instead, they are using it to envision ways to bring the whole system down.

"But the ultimate failure here is of imagination. What we are witnessing can also be seen as a demand to finally have a conversation we were all supposed to have back in 2008.

"There was a moment, after the near-collapse of the world's financial architecture, when anything seemed possible. Everything we'd been told for the last decade turned out to be a lie...

"It seemed the time had come to rethink everything: the very nature of markets, money, debt; to ask what an 'economy' is actually for. This lasted perhaps two weeks. Then, in one of the most colossal failures of nerve in history, we all collectively clapped our hands over our ears and tried to put things back as close as possible to the way they'd been before."

Actually, Graeber is understating the case, in at least two ways. First, the lies have been with us far longer than just a single decade. They go back at least 30 years, to the elections of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, the later of whom became known as "Tina" for her favorite catch-phrase attack on the imagination: "There Is No Alternative". Second, it was not just a failure of nerve, and a failure of imagination. It was a failure of reason and of democracy as well. It was, in a sense, an inevitable failure, since those three decades have seen us create enormous deficits of reason, imagination and democracy which made it impossible for us to mobilise the necessary resources at the moment they were needed most.

I agree with Graeber that now we've been granted a second chance. But to make the most of it, we need to understand the hole we've dug ourselves into. That's what this series, America's 13 Deficits is all about: understanding the hole. And the last three deficits - reason, imagination and democracy - are, in a sense, the most important of all, for they are the most basic resources for finding our way out.

[Part One](#) examined fiscal deficits - short-term, mid-term and long-term federal deficits, along with state and local deficits. [Part Two](#) considered physical deficits in infrastructure and ecosystem services. Part Three dealt with three structural/functional deficits: the sustainability deficit, the time/jobs deficit and the equality deficit. These final three deficits are cognitive and political, and the key to overcoming all three of them is simply the will to do so.

### **The Reason/Critical Thinking Deficit**

America has always had a critical thinking deficit, in that it has a long tradition of anti-intellectualism. This is particularly perverse, maddening and contradictory, since America's Founders were the most intellectual group that ever founded any nation we know of, and the desire to foster free and critical thinking, both in government and in the society at large, was one of their notable goals, as a direct consequence of the Enlightenment heritage on which America's Founders depended.

This philosophy prized individual critical inquiry, as well as institutions-formal and informal-which enabled individual efforts to be joined together into a far more powerful whole. This outlook was crucially important to the creation of a new nation on a new hemisphere, confident enough to establish itself on a new political foundation with some ancient roots, but fashioned with its own original design. Mere imitation of the past was rejected as a guiding principal. So, too, was blind reliance on the fantasy of individual political genius. Instead, the spirit and process of critical inquiry was crucial to how the new nation was conceived.

The basic architecture of "separation of powers", for example, was intended to prevent the accumulation of all power into the hands of any unaccountable group or faction - and thus to put a premium on the process of advancing ideas that could pass the muster of critical examination by the widest possible range of parties involved. Similarly, steps were taken to insulating of government from dogmatic religious influence. Religious tests for public office were banned in the Constitution itself, and separation of church and state was formalised in the First Amendment's guarantee of religious freedom, which similarly guaranteed freedom of speech,

freedom of assembly and freedom of the press - all intimately connected to the individual and collective exercise of critical reason.

And yet, despite all this, there was always an anti-Enlightenment, anti-intellectual side of America as well. And that side has always created needless deficits in critical thinking, hampering America's ability to fully realize its promise.

In 1994, the anti-intellectual forces won a substantial victory when Republicans won control of the House of Representatives for the first time in 40 years. One of the earliest and most profound changes introduced under Speaker Newt Gingrich was the elimination of the [Office of Technology Assessment](#). The OTA, first established in 1972, provided Congress with objective and authoritative analysis of the complex scientific and technical issues of the late 20th century, and was widely imitated in the establishment of similar legislative offices around the world.

It was both a product and a promoter of a mature analytical approach to governmental problem-solving, which strengthened respect for a dispassionate truth-seeking approach. Its purpose was not to coldly dictate policy outcomes, but rather to provide reliable, common factual and analytical foundations on which people with different interests, opinions and values could depend in an effort to work out commonly-agreeable policies. It was, in short, a concrete expression of the Enlightenment rationality that informed the shared worldview of America's Founding Fathers.

Thus, Gingrich's elimination of the OTA represented a crucial turning away from the idea of valuing, promoting and relying on the power of critical thought as a key ingredient in the process of self-governing. Of course this is not to pretend that America was ever perfect-or even near-perfect-in pursuing enlightened policy primarily based on critical reason. Basic flaws in our ability to even recognise the full humanity of women and ethnic, racial and religious minorities are but the most vivid and embarrassing proofs of how far from perfect we have been. And yet, the OTA was established in 1972, immediately after what was arguably the most significant decade in American history for systematically correcting those grievous shortcomings. Abolishing the OTA epitomised a shift in political values away from critical thinking and toward raw political power which has coincided with a prolonged period of political dysfunction, during which all the other deficits described in this series have become far more serious burdens on the general welfare of the nation.

