

A Nation Dispossessed: The Tea Party Movement and Race

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Abstract

This analysis combines both qualitative information and quantitative data. The author reviewed numerous first person reports of Tea Party rallies, conferences and meetings from every corner of the country, and read most of the movement's own literature. The Tea Parties are described as a unique movement appearing at a specific historical moment. The movement encompasses constituent national networks, core members and more loosely aligned supporters. Its supporters are overwhelmingly white and middle class. Matters of race and national identity motivate many Tea Partiers as well as a sense of dispossession from their place of privilege in the racial order. This analysis takes at face value the movement's dress, symbols and invocation of the constitution, as well as its claims to embody the aspirations of a narrow body of 'real Americans'. By making an exclusionary claim on the nation's founding moments, they actually set themselves apart from other Americans.

Keywords

Tea Party, Tea Party movement, nationalism, racism, white dispossession, white majority fears, white nationalism

Introduction

In the early 1970s, before the Vietnam War had ended, small cartoon pamphlets were left behind in the toilet stalls of the auto plant where I worked at the time. They were meant to be read then and there, and told a story which ended with the punch line, 'There will be wars and rumors of wars until the Second Coming of Christ.' These Christian proselytizing devices conveyed a message of timelessness and hopelessness in the face of humanity's manifest failings. In fact, wars may be a permanent part of the human condition, or not. But the Vietnam War had a point of origin, ended at a specific moment, and was not timeless or unchanging. Further, the civic opposition to the war had a direct effect on its course. Time and place matter. Events, politics and even historical epochs change. We all may live in the moment history produces, and each new moment may carry within

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it all of the previous developments before it, but history is not a cycle of continuing reoccurring events. Each new moment is indeed new. 'It is not possible to step twice into the same river,' to quote the pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus (Kaufmann, 1968: 16).

So it is with the Tea Party movement. The Tea Parties began at a specific time: immediately after the inauguration of Barack Obama, the first African American president of the USA. The Tea Partiers built their movement upon a bundle of resentments, including rejection of the Republican establishment of Senator John McCain and President George W. Bush, and objection to any progressive reforms that the Obama administration might usher in. These Tea Parties may bear a striking resemblance to previous political moments, such as the movement that pushed Senator Barry Goldwater into a Republican presidential nomination in 1964, and powered the 1968 independent campaign of Governor George Wallace. And the Tea Parties certainly include the anti-immigrant and culture war impulses of the three million voters who had pulled levers in the Republican presidential primaries for Pat Buchanan in 1992 and 1996. As a movement in the 21st century, however, the Tea Parties are a phenomenon qualitatively different from those that have preceded it.

While the Goldwater candidacy, like the Tea Party movement, drew support from the furthest reaches of the far right, it occurred during an era before the fight against legal segregation had ended. As such, it drew many who considered themselves defenders of white supremacy and the status quo ante. By contrast, the Tea Parties developed post-Jim Crow and after the white monopoly on the presidency had been broken. While they claim to be defending a mythic past, they are, in fact, dedicated to changing the existing regime rather than defending it. While Alabama Governor George Wallace famously drew votes from blue collar white racists in Michigan, Maryland and elsewhere, Tea Party supporters are overwhelmingly middle class and not subject to the same pressures of possible unemployment and economic distress. Further, Goldwater in 1964 and Wallace in 1968 represented a last gasp attempt to protect Jim Crow and turn back de jure desegregation. The Tea Party movement, by contrast, appears to contain elements of something new for the 21st century.

In this article, I will attempt to show that the current batch of Tea Partiers assert their Americanness as a relatively distinct form of nationalism. Further, I will demonstrate that the Tea Parties contain a mass manifestation of a supposed white 'victimhood', during a period when demographic shifts might begin to imperil the unquestioned majority status of white people. And I will sketch the outlines of the Tea Parties as a semi-autonomous movement, both within and outside of the Republican Party.

The Movement

Congressman Dick Arme's FreedomWorks staff set in motion the first anti-tax protests that began the Tea Parties in February 2009. By 15 April 2009, more than 260,000 people showed up at over 300 Tea Party events, according to Nate Silver, who used mainstream media reports as his guide (2009). In the months that followed this first set of events, a number of organizations got into the mix. Conservative Republicans were among the protestors, carrying poster signs about the rapidly expanding national debt, and against universal healthcare and taxes. A peculiar brand of libertarian conservative, nourished by think-tanks like the Cato Institute and energized by Congressman Ron Paul's Campaign for Liberty, participated. The Reverend Donald Wildmon's American Family Association posted on its website the names of more than 1500 people who signed up as Tea Party protest organizers, and a total of 1271 had AFA 'registered' events. Among the ancillary organizations that attached themselves to the Tea Party movement, please count Americans for Prosperity and the John Birch Society.

