

MAGA is the Visible Face of a Parasite Deeply Embedded in American Society

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Theses

- 1. We are all victims of ruinous network effects that are beyond our remediation because they are beyond our collective comprehension. The current climate-change-induced global extinction and America's march toward authoritarianism are both examples of this.**
- 2. Remediation requires understanding, which, in this case, is being inhibited by the subject-matter-stovepipe organizations of our intellectual communities.**

A Note to the Reader

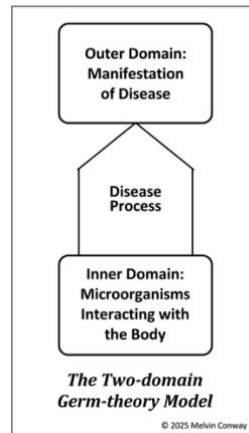
The primary purpose of this essay is to help us move the anti-authoritarian movement in America forward rather than just sideways. (The more general messages of the two theses stated above are discussed in the Appendices.)

All the comments I see on the fact that we're all now running the "authoritarian playbook" are simply *observations*; there are no effective *prescriptions*. Many prescriptions exist, are being practiced, and might indeed be necessary, for example, fighting every illegal Executive Order in the Courts and peacefully demonstrating, but they are merely reactive and don't reverse the damage.

What it takes to move the action forward, in my view, is a more specific understanding of what is happening at a level of detail that identifies points of vulnerability and opportunities for intervention. But our understanding of how current American politics actually works is nowhere near there yet.

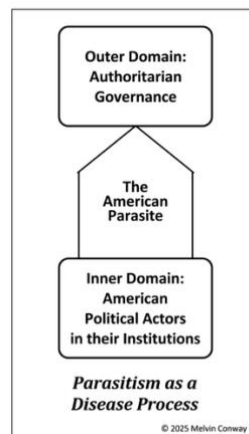
However, we have a powerful source of inspiration: the [germ theory of disease](#), which, two centuries or so ago, replaced disease concepts like "bad air" and interventions like bleeding and exorcism. Some crucial experiments and the availability of the microscope changed our thinking: we were forced to walk and chew gum cognitively by thinking simultaneously about disease in *two domains of perception*. I'll call them here the *inner domain* and the *outer domain*.

In the case of infectious diseases the inner domain is the world of the (usually invisible) microorganisms, such as bacteria and viruses, and the outer domain is the world of the disease's (often observable) manifestations in the patient, such as fever. The *disease* is the *process that connects* phenomena in the inner domain to phenomena in the outer domain.



The argument in this essay focuses on America's march toward authoritarianism. It continues the need to think in two domains, but it is based on another concept from biology: [parasitism](#). The word "parasite" might appear as an epithet in political commentary, but it is used here in a formally correct and value-neutral way.

In the present argument, parasitism is the disease process, America's move toward authoritarianism is the external manifestation of the disease, and the actions of all the political actors (seen and unseen) are what is going on in the inner domain. The challenge is to figure out the details of the disease processes that cause the inner-domain activity to manifest as authoritarianism.



In order to develop the concept toward usefulness I have relied on intuitions gained from practicing [object design](#) and from using formal techniques (called in other disciplines “[abstraction](#)” and “[patterns](#)”) that are common to mathematics and some design disciplines, but not to political discussion.

This argument might also seem counterintuitive because, at times, it calls into question the very notion of cause and effect that is taken for granted in Law and everyday reasoning: [proximate and ultimate causation](#). This notion works at small scales but fails to work, and it actually can mislead us in systems with *connectivity at scale*.

Connectivity at scale (called “network effects” in Thesis 1 above) can lead to unexpected phenomena. Even in a completely unbiased system, it naturally leads to marketplace inequities^a. We have case studies of connectivity at scale when the network contains biased actors in the cases of the [Internet Research Agency](#) and [Cambridge Analytica](#)^b.

Current social theory is doubly disadvantaged. It has not had the two-domain cognitive awakening that medicine has, and it is blind to network effects. That double disadvantage has led us to Thesis 1.

We need a theory of politics that augments our conventional ideas about cause and effect at scale and with high interconnectivity. I’m not offering such a theory here, but you will see a few plausible thought experiments that suggest that such a theory is possible, at least in part.

I’ll be presenting this argument in compact form as an outline, immediately below. Following the outline will be a set of appendices that elaborate on some of the argument’s unusual assertions.

^a See Example 1 of “[NEEDED: SYSTEMS THINKING IN PUBLIC AFFAIRS](#)”

^b See “[Mind*ck](#)” by Christopher Wylie and [The Great Hack](#).