Although Republicans clearly took the lead in turning away from reason, the list of major blunders since then implicates both parties, with major foreseeable blunders including the 1999 repeal of the Glass-Steagall Act, the Depression-era law preventing commercial banks from involvement in risky speculation, the failure to prevent 9/11 despite substantial forewarning, and the followup response of going to war against people not responsible for the attacks, the passage of the Bush tax cuts, failure to prevent the housing bubble and collapse, and prolonged inaction to the threat of global warming. As noted in Part One, the entire mid-term deficit is due to such blunders.

While measuring the presence or absence of critical thinking is a challenging goal, it should not be considered impossible, particularly in light of an explosion of research in cognitive science

over the past 20 to 30 years. Indeed, the state of California once developed educational standards for the teaching of critical thinking-standards that conservative Republicans organised to get rid of. Hence, the primary challenge is *not* the difficulty of defining and discovering how to measure our critical thinking deficit - rather, it is how to muster the political will and power to once again dedicate ourselves to increasing our resources of critical thought, rather than destroying them.

### **The Imagination Deficit**

Our imagination deficit is closely tied to our critical thinking deficit. Minds that are perpetually muddled in uncritically accepted ideas and pseudo-facts, incapable of grasping clear-cut truths are hardly prepared to grasp projected possibilities and judge them soundly. This was strikingly obvious in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, for example. Calls for critically examining the reasons behind the attacks were quickly demonised, with a leading role played by a centre-right organisation - the American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA) - that pretended to stand for academic excellence.

Calls for imagining a pro-active, rather than a reactive response were quickly dismissed as well. A Gallup Poll conducted immediately after the attacks found only a bare majority favoring a military response, rather than a criminal justice response - in sharp contrast to most of the rest of the world. There was clearly an opening for imagining a different world, a different way of dealing with destructive violence. But that opening was quickly closed. There was no significant process of critical inquiry and discussion between 9/11 and the initiation of war against Afghanistan, nor was there any serious concern to imagine other possible courses of action. Things were arguably even worse before going to war with Iraq less than a year and a half after that. The careless disregard for facts, much less for reasoned argument, precluded any possibility of trying to imagine alternative approaches - even though there was no need to imagine such alternatives on our own. All we had to do was be willing to entertain alternatives that others had not just dreamed up, but actually implemented.

Failure of imagination is equally evident in our prolonged refusal to act on global warming. Collectively, we have proven incapable of imagining either the future we are headed for, or the alternative pathways that could save us, even though scientists and economists, using critical reason, have developed very good pictures of what lies ahead. Thus, the problem is not a lack of information, but a lack of capacity to grasp that information as a coherent whole, which is the very foundation of our capacity for imagination.

Finally, as Graeber's powerful op-ed reminds us, we've suffered a grievous lack of imagination in coping with the global financial crises, which has only somewhat abated for a while. This failure is most astonishing, considering that we already know what is needed from the experience of multiple nations during the Great Recession - yet we simply cannot imagine doing something similar today. The necessary and humane has become utterly unimaginable to us. Our imagination deficit precludes us from even considering the real solutions to the other deficits that confront us.

### **Political Deficits - The Democracy Deficit**

Democracy is not just a good idea in and of itself, it is also generally conducive to positive policy options. Anti-democratic forces tend to advance the narrow self-interests of those they represent. If the un-represented suffer as a result, there is nothing surprising about it. Of course, democracy *per se* is no guarantee of good outcomes, but it does significantly improve the odds of such outcomes, particularly when it is paired with protections of individuals and minority groups by a framework of rights, in the form known as liberal democracy. The more that a wide range of people's views and interests are openly considered, the more likely their best interests will be served. Thus, any deficit or deficiency in realising broadly democratic self-government is likely to cause harm, or at least fall short of the optimal good that might otherwise be achieved. Deficits in democracy produce needless deficits in all other realms as well, as surely as night follows day.

America's democracy deficit can be seen in a number of ways. One is simply to compare its relatively abysmal level of voting participation to other nations. From 1960 to 1995, more than 20 countries had turnouts higher than 80 per cent for lower house elections, while the US averaged just 48 per cent - a gap of over 30 per cent. The US average was even lower for off-year elections without a presidential race.

A second view of America's democracy deficit comes from looking at class bias in voting. [One cross-national study](#) of late 1990s elections found almost no class bias in high turnout countries, while declines in turnout overall correlated with increased gaps between voters in the highest and lowest income quintiles. Still, there was only one country with a lower overall turnout than the US - Switzerland - and its income gap was 20 per cent, compared to a much higher 35 per cent in the US.