The Tea Parties also attracted a number of white nationalists, Minutemen vigilante types and other anti-immigrant activists. The ideological white supremacists were often ambivalent about the Tea Partiers' events. One early opinion piece in the white nationalist Council of Conservative Citizens' tabloid newspaper, *The Citizens Informer*, considered the positive side of the protests (Rolen, 2009): 'The fact that hundreds of thousands of white people got up the nerve to oppose the government [was] astonishing.' On the other hand, it noted the 'negative tendency that plagues Tea Party activism ... to deny the racial dynamic empowering the movement.' The piece concluded with the idea that the 'future of this revolution, if that is what it is, depends on white zealots' (Rolen, 2009: 4). Little talk of taxes and budget deficits intruded into the white nationalist analysis. This sentiment was matched inside the Tea Parties, with an identifiable racist venom visible in the signs and the raw display of emotion at public protests.

There are three levels of commitment inside the Tea Party movement:

- (1) at the core are six national networks, and thousands (the exact number is contested) of local and state groups. Many of the local members are also enrolled in one or another of the national networks;
- (2) at the next level there are millions of activist supporters, who have attended rallies, bought the movement literature and paraphernalia, and paid attention enough to make sure they cast votes as Tea Partiers. Four per cent of the adult population said that they had either attended a rally, donated money or both, according to a 15 April 2010 *New York Times* article describing a recent poll (*New York Times*-CBS Poll, 2010: 33). While the margin of error in that poll is 3 percent, the numbers were large enough to give the movement a genuinely mass character;
- (3) at the third level are generic supporters, who are willing to tell pollsters that they agree with or support the Tea Parties. They constitute around 18 percent of the adult population, a figure that fluctuates with time and polling organization, but puts the number in the third tier of the movement in the tens of millions.

The six national networks, listed in declining order of size at the time of writing this essay, are:

- (1) Tea Party Patriots, which registered its website by that name on 10 March 2009;
- (2) FreedomWorks Tea Party, which is chaired by former Congressman Dick Armey, and sits in a DC-based lobbying outfit;
- (3) Tea Party Nation, which joined the protests before it was actually incorporated in Tennessee in April 2009;
- (4) Patriot Action Network, originally known as ResistNet Tea Party, which nests inside a corporate box created in 2004;
- (5) 1776 Tea Party, also known as TeaParty.org, which was incorporated in Texas in February 2009; and
- (6) Tea Party Express, which is a political action committee, and as such as no actual membership. It originally registered with the Federal Election Commission as Our Country Deserves Better PAC in 2008.

These organizational networks both compete and collaborate with each other. They have different levels of internal cohesion. They often vie with each other on big subjects such as programmatic focus, and bicker over issues of little substance. Yet, they share a self-identity as the 'Tea Party', and a universal sense of alienation from non-Tea Partiers. They use resources to pursue

their goals, and a common language with which to express them. In short, Tea Partiers exhibit the same characteristics as other social movements of the modern or post-modern era.

Quantifying the core membership of the movement is crucial to understanding it. The Institute for Research and Education on Human Rights took its first count of the combined membership of these factions on 15 February 2010. It stood at 160,714. On 16 August 2010 that membership total was 255,131. On 1 June 2011 it stood at 321,921. That is straight-line growth at the core of the Tea Party movement.

The number of Tea Party Caucus members in the House of Representatives now stands at 53, and there is now a caucus in the Senate with four members (prior to the 2010 election, there were 52 members in the House, and none in the Senate). The members of these caucuses often vote differently on crucial issues such as deficit levels and the budget. Nevertheless, they stand as a reminder that the Tea Party movement should not be regarded simply as a 'fringe' or 'extremist' phenomenon, but has established a firm foothold at the center of American life.

A number of opinion polling organizations have been measuring Tea Party supporters. Such polls are inherently imperfect. They measure what a respondent is willing to tell a complete stranger over the phone or via the internet. Very few polling organizations have been asking questions about the Tea Parties long enough to establish measurably certain trends. On race-related matters, polling has been notoriously difficult; the so-called 'Bradley effect', named after the inaccuracy associated with pre-election polls in 1982 when Los Angeles Mayor Thomas Bradley ran for California governor. Nevertheless, polling data can have value as an indicator of both political opinions and demographic information. Recognizing these limitations, I have used opinion polls from multiple sources in this document.

Tea Party supporters were more likely than the general population to be older, married, and white evangelical or born-again Protestants, according to an April 2010 poll by the *New York Times* and CBS (*New York Times*-CBS Poll, 2010: 38). They were twice as likely to identify themselves as Republicans, although 43 percent said they had an unfavorable view of the Republican Party, and 6 percent said they had a favorable view of the Democratic Party (*New York Times*-CBS Poll, 2010: 17–18). Their self-described class status appeared to be higher than the general population, but looked much like the income stratification of other white Americans: 3 percent said they were upper class, 15 percent upper middle, 50 percent middle class and 26 percent said they were working class (*New York Times*-CBS Poll, 2010: 36).

When asked by pollsters about the most important problem facing the country, Tea Party supporters responded 'the economy' at the same approximate percentages as the general population. They were more concerned about government deficits, however, and less concerned about jobs. And they were more likely to oppose government spending to create jobs, and more interested in reducing the fiscal deficit. That finding would support a regression analysis that found no correlation between unemployment levels and Tea Party membership (Tanner, 2010).