Outline of the Argument

- I. **American society is inhabited by a parasite**; what does that mean?
 - a. The implementation of Project 2025 seems a bit chaotic, occasionally comical, because some political actions are leading, and will lead, to outcomes (for example, election results) that work against the participants' political interests.
 - b. This assessment of imperfect purposefulness is only partially correct; something deeper and less obvious is also going on.
 - c. What's missing in our analysis is that we think in terms of political actions as designed toward individual or group interests. Individuals/groups design their actions to create outcomes that these individuals/groups want, and we see failure when this doesn't happen.
 - d. But researchers are finding in Nature that, at scale, what we see as failure is commonplace. (Example: parasite kills host.) These findings have something to teach us. The connection between individual actions and aggregate outcomes can be counterintuitive and difficult to analyze using conventional methods.
 - e. One thing, however, that evidence makes clear: the two basic processes of the biological Parasitism model that connect a Parasite to its Host, **Extraction of Resources** and **Disabling of Defenses**, describe ***every aspect*** of what we are seeing happening in current American politics.^c
 - f. We need a new approach to political reasoning in order to understand the larger process that's going on, and, with that new understanding, to reason perhaps differently about intervention.
 - g. America's parasite is a non-concrete entity of a higher order than the political actors about which we conventionally reason. Absent purposeful intervention, this parasite will persist regardless of the individual fates of politicians and their parties.

^c See Appendix A: The Parasitism Pattern

- h. If this is true, and if we view our parasite as a mortal enemy (I do), then the conventional political/legal approaches to intervention being used today won't solve our problem.
 - i. We need a new approach. This essay begins to suggest one.
- II. **Our American parasite is not a person or organization.**
- a. It can perhaps be described as a ***network of processes*** that are deeply embedded in almost all of American politics.
 - b. Each of these processes leads either to **Extraction of Resources** from American society or to **Disabling its Defenses**. These processes don't always lead to individual political success but they work together for the ***survival of the parasite***.
 - c. Even though the parasite is not a concrete political player in the conventional sense, in many ways it acts like one with its own interests.
 - d. We need a new discipline about ***Collections of Intercommunicating Actors*** that can give us insights in order to understand the connections between individual actions and aggregate outcomes.^{d e}
 - e. Two thought-experiments that illustrate this need
 1. What is the cause of the destruction of a cherry orchard by a murmuration of starlings?^f
 2. The law governing markets requires corporate officers to grow public corporations indefinitely without regard to destructive global consequences.^g

^d See Appendix D: Collections of Intercommunicating Actors and Emergence

^e See Appendix E: Science, Emergence, Object Design, and Simulation

^f See Appendix B: Thought Experiment: Cherry Orchard Destruction by Starlings

^g See Appendix C: Thought Experiment: Scaling Up Adam Smith's Invisible Hand is Changing our Climate

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<https://melconway.com/Home/pdf/BonaFides.pdf>

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III. **This parasite has been growing in America for a half century.**

- a. In 1971 the Lewis Powell Memorandum (“Attack on American Free Enterprise System”)^h characterized American society in terms of ***economic segments competing for power***. This characterization was reinforced by influencers such as Milton Friedman and Ronald Reagan, who repeatedly described Government as a competitor to, rather than as an agent of, the population.
- b. The Powell memo also outlined an implementation strategy for corporate interests to take control of the political process.
- c. The Powell economic-segment-oriented characterization was prettified and made politically acceptable by the Reagan/Thatcher conservative movements and the Heritage Foundation, which changed the framing from *control* to *individual freedom*. However, the original goal of segment dominance remained.
- d. Powell’s dominance strategy has been supported by dark money from large donors.
- e. The Powell memo coincided with the beginning of a major shift in American politics to the right, but it did not cause that shift. It was a response to an invitation, and was one of many signs of a new consensus that was already in formation.
- f. The long-term implementation of this new consensus has built the current parasite, one statute and one court decision at a time. This must be understood as an emergent phenomenon.ⁱ
- g. Understanding the internal dynamics of the political consensus-formation process must be one of the outcomes of the study of Collections of Intercommunicating Actors; it can lead to insights into points of intervention.
- h. See the display of graphical evidence of the consequences over a half century of the parasite’s ***Extraction of Resources*** and ***Disabling of Defenses*** behavior.^j

^h See Appendix G: The Powell Memo

ⁱ See Appendix E: Science, Emergence, Object Design, and Simulation.

^j See Appendix F: The Social Phase Transition Following World War II.

IV. What are the concrete manifestations of “Extraction of American Resources” and “Disabling of American Defenses”?

a. “Resources”. What is the parasite extracting and using from American society?

- i. The parasite is doing what it has been doing for a half century: gathering up ***political control***, (in particular political control by large corporations). It appears that midway in this history there was a merger between (largely corporate) groups interested in political control and (largely cultural) groups identified with Christian Nationalism.^{k l m}

The extracted resource has evolved from political control to social control.

1. Powell made political control the objective central to his 1971 memo.
2. Its success is clear in Supreme Court decisions such as Citizens United.
- ii. Current comment on the 2025 One Big Beautiful Bill Act (OBBBA) emphasizes transferring wealth from middle- and working-class people to billionaires and corporations. In my view, this emphasis is a distraction; *the American Oligarchy is a major agent used by the parasite, but it is not the parasite.*

^k See the movie “[Bad Faith](#)”.