A third view of America's democracy deficit comes from looking at electoral systems. With only a few scattered exceptions, US elections are and always have been winner-take-all, compared to proportional representation systems that predominate in almost all other advanced democracies. In a winner-take-all system, whoever wins the most votes wins all the representation, while proportional representation gives roughly equal representation to winners and losers alike. The winner-take-all system tends to discourage voters and even political organisers in areas where they are unlikely to win a majority - thus creating long-term disincentives to democratic participation.

A fourth view of America's democracy deficit comes from looking at its institutions. The most blatant, high-profile example is the US Senate, which is comprised of two senators from each state. Thus California, with a 2010 population of over 37 million, is represented by two senators, while the 21 least populated states have a combined population of just over 35 million - two million less than California, but are represented by 42 senators. Making matters even worse, the senate has a plethora of anti-democratic rules, the most well-known of which is the filibuster, which allows a minority of 40 senators to block any action, except on narrowly-tailored budget-related bills. Thus, a population less than that of California can block almost all legislation in the US senate, and there's nothing that representatives of the other 274 million Americans can do about it. In fact, there are many senate actions - such as voting on judicial nominees - that can be blocked by just a single senator ... anonymously!

Yet, astonishingly, all of these democracy deficits are dwarfed by the deficit due to economic special interests. In Part One, I described how our long-term, multi-decade federal deficit is due entirely to oligopolies, powerful economic special interests that thrive at the expense of the general welfare. I cited the analysis presented in 2010 paper, "[A World Upside Down? Deficit Fantasies in the Great Recession](#)", by political scientist Thomas Ferguson and economist Robert Johnson, which identifies three oligopolies in particular - the military-industrial complex, the medical-industrial complex, and the financial sector. However, at a deeper level of analysis, Ferguson had earlier explained how organised economic special interests largely control American democracy, creating a constant condition of democracy deficit, regardless of outward appearances, and our constant pretension to be the foremost democracy in the world.

Ferguson presented extensive historical evidence in his 1995 book, *Golden Rule: The Investment Theory of Party Competition and the Logic of Money-Driven Political Systems*, but the basic pattern is readily grasped, and witnessed in politics virtually every day: Small groups of wealthy donors with narrow policy goals are far more able to realise those goals than large groups with broad goals, up to and including the entire public at large. This control traces back to the costs of political involvement. Voters can only choose between alternatives presented to them, while major donors can predetermine who and what those alternatives will be.

In a vivid imaginary illustration, Ferguson describes an electorate composed of 3 per cent who are vehemently anti-union textile manufacturers, controlling all the wealth, while the other 97 per cent are pro-union. In a two-party election with a law permitting unionisation as the only issue, Ferguson argues, neither party would advocate for the law advocate with 97 per cent support, since they literally couldn't afford to do so.

The parallel to our actual politics today are striking. "Every poll I know of has big chunks of the public, sometimes even Tea Party members, opposed to cuts in Social Security," Ferguson told me last spring. "Medicare appears to show the same pattern, too. And, the percentage of the public that wants to concentrate on the deficit is very small versus truly large numbers of Americans putting 'jobs' at the top of their priority lists." Yet, under the threat of default this summer, the priorities of the American people were not just ignored, but openly mocked for months on end.

This is what a democracy deficit looks like. And it is, quite literally, a road to ruin. Eventually, even the special interests will be destroyed by their own short-sighted folly.

The Occupy Wall Street movement stands in dramatic contrast to all that, in at least two fundamental ways. First, one of their primary themes is "We Are The 99 per cent" - the vast majority whose welfare is systematically ignored, just as Ferguson explains. Second, their method of organising is radically democratic, based on a model of participatory democracy that goes all the way back to ancient Greece, but whose spirit is much closer to that of Quaker communities, whose long influence on racial and gender justice movements in America played a particularly important, if unheralded, role in the civil rights, feminist and anti-war movements of the 1960s.

While direct democracy practises have played a significant role in social change movements since then, they've also become a significant, though largely unrecognised part of the American political process. New England town meetings have always been one example of direct democracy that is recognised, and the town meetings of Vermont have proven particularly important in raising to prominence otherwise neglected issues. But similar sorts of community meetings have become commonplace adjuncts of the public policy process in many other parts of the nation. They are almost exclusively advisory in nature, but their influence is undeniable. For example, in Los Angeles, a decade ago, the city charter was amended to create a system of "neighbourhood councils". While their power is advisory only, and they have their own elected boards, they hold regular public meetings where the spirit of direct democracy has tentatively emerged in one of the most unlikely of places.

If America is to find its way once again, its people cannot rely on simply delegating this task to others - to think, to dream or to act in their behalf. "Occupy Wall Street" or by occupied by it. That is the simple choice we face. The one per cent will never have the best interests of the 99 per cent in mind. This isn't just true in America - it's just as true of the Arab world as well, where the leadership of the Arab Spring helped re-awaken the American people. Which is why addressing our democracy deficit stands at the centre-point of dealing with all the rest of our deficits as well - not just for America, but for all the world.