Tea Party supporters reported little economic status anxiety, and were more likely than the general population to say that their financial situation was 'good' or 'very good' (*New York Times*-CBS Poll, 2010: 37).¹

This overall portrait of Tea Party supporters comports with a Blair-Rockefeller poll conducted immediately following the November 2010 elections. Tea Partiers are overwhelming white (91.4%), and middle class, (49.9%) or upper-middle class (13.9% making over \$100,000). They were more politically literate than non-Tea Party members, and more likely to have voted in the 2010 elections. They are older, Christian, more likely than non-Tea Partiers to believe that their Bible is literally the word of God. Of those pollsters identified as 'Tea Party members', more than half (55.1%) were Republicans, and another 26.7 percent were Independents leaning Republicans (Maxwell, 2010).

The Tea Parties cohered as a complex grass roots political movement, with multiple organization centers and political tendencies, after a large protest march in September 2009. 'Planning the massive event gave Tea Party groups an opportunity to work together. Hundreds of thousands of Tea Partiers met in the streets, broke bread together, shared their stories and their anger, and made connections to one another' (Burghart and Zeskind, 2010: 17). Over time, Tea Partiers morphed from their beginnings as a protest-and-rally-in-the-streets phenomenon, into a more sophisticated but no less determined movement with definable electoral goals. This change of tactics was apparently self-conscious, and its outlines were traced in a July 2011 *American Spectator* article by Ned Ryun, 'Whither the Tea Party?' One Florida Tea Partier tells Ryun: 'In the beginning, rallies were necessary to let everyone know we're here ... In the summer of 2009 we attended town halls and by the beginning of 2010 we began engaging candidates.' Talking about the balance of 2011 and 2012, this Floridian said, 'The level of participation at monthly meeting is staying steady ... As we see it, November 2010 was a mere practice run for 2012' (Ryun, 2011).

To observers outside the Tea Parties who gauged the strength of the movement simply by watching public rallies or reading polls, it remained largely an enigmatic phenomenon, ultimately unknown and unknowable. At first, the protests were virtually ignored by significant elements in the liberal and progressive political universe. One article, which should be re-read because of the authors' profound misreading of the conflicting currents of history, declared in June 2009 that the conservative movement was dead and that the era of progressive reform was upon us. Although the Tea Party resistance to President Obama was already in full flower, they wrote:

It shouldn't be that tough. All the stars are aligned for launching the greatest era of progressive reform since the 1960s. We face stark crises that require fundamental structural reform. We have a powerful, popular president with a mandate for change – and a majority of Americans yearning for it. Catastrophes have left conservative ideas discredited and Republicans are leaderless and divided. (Borosage and Vanden Heuvel, 2009: 11)

Then just one month later, under the headline, 'Tea Party Movement Loses Steam', David Weigel reported that 'the collaboration between the official Republican establishment and the Tea Parties has not lasted into June', and that that 'news value of the [July] events looked to be lower' (2009).

The Tea Party protests over that 4 July 2009 weekend did turn out to be smaller than the first explosion of events the previous April. But Tea Partiers soon overpowered congressional representatives at their August recess town hall meetings, and their news value became enormous. That September, Tea Party conservatives and libertarians rallied on the Washington, DC mall, in one of the biggest right-wing events since the Ku Klux Klan had marched down Pennsylvania Avenue in 1924. That rally, as was noted in the Institute for Research and Education on Human Rights report *Tea Party Nationalism* (Burghart and Zeskind, 2010), ushered in the era of the Tea Parties as a political and social movement:

In February 2010, progressives were once again writing the obituary of the Tea Party movement. Under the headline, *The End of the Tea Party: Right-Wing Populist Fads Catch Our Attention – but They Burn Out Quickly*, Mark Schmitt wrote: 'The tea-party movement cannot be sustained at the level of anger that's currently fueling it' (2010). The Tea Party blip, Schmitt told us, was all but over. That June, *Mother Jones* journalist Kevin Drum asked 'Beginning of the end for the Tea Parties?' (Drum, 2010) and cited a *Washington Post* report that the Tea Party movement was cracking up. Yet, in the elections the following November 2010, four out of 10 voters told pollsters that they supported the Tea Party, a sign that the movement was energized enough to command control of that election cycle's outcome.

Then again in March 2011, *New York Times* columnist Charles Blow claimed that the Tea Parties were in a ‘tailspin’ and ‘the movement is losing its momentum’ (Blow, 2011). The author drew this conclusion from a March 2011 Pew poll that had just been released. This poll included just one question aimed at measuring the general level of support for the Tea Party movement among adult Americans: ‘From what you know, do you agree with the Tea Party movement, or don’t you have an opinion either way?’ (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2011: 32). When compared to data on the same question one year previous, the results were interesting. In March 2010, 24 percent of poll respondents said they agreed with the Tea Party movement; 14 percent said they disagreed; and 29 percent said they had no opinion either way. When asked the same question in 2011, the number of those who said they agreed with the Tea Parties fell four points to 20 percent. The number who disagreed with the Tea Parties, however, rose to 25 percent – a full 11 percent increase in Tea Party opponents in just one year.