^l See the documentary “[Anne Nelson: inside the Radical Right's Shadow Network](#)”

^m <https://futurism.com/billionaires-corporate-dictatorship>

- b. “Defenses”. The parasite depletes American society’s defenses by weakening individuals and institutions.
 - i. Downstream effects of large-scale destruction of Government services
 - 1. Effects of DOGE:
 - a.
 - 2. Crippling of NOAA, FEMA, etc.
 - ii. Individual impoverishment, increased maldistribution of wealth and income.
 - 1. See graphics showing changes since the 1970s.
 - 2. In OBBBA, financial impacts on people of loss of health insurance.
 - 3. Transfer of proceeds of improved productivity from Labor to Capital since the mid-1970s (see graphic).
 - 4. Destruction of the Labor movement since 1980 (see graphic).
 - iii. Policies against individual and public health.
 - 1. Reduction of funding for Medicaid (and to some extent, Medicare).
 - 2. Reduction of support for SNAP benefits.
 - 3. HHS anti-vax, anti-public-health vaccine policies.
 - 4. Loss of rural health services consequent to Medicaid cuts.
 - iv. Anti-expertise, anti-education moves.
 - 1. Attacks on universities.
 - a. Withdrawal of research funds
 - i. Dispersal of faculty
 - ii. Loss of public knowledge
 - b. Discouragement of students from abroad
 - 2. Attacks on large law firms

V. Is this parasitism model science or magical thinking?

- a. We won't know until we have credible hypotheses that show causal connections from inner-domain to outer-domain processes in the areas of interest.
- b. The topic is very large and almost completely unexplored.
- c. I have done a few thought experimentsⁿ and believe that we can create some science in a few selected topics.
- d. We must not be put off by the fact that this disease is an abstraction. We know how to deal with abstractions; *all diseases are abstractions*.
- e. The big, and most interesting question: Why would people do (en masse) stuff that's obviously against their principles of not in their interests? (e.g., the Republican Congress.)
 - i. There are precedents.
 - ii. I believe there can be, and I trust that there will be, a general theory.
- f. The general need is for a ***pattern language for emergence***^o.
- g. My greatest concern is Thesis 2; we are not organized to examine this topic. The research community and its personal incentives are not well structured for such multi-discipline inquiry.^p

ⁿ See Appendices B, C.

^o Pattern languages in [Architecture](#), and in [Software Design](#).

^p See Appendix H: C.P. Snow's Two Cultures

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Appendix E: Science, Emergence, Object Design, and Simulation

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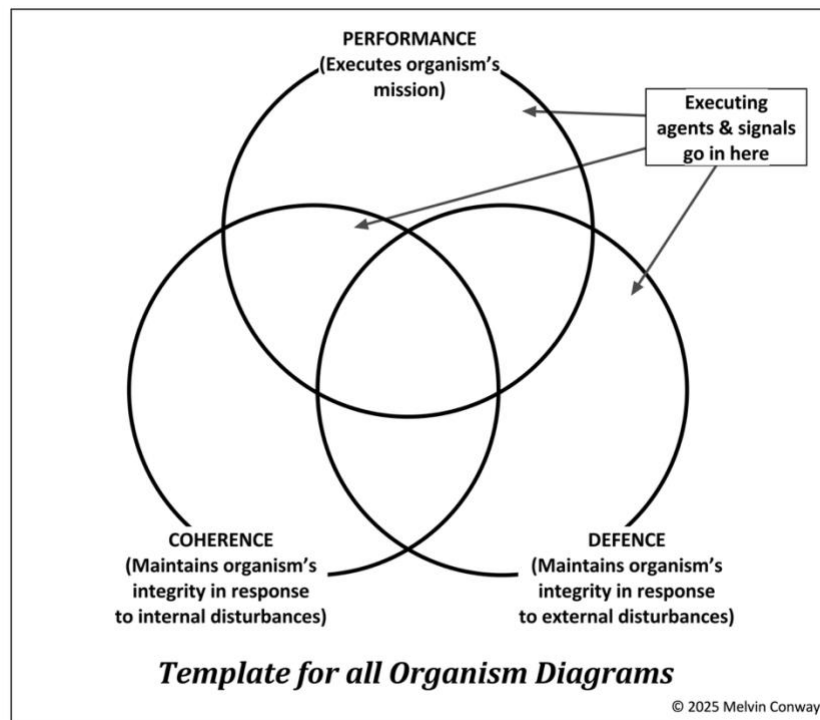
Appendices

Appendix A: The Parasitism Pattern

The **Organism abstraction** captures three functions common to all organisms: Performance, Coherence, and Defence (consistency requires that I use the British spelling). Each function of any instance of the abstraction is performed by *actors* (I call them agents here) within the organism that *communicate* with each other.

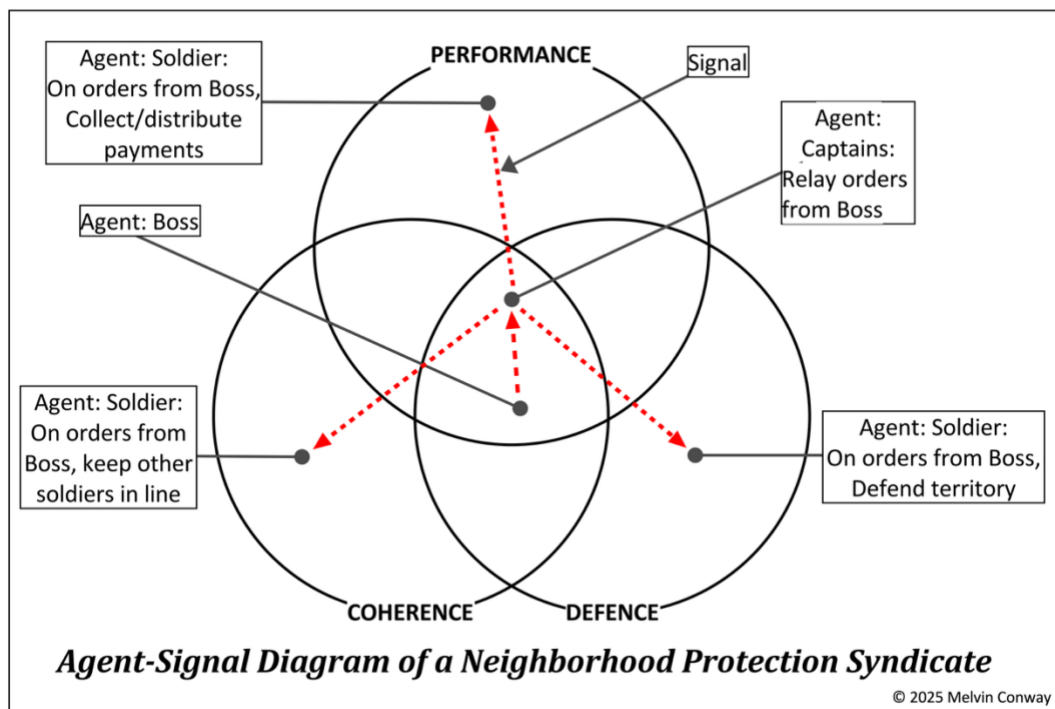
1. Performance: The agents within this function perform the mission of the organism. For example, the mission of a Mafia protection syndicate is to extract money from shopkeepers, who are kept in line by the soldiers of the syndicate.
2. Coherence: The agents within this function maintain the integrity of the organism by defending against threats from inside the organism. The Mafia, for example, has a code of silence that is enforced by its soldiers: “You rat, you die”.
<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Omert%C3%A0>
Fear is an important tool in the implementation of Coherence. For example, if a Mafia soldier is found talking to the wrong people, he doesn’t know which of the other soldiers has been ordered by the Boss to watch him, report back, and possibly “correct” his behavior. This tool is being used in the US Congress right now.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dF9g0W1qubU>
3. Defence: The agents within this function maintain the integrity of the organism by defending against threats from outside the organism. The soldiers of a Mafia syndicate can be used to defend incursions into the organization’s territory by neighboring syndicates.

The graphic of the Organism abstraction represents its three functions as three overlapping containers, each containing its respective agents.

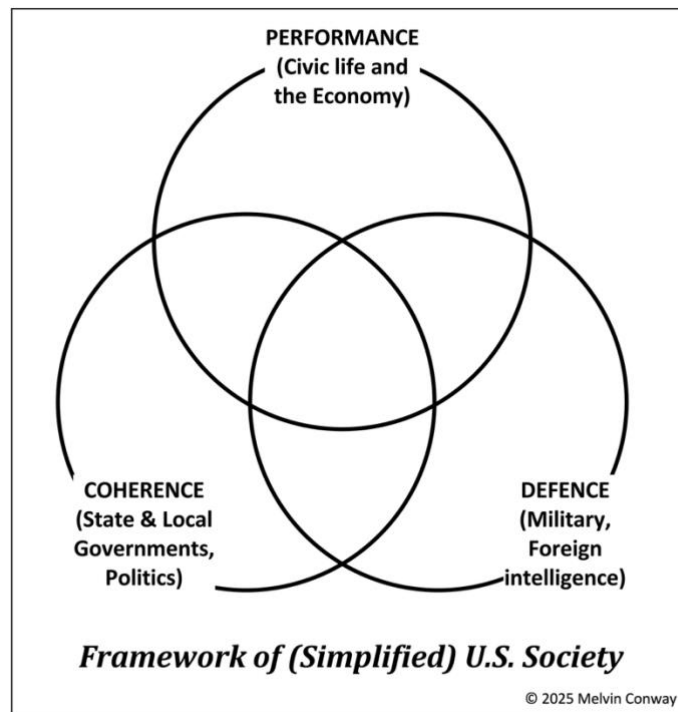


A model of a concrete instance of the organism abstraction will show a network of agents and their signals within these containers. (One individual can be in several agents.)