It is useful to compare the March 2011 Pew poll results with a February 2011 survey taken by the Harris poll. In that poll, the number of those who ‘support’ (somewhat support and strong support added together) was 37 percent – 17 points higher than in the Pew poll. In the Harris poll, the number who opposed the Tea Parties was 38 percent – 13 points higher than in the Pew poll (Harris Poll, 2011).

Since Pew data tends to differ from Harris data generally, the point spread between the two polls is probably not related to some kind of huge one-month slide. Instead, the differences between the two different data sets may be more related to the vagaries inherent in public opinion polling: the size of the polling sample can skew the data (Pew surveyed 1009 adults by phone, Harris surveyed 3171 adults via computer), discrepancies in the surrounding questions, and the way questions are asked (Zeskind and Burghart, 2011).

There are some similarities, however, in what Pew and Harris found. In both instances there was a measurable increase in the level of opposition to the Tea Party movement and a small but noticeable drop in the level of third tier support during the spring of 2010. While it is too soon to be certain of our conclusions, the increase in opposition may be related to the fact that more people are now talking about the birthers, racists and bigots in Tea Party ranks. And the drop in support from the movement’s perimeter could be related to a form of ‘buyers’ remorse’, where some of those who voted for the Tea Party-supported candidates the previous Fall now understand the wreckage that these politicians produced as governing officials. Federal budget negotiations during the summer of 2011 also raised the number of opponents of the Tea Party. At the same time, the core of the movement has continued to grow, as the data previously cited from the Institute for Research and Education on Human Rights demonstrates.

Race and ‘Dispossession’

Tea Partiers deny that they are white racists at every available opportunity. When challenged, some of their leaders will insist that they are interested only in a smaller, more fiscally sound federal government and unencumbered laissez faire capitalism. As if to prove this point, those few black people who have aligned themselves with the Tea Parties are prominently featured at rallies, conventions and other gatherings. Further, none of the leaders of the six national factions have made any statement indicating that they adhere to any kind of quasi-coherent version of the ideology of ‘scientific’ racism. By contrast, such declarations are de rigueur among white nationalists.

Nevertheless, from the beginning, the self-evident signs of racial animus have been omnipresent at Tea Party events. Posters at rallies and protests demeaned the president in specifically racial terms, depicting him as an African witchdoctor, or a lying African. Then there were placards where

white people depicted themselves as racial victims, as slaves, or worse. Along those lines, one woman carried a homemade sign that read, 'Obama + Marxism = Slavery'. One of the most infamous of this type was carried by the founder of the 1776 Tea Party network, Dale Robertson: 'Congress = Slaveowner, Taxpayer = Nigger.'²

Other incidents occurred during Tea Party protests against health care reform in March 2010. Members of the Congressional Black Caucus were accosted and abused by Tea Partiers. Representative Emmanuel Cleaver was spit upon. Civil rights legend Representative John Lewis was called the 'n-word'. The crowd hurled ugly anti-gay slurs at Representative Barney Frank, the country's first openly gay member of Congress. Despite the fact that these events were a matter of public record, Representative Michele Bachmann, head of the Tea Party Caucus in the House of Representatives, claimed that no Tea Party protestors engaged in such activity. And her denials were echoed across the movement's blogosphere.

Similarly, all of the Tea Party factions rebuffed a NAACP resolution in 2010 condemning 'racist elements' within the movement's ranks. The few conservative black people who had joined the Tea Parties denounced the resolution and the NAACP, and rejected the evidence that there was any type of problem other than the 'liberal media'. FreedomWorks Tea Party also denied that racism was an issue inside the Tea Parties. It issued a statement over the signature of former Congressman Dick Army that said theirs was a 'colorblind' organization for whom racism was 'repugnant' (Army, 2010).

Others went further than denial. The national spokesman for Tea Party Express, Mark Williams, responded with a statement that said: 'They make more money off of race than any slave trade ever. It's time groups like the NAACP went to the trash heap of history where they belong with all the other vile, racist groups that emerged in our history' (McMorris-Santoro, 2010). The St. Louis Tea Party Coalition declared that 'the very term "racist" has diminished meaning.' It stated further, 'We demand that the NAACP withdrawal [sic] their bigoted, false and inflammatory resolution' (Hennessey, 2010; St. Louis Tea Party, 2010). It echoed others who said that the NAACP should denounce the New Black Panther Party instead.

Overnight the Tea Party blogosphere became full of comments that both refused to see any racism at Tea Party rallies and that attacked the NAACP (Virginia Tea Party Patriots, 2010). One comment described the civil rights organization as a 'rabid dog let loose in a neighborhood of thoughtful people'. Another claimed that the NAACP was 'willingly engaged in reverse discrimination'. Another headlined their comments in a way that summed up much of the Tea Party response: 'NAACP fanning flames of racism, hate'. Indeed, the Tea Party consensus seemed to be that it was either the mainstream media or the NAACP or both that acted in a racist fashion.

There are a number of ways that these events – the racist signs, the denials, the antagonism to civil rights, and the lack of a coherent racist ideology – can be added up. One could argue that a few mean, bad apples inhabit the Tea Parties, and that most of the others exhibited no more explicit, self-conscious a form of racial bias than the average white person. There would be a measure of truth in that assertion. After all, most white people do not consider themselves racist, yet 'will pay \$300,000 for a \$75,000 house just so they can live with other white people', to quote one of the more insightful leaders of the white nationalist movement (Zeskind, 2009). Along the same lines, you could note that there is a movement-wide insensitivity to continuing discrimination against people of color.

In this regard, the Tea Parties are not unique. Significant numbers of white people have been blind to the racial realities around them. A January 2004 Gallup poll sponsored by AARP (formerly the American Association for Retired Persons), for example, found that 61 percent of non-Hispanic whites claimed that 'Blacks Have Equal Job Opportunities as Whites' (Gallup, 2004: 47).

Yet, the evidence that black people and people of color continue to face racial discrimination is incontrovertible (Blank et al., 2004; Bussey and Trasvina, 2003; Pew Social and Demographic Trends, 2011; Price, 2003). So too is the converse: all the data indicates a relative privilege going to white people vis-a-vis people of color.

The notion of white privilege does not rest on the supposition that all white people are better off economically, politically, and socially than all black people. There certainly are desperately poor and politically excluded white people, and there is evidence that the number of white people in this condition has grown during the recent economic crisis. Similarly, there are fantastically rich black people and those who live and breathe in the highest echelons of our society. But, relative to blacks and other people of color, the persistent advantage remains with white people in employment, wealth accumulation, access to health care, educational achievement, and political representation. This stubborn fact has led some scholars to conclude that 'whiteness,' as a socially constructed identity for Americans with melanin-deprived skin tones, consists in the main of nothing more than this relatively privileged status.

There is something more to the Tea Party movement's relationship to race issues than just a few bad apples and the usual white blind spot to privilege, however. Consider the fact that of those white people who strongly *agree* with the Tea Party, only 45 percent thought that black people were intelligent, and only 35 percent believed they were hardworking. For white people who strongly *disagreed* with the Tea Party, by contrast, those numbers were 59 percent and 55 percent respectively. Even more revealing was the data for the statement: 'If Blacks would just try harder they would be as well off as Whites.' A full 68 percent of Tea Party whites agreed with this statement, while only 35 percent of non-Tea Party whites agreed; almost a two-to-one difference (Parker, 2010).

One conclusion is that Tea Partiers are more negative about people of color than other white people; and non-Tea Party whites tend to be more likely to have positive attitudes about black people. This difference between Tea Party whites and white people in general can be measured quantitatively.

Another aspect of the distinct racism of Tea Partiers is evident when considering an analysis of attitudes towards civil rights organizations over time. In 1963, before passage of the open-housing laws and the Voting Rights Act, 42 percent of white people believed that civil rights organizations 'were asking too much'. Since the height of the black freedom battles, that percentage has been growing. In 1993 it had gone up to 47 percent. And in 2003, the 'too much' figure had risen to 49 percent of non-Hispanic white people, according to Gallup (2004: 26).

To more fully understand the significance of this data regarding hostility to civil rights organizations, a study was conducted of white perceptions of anti-white bias. Both black and white respondents saw declining 'anti-Black bias' over time. During the same period, however, white people in general regarded 'anti-White bias' as increasing. According to the study's authors: 'These data are the first to demonstrate that not only do Whites [sic] think more progress has been made toward equality than do Blacks, but Whites also now believe that this progress is linked to a new inequality – at their expense' (Norton and Sommers, 2011). In sum, whites but not blacks regarded race relations as a 'zero-sum' contest, where if one side wins then the other side must lose. The two trends were tightly correlated, but the authors could not show that they were causal. In any case, it was enough for them to note that many white people saw anti-white bias as a bigger societal problem than anti-black bias (Norton and Sommers, 2011).

Consider then the fact that Tea Party supporters in 2010 contended that 'too much' had been made of the problems facing black people in numbers disproportionate to the general population, 52 percent to 28 percent, according to a *New York Times* poll which included people of color in the

general population (*New York Times-CBS News Poll*, 2010: 30). A second poll, conducted at the end of 2010, compared Tea Partiers with just the white population as a whole. Still it found that Tea Party supporters were about 1.5 times more likely than whites generally to believe that we have 'gone too far in pushing for civil rights', 62.8 percent to 39.4 percent (Maxwell, 2010). Again, this is a difference measured quantitatively between Tea Party whites and the white population generally.

An inference from this data can help explain much. In this view, civil rights organizations which work to end anti-black bias are also regarded as the vehicle for anti-white bias. Since Tea Partiers are more likely than white people in general to be hostile to civil rights organizations, it follows that they are more likely to feel like victims of 'anti-white bias'. Their hostility to civil rights organizations and efforts aimed at racial equality is a salient, observable fact. From this vantage point, it seems that the attempt to demonize civil rights organizations is also an attempt to protect themselves from 'anti-white bias'.