For example, here is a simple agent-signal model of a neighborhood protection syndicate. (Also see <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Underboss> and <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Consigliere.>)



Here is a simple model of American society based on the Organism abstraction.

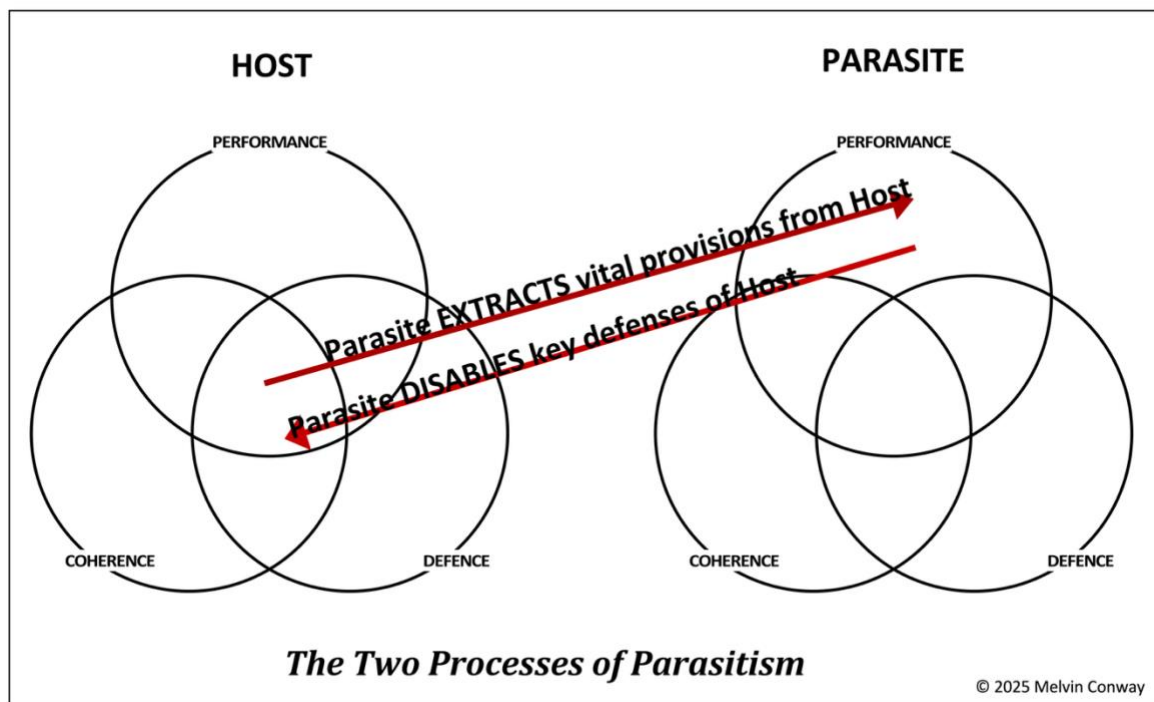


The **Parasitism pattern** is well established in Biology. Here are definitions from [LibreTexts](#) and from [Wikipedia](#).

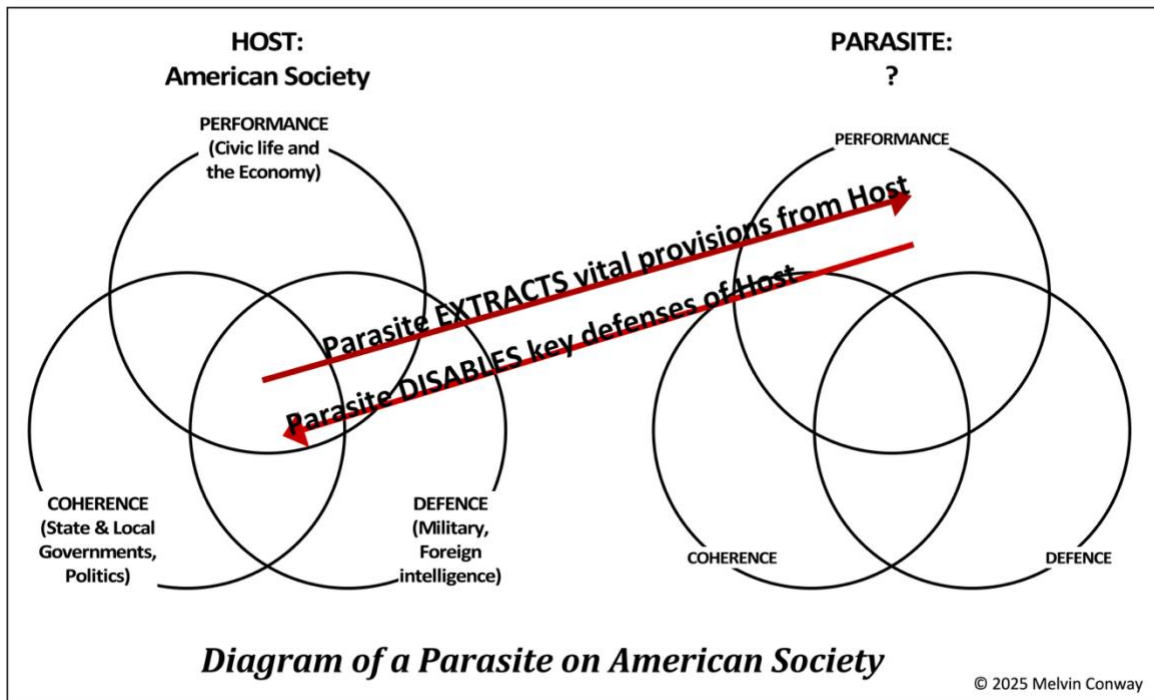
These, and many other, definitions of parasitism specify two entities, the Host and the Parasite, in two transactional relationships:

1. The Parasite **EXTRACTS** resources it needs from the Host.
2. The Parasite enables this extraction by **DISABLING** key defenses of the Host. (Some definitions go so far as to say that the Parasite harms the Host.)

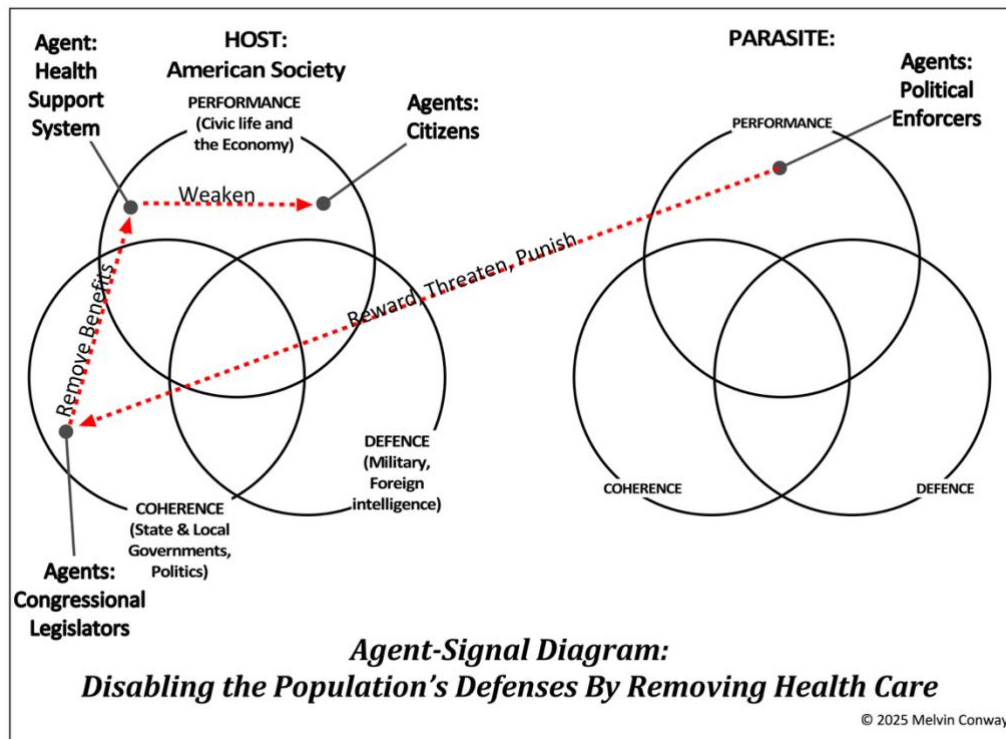
Here is a graphical representation of parasitism using the Organism abstraction.



Here is a graphical representation of a parasite on American society as the Host.



Here is an agent-signal diagram showing the American parasite weakening the population's defenses by lowering its level of health.



The following Appendices are interim placeholders. The referenced content contains previous source material on which the final forms will be based.

Appendix B: Thought Experiment: Cherry Orchard Destruction by Starlings (placeholder:

Minsmere murmurations:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KnndQglUraQ>

Princeton/Leonard research:

<https://www.princeton.edu/news/2013/02/07/birds-feather-track-seven-neighbors-flock-together?section=topstories>)

Appendix C: Thought Experiment: Scaling Up Adam Smith's Invisible Hand is Changing our Climate (placeholder:

<https://melconway.com/Home/pdf/UbiquitousConnectivity.pdf>,
see Example II, pp. 29-end.)