Indeed, Tea Partiers were more than twice as likely as the general population to tell pollsters that they believed the Obama administration favors blacks over whites (25%TP to 11% GP). Further, more than half of Tea Party supporters claimed that the Obama administration favors the poor, 56 percent to 27 percent, which may be a polite non-racial way of saying the same thing (*New York Times-CBS News Poll*, 2010: 24).

Thus, Tea Partiers define themselves as 'victims' of the civil rights movement and of President Obama, who broke the white monopoly over the White House. They become the 'slave' and the 'nigger' memorialized on their poster boards.

Tea Party leaders have not as yet articulated a coherent theory of how whites became the new victims of racial discrimination. On the other hand, white nationalists have promoted multiple ideas to explain what they perceive as the fallen status of white people (Zeskind, 2009). One intellectual figure in the white-ist world, Wilmot Robertson, called Anglo-Saxon Protestants the 'dispossessed majority', and traced the first moments of loss back to the Civil War (Robertson, 1976). Most other white nationalists placed this phenomenon in the post-World War Two period, after the fall of Hitler and Hitlerism and at the time of the advent of the black freedom movement. Some noted the de-colonization of Africa and Asia as part of the loss of world-wide white supremacy (Tyndall, 2008). All considered this supposed dispossession in terms of race and nation, as opposed to losses that a single individual might endure. For example, they were concerned with cultural hegemony rather than jobs, with control of the news media rather than control of property rights, and political power for white-ists rather than personal wealth accumulation. Their ideas about how they came to be in such a lowly status as whites always included some notion of population shifts, demographic change, and 'swamping' by immigrants. Some placed the myth of all-powerful Jews as the cause of their white racial demise. All regarded the future in particularly bleak terms. And re-birth and renewal and the re-acquisition of power and hegemony were all conceived of in terms of race and nation, sometimes requiring much individual sacrifice. Individualism was sneeringly regarded as a conservative capitalist value opposed to revolutionary nationalist virtues (MacDonald, 1978).

Tea Partiers have a less coherent set of ideas about their supposed dispossession. Given the extreme individualism exhibited inside the movement, it is surprising that so few of their ideas about loss rest on some personal failures of their own. They are quick, however, to point to the individual failings of others. The poor do not work hard enough and they bought homes they could not pay for and should not have. The super-rich and the bankers should just plain lose when their investments go awry. Now, Tea Partiers worry, the frugal, hardworking middle class taxpayer will have to pay for the sins of others.

It is a more a mythic loss, however, than an actual loss of political or economic power. And per the data discussed above showing little economic status anxiety among Tea Partiers, it is based on the perception that ‘people like them’ have lost their hegemonic place in the culture and society. This sentiment shows up in the Tea Party movement’s opposition to immigration, and the high percentage of Tea Party Caucus members in Congress who have sponsored a bill that aimed to end birthright citizenship if it passed. One of the best examples of this notion appeared in a communication from the leadership of Tea Party Nation, who worried that the ‘White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) population in America is headed for extinction, and with it our economy, well-being and survival as a uniquely America culture’ (Burghart, 2011a). In a similar vein, Tea Party Nation also promoted an old fashioned racist answer: re-institute the ‘National Origins Formula’ found in the 1924 Immigration Act. That act, passed in a deliberate attempt to curb immigration from eastern and southern Europe, was intended to preserve the dominance of the Anglo-Saxon in American life. It was blatantly racist in its time. Tea Party Nation’s embrace of this theory that non-Anglo-Saxon immigration has caused the downfall of the country is way beyond the mantra of debt, taxes, and fiscal policy that Tea Party leaders have claimed is their calling card. It puts Tea Party Nation in the company of those white nationalists who have promoted a more complete theory of white dispossession.

Perhaps no greater sign that the Tea Party movement has postulated a collective sense of loss has been the omnipresence of the slogan: ‘Take It Back’. You have to have lost something first, before you can take it back. The slogan begs us to ask the questions: what has been lost? Precisely who should be doing the taking back? And who should they take it from?

The short answer in the movement’s parlance is that ‘real Americans’ have loss of ownership of the country (or variously a lost control of the government), and it is the liberals, socialists, fascists, poor people and illegal aliens--unreal Americans all – who have stolen it.

The Nationalism of the Tea Parties

During the 1968 protests at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, a band of youth culture revolutionaries known as the Yippies nominated their own candidate for president, Pigasus. Actually there were two ‘Pigasi’, a runt piglet and a full grown hog that they had trucked in to Lincoln Park for the occasion. The hog was designed to capture the imagination of the peacenik counter-culturalists then battling the police, and make a statement about the choices for president. The event was simply a piece of political theatre; it was over as soon as it happened. Pigasus made no further appearances at Yippie protests, although he has been kept alive in post-60s literature.

The tri-cornered caps, Gadsden flags, and Revolutionary War costumes, even the Tea Party name itself are political theatre of a completely different order. They recur regularly at protests, rallies and meetings large and small. The colonial era dress is of a piece with the ubiquitous presence of copies of the Constitution at Tea Party events, and all are signs of a particular form of nationalism inhabiting this movement, as is the exaggerated assertion of American exceptionalism.