Appendix D: Collections of Intercommunicating Actors and Emergence (placeholder:

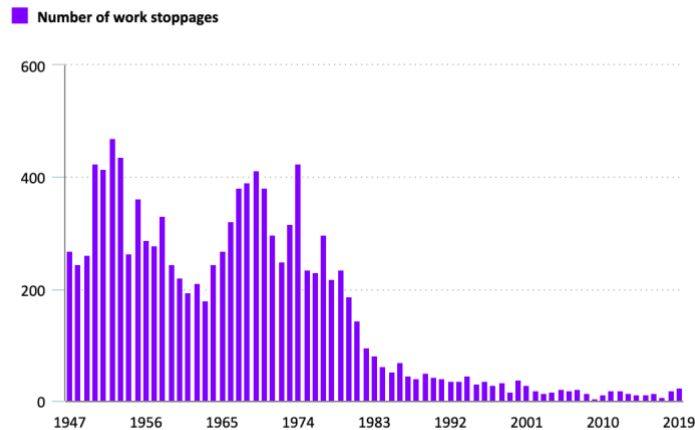
https://melconway.com/CBH/Freedom_Emergent.pdf
)

Appendix E: Science, Emergence, Object Design, and Simulation (placeholder:

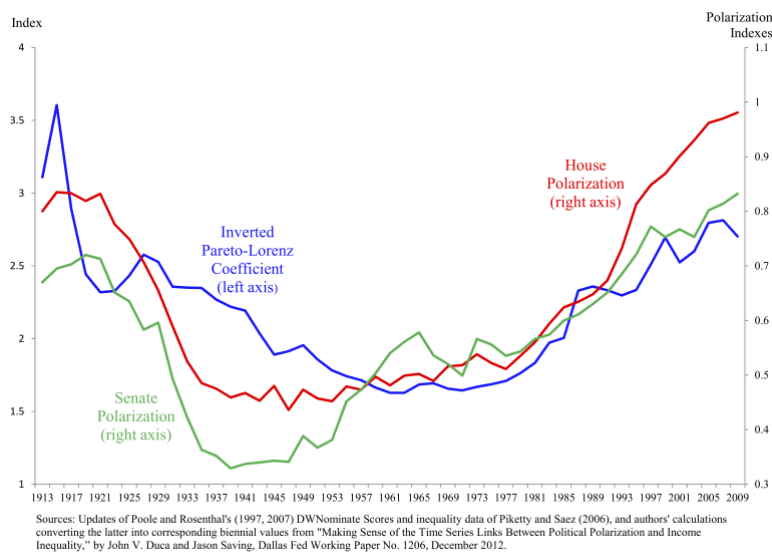
https://x.com/conways_law/status/1385650066178854918)

Appendix F: The three decades following the end of WWII were a Social Phase Transition (placeholder:
https://melconway.com/CBH/Historical_Overview.pdf ; include these graphics:

Annual work stoppages involving 1,000 or more workers, 1947–2019



Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.



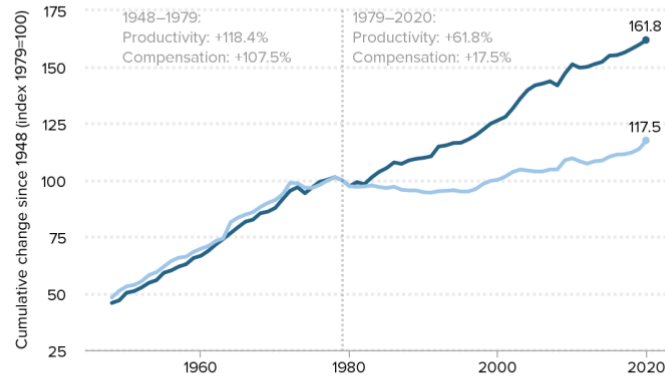
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The gap between productivity and a typical worker's compensation has increased dramatically since 1979

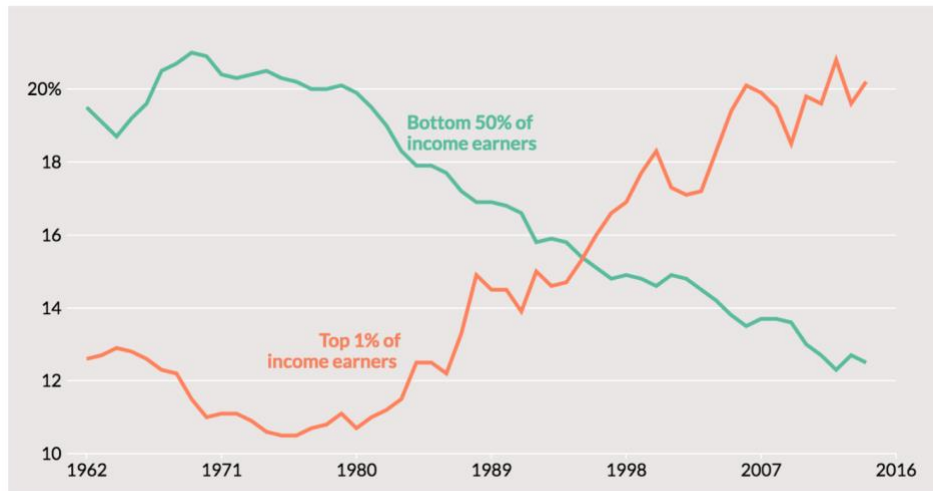
Productivity growth and hourly compensation growth, 1948–2020



Notes: Data are for compensation (wages and benefits) of production/nonsupervisory workers in the private sector and net productivity of the total economy. "Net productivity" is the growth of output of goods and services less depreciation per hour worked.