Nationalism is an ideological construction through which individuals and social movements can produce a notion of collective identity on a particular territory. It seeks to answer the question of who is in, and who is out of the people, the nation, and who has the rights of citizenship in the state. It does not necessarily imply a particular vision of government. But it does follow inexorably from the assertion that there are ‘real Americans’ and others not so real.

Since the birth of the system of nation-states in 17th-century Europe, the ideology of nationalism has appeared in multiple forms. In the Dred Scott case and at Nuremburg it assumed an explicitly

racial character. Ruling classes everywhere have used it to suppress and exploit their own domestic populations, and to gin up popular support for wars with other nations and states. Nationalism has also been a vehicle for post-colonial liberation and economic development in many Third World countries. During the Cold War, the ideology of nationalism was subordinated to the imperatives of the competition between the Blocs of Countries in the capitalist West and the Soviet East (Hobsbawm, 1990). After the Cold War ended, ethnic nationalism engulfed the Balkans and elsewhere, as post-Yugoslav Serbia, Croatia and Bosnia went to war.

In the current era of trans-national capitalism, the nationalism of the working classes has often opposed itself to the globalism of the bourgeoisie; notably contrary to the predictions of Karl Marx. More, in a twist of the usual two-sided dialectic, nationalism has become the most salient opponent of both corporate globalism and a solidarity-based internationalism. The significance of nationalism as an ideology has magnified the importance of Tea Party nationalism; even as the Tea Party movement has promoted ideas such as de-regulation and privatization that are completely consonant with the growth of trans-national capitalism.

There are several schools of thought regarding American nationalism. For the purposes here, the two that matter most are creedal nationalism and ethno-cultural nationalism. The former view is that Americans are bound together by a common creed, found in documents such as the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence. In this view, the USA is sometimes called a proposition nation, in which adherence to the principles of liberty, democracy and equality before the law become the foundation of a unique nation. This has been the dominant understanding of Americanness since at least World War Two, and it has been endorsed by both Republican and Democratic presidents, as well as by liberal and mainstream conservative thinkers.

The other, ethno-cultural nationalism has a longer lineage in American life, going back to the period before the Civil War and the 14th Amendment. In contemporary times, anti-immigrant ideologues such as Peter Brimelow and paleo-conservatives such as Pat Buchanan are prominent among those who have articulated this understanding. 'Language, faith, culture and history – and yes, birth, blood, and soil – produce a people, not an ideology,' Buchanan wrote. 'Democracy is not enough. Equality is not enough. Free markets are not enough to hold a people together' (Buchanan, 2006).

The Tea Parties are motivated by an inchoate combination of both visions of American nationalism (Goldstein, forthcoming). The older, ethno-cultural nationalism finds one of its clearest expressions in the movement's attitude towards President Barack Obama as the pre-eminent 'un-American'. Obama broke the white monopoly hold on the presidency. He usurped the Founding Fathers and betrayed their Constitution – which did not include the 13th, 14th, 15th, 16th and 17th Amendments. In this telling, Obama is evil incarnate: Hitler, fascism, socialism, and every other manifestation of what is presumably alien.

The notion that President Obama is not a native-born American and therefore not constitutionally eligible to be president is known as 'birtherism' to Tea Party critics. It is widespread in the movement's ranks and among the leadership. Four of the six Tea Party national networks had people in leadership who have trumpeted the no-birth-certificate foolishness. In April 2010, 30 percent of Tea Party supporters were willing to tell pollsters that they believed the president was not born in the USA (*New York Times*-CBS Poll, 2010: 24). As the Tea Party movement became an echo chamber for these ideas, they reached an ever larger percentage of the population. By April 2011, 47 percent of Republicans believed President Obama was not born in the USA. Another 22 percent said that they did not know where the president was born (*New York Times*-CBS Poll, 2011: 8). A separate poll by the Washington Institute for the Study of Ethnicity, Race and Sexuality found that 60 percent of Tea Party supporters claimed that either they did not know where Obama was

born or that he was born outside the USA (Parker, 2010). After President Obama publicly released his long-form birth certificate in April 2011, the terrain of the argumentation against his American-ness shifted, but the essential charge remained the same (Burghart, 2011b).

This 'birtherism' intersects almost completely with the anti-immigrant aspects of the Tea Party movement. The staff of one of the six national factions were imported directly from a Minuteman vigilante group. This network, founded as the 1776 Tea Party, has 14,414 enrolled members, and has one of the lowest profiles in the movement. It has worked with other factions, among them the group founded as ResistNet Tea Party (now known as Patriot Action Network). Many activists from local anti-immigrant organizations and Minuteman groups have become part of ResistNet, which for some time was the second largest of the Tea Party factions with over 80,000 members in August 2010. Tea Party meetings, large and small, included speakers from anti-immigrant organizations and the movement became a center for nativist and xenophobic politics.

More than four in every 10 (42%) Tea Party supporters told pollsters they think *legal* immigration should be decreased. And 97 percent said they thought illegal immigration is a very serious or somewhat serious problem (*New York Times*-CBS Poll, 2010: 27). Members registered their support for Arizona's draconian anti-immigrant bill, SB 1070. Many oppose birthright citizenship, which is guaranteed by the 14th Amendment, and listed 'anchor babies' among the evils of our time. Their blogosphere became a venue for anti-immigrant rants. Almost all worried about changes in population, cultural and political power. Upon this same axis of issues, white nationalists have created their theories of a dispossessed majority (Burghart and Zeskind, 2010).

Despite this intersection with white nationalism, Tea Partiers have not yet expressed a coherent racial or ethnic ideology. Rather, their movement interweaves these racial and cultural complaints with elements of creedal nationalism – albeit in more exaggerated forms. Consider in this regard the US Constitution. Pocket-sized copies of the Constitution are distributed at Tea Party events like candy on Halloween night. Cleon Skousen's '5,000 Year Leap' describing the Biblical origins of the Constitution and the exceptional character of America are more common than mosquitoes in the twilight of a summer eve. Seminars teaching the virtues of 'Constitutional government' have become a required duty for hard-core Tea Partiers. For this movement, adherence to the Constitution mandates states' rights, debt-free budgets and free markets. One and all pledge their allegiance to the God's perfect gift the Founding Fathers left behind.

Except that it was not so perfect at the founding. According to Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall, 'I do not believe the meaning of the Constitution was forever "fixed" ... To the contrary, the government they devised was defective from the start, requiring several amendments, a civil war, and momentous social transformation' (1987). Slavery was not abolished by the Founding Fathers, contrary to Tea Party Caucus founder Michelle Bachmann. Neither did the original Constitution grant women the right to vote, nor did it promise citizenship and equality before the law to all Americans. Nor did it guarantee the direct election of Senators, a basic premise of our current democracy. It did, however, pledge to 'promote the general Welfare'.

The Tea Party movement is purposefully blind to these points. It contains significant elements opposed to birthright citizenship, and thus they seek to 'amend' the 14th Amendment. Seminars are taught on the virtue of rescinding the 17th Amendment and popular election of US senators. Among the adherents to this principle are Tea Party favorites Congressman Ron Paul and Governor Rick Perry. Support for the common good is not so common in these ranks.

Thus, even though Tea Partiers formally adopt a notion of American nationalism based on our supposedly common creed, the dominant view of the Constitution in their ranks puts the actual meaning of this American-ness closer to the blood and soil politics of Pat Buchanan.

Conclusion

Social movements do not last forever. More often than not, they have one or another or a combination of three fates. One, they are either victorious and decline after reaching their goal. Two, they are defeated outright. Three, they are co-opted by some larger institution.

The militia movement that emerged in the 1990s, for example, was defeated following the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995 by a concerted campaign of civic opposition and government repression. Militia groups have reappeared, but the movement itself is gone as of now. To go back further in history, the Ku Klux Klan and other white-minded thugs that emerged during the Reconstruction period after the Civil War were essentially victorious in re-establishing the system of white supremacy in the former Confederacy, and the Klan dissolved effortlessly into the Democratic Party before the end of the century. The Klan in the 1920s may have suffered from the scandals surrounding its leadership, but the movement did not die until after it won a change in the 1924 immigration law that protected Anglo-Saxon hegemony for another generation. After that it basically closed up shop, except in the Deep South. The Klan, the Citizens Councils, the Birchers and the segregationists in the 1950s and 1960s were decisively defeated by the black freedom movement, and they were left standing with empty hands after Governor George Wallace's independent presidential campaign in 1968. Only the Republican Party gained after it adopted its infamous 'Southern Strategy'.

The decisive moments that will decide the Tea Parties' fate have not yet occurred. The movement's sights are set squarely on November 2012. If they win back the presidency for the Republican Party, the movement might or might not dissolve into squabbling factions. If they perceive that they have lost that election, or the Republican primaries before it, an internal power struggle may or may not split it irrevocably apart. Win, lose or draw, however, the Tea Party movement has already left important markers on America's political landscape: First, in the current debate over economic policy and the national debt, they have moved the discussion toward fiscal restraint and de-regulation. They stand in the way of environmental protection and other measures by which the federal government might promote the common good. Of more long-term consequence, however, will be its legacy in the arena of race. Please consider that the Tea Party movement may be a precursor of an even larger revolt by supposedly dispossessed white people as the expected population and demographic shifts occur in the decades to come.

Notes

- 1 While the Center for Social Inclusion found the 'Tea Party used economic insecurity and growing racial fears to win in majority-White districts', it also concluded, 'Unlike the strong impact that race appeared to play in these heavily foreclosure-impacted districts, White income and poverty rates did not seem to significantly impact the electoral success of Tea Party candidates.' Thus race was the more salient factor, not income. (2010).
- 2 At a Tea Party rally on 15 April 2010 at the Community America Ballpark in Kansas City, Kansas, persons apparently designated for the task were checking signs at the gate. On that occasion, in several noticeable instances, obviously racist signs and the people carrying them were turned around and told not to enter the ballpark with those signs. The Institute for Research and Education on Human Rights received reports of similar measures in other cities during the April 2010 protests.

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