Source: EPI analysis of unpublished Total Economy Productivity data from Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) Labor Productivity and Costs program, wage data from the BLS Current Employment Statistics, BLS Employment Cost Trends, BLS Consumer Price Index, and Bureau of Economic Analysis National Income and Product Accounts.

Economic Policy Institute



Source: Thomas Piketty, Emmanuel Saez, and Gabriel Zucman, "Distributional National Accounts: Methods and Estimates for the United States," 2016, Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research

Note: The unit is the individual adult and incomes within married couples are split equally.



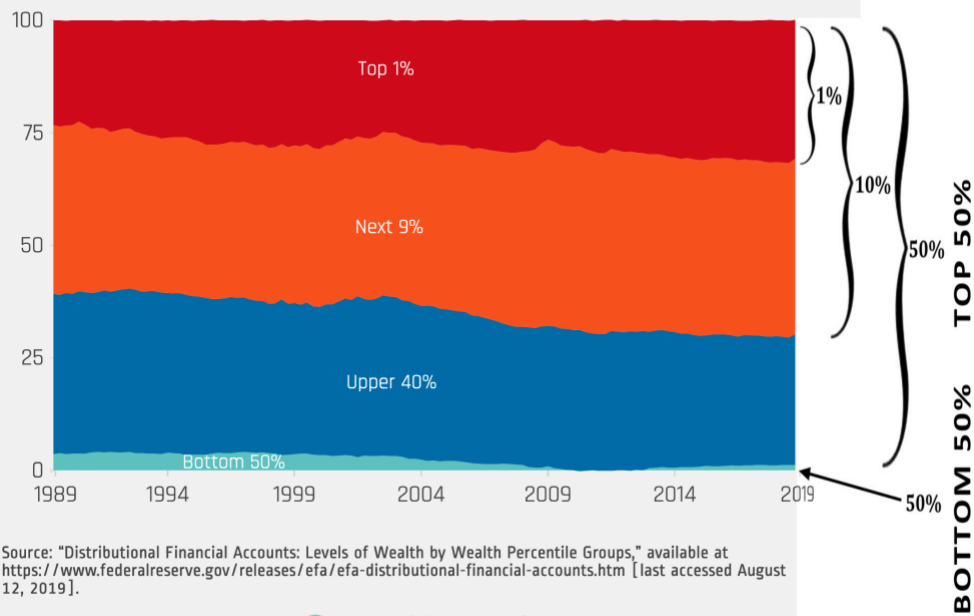
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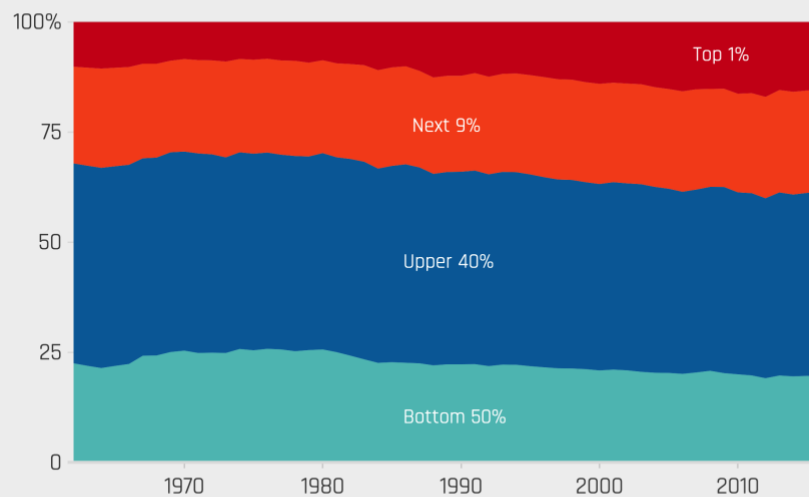
The majority of all wealth in the U.S. is controlled by the top 10%

Percent of U.S. wealth earned by each wealth group, 1989-2018



The top 10%'s share of all income has risen by 6 points since 1963

Percent of post-tax U.S. national income earned by each income group, 1963-2016



Appendix G: The Powell Memo.

<https://www.greenpeace.org/usa/democracy/the-lewis-powell-memo-a-corporate-blueprint-to-dominate-democracy/>

Appendix H: C.P. Snow's Two Cultures.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Two_Cultures

(placeholder: <https://melconway.com/Home/pdf/Body-Building.pdf>)