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Cycles of Contention: The Rise and Fall of the Tea Party

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Abstract
Right wing populism has typically consisted of anti-statist/elitist mobilizations by the ‘common people’ opposed to government policies and/or various out-groups. Such cycles of contention, typically prompted by various social changes and/or crises, have long been an essential feature of American society. The Tea Party (Parties) appeared in 2009 as a response to economic stagnation and crisis, secular challenges to traditional religious identities and the election of an African American president. The Tea Partiers were generally highly conservative, highly religious, rural/suburban, lower middle class Republicans. Such movements might be best understood as reactionary ‘resistance movements’ that attempt to defend and retain traditional identities and statuses based on race, patriarchy and hetero-normativity that have been under assault by late modern ‘network’ society. Such movements, prompted by anger, rage and ressentiment may garner attention and even wider support, but if/when they gain power, they foster ‘buyer’s remorse’ and eventually wane.

Keywords
Tea Party anger, ressentiment, right populism, status, identity, racism, patriarchy, Puritanism

Introduction
During the 2008 presidential campaign, Sarah Palin accused Obama of ‘pallin’ around’ with communists and/or radical black preachers. Palin’s audiences often ranted ‘kill him’ or ‘kill them’. Some called Obama a Muslim socialist/terrorist born in Kenya. Meanwhile, a ‘birther movement’ questioned the authenticity of Obama’s Hawaiian birth certificate. Their racism became so evident that McCain asked them to tone it down. But with Obama’s election, this crude, virulent racism was incorporated into the Tea Party ideologies; as a public relations strategy, that racism became more ‘color-blind’.

The legacy of the Bush tax cuts, expanded entitlements and two costly wars led to a huge federal deficit. Then, given the lack of government regulation, the sub-prime housing bubble burst, the derivatives market crashed and there was a massive financial crisis. Many businesses suffered...
downturns or bankruptcies. Millions of homes were foreclosed. Unemployment skyrocketed. Meanwhile, the Bush administration engineered the most massive bailout program in financial history: the Troubled Asset Relief Program (TARP). With vast sums of money from the government, major banks like Chase, Citibank, and Bank of America, even foreign banks like Deutsche Bank, and the AIG insurance company were capitalized and kept solvent. Many people were fearful and anxious about their futures and angry that financiers were bailed out – but not the little guys. The dire economic conditions helped Obama win.

In early 2009, in a carefully planned ‘spontaneous’ outburst of anger, a CNN financial reporter named Rick Santelli ranted about the bailout as a reward for ‘bad behavior.’ He railed against the funding of so-called ‘losers’ mortgages’. He articulated the anger and resentment shared by large numbers of people facing economic crises who were not bailed out. He claimed that we needed a new ‘tea party’ and in a short time highly funded ‘astroturf’ groups appeared that were encouraged, financed and organized by the Koch brothers’ ‘Americans for Prosperity’ and Dick Armey’s ‘FreedomWorks’. They called themselves the ‘Tea Party’, donned Revolutionary War era attire and tricorn hats, held rallies, and disrupted town hall meetings devoted to health care legislation. Despite their sound and fury, the Affordable Health Care Act was passed. Like many ‘populist’ movements, they ultimately served elite interests – neither the insurance industry nor pharmaceutical companies wanted single payer national healthcare. Both are glad to collect millions more dollars from government paid premiums.

The rise of the Tea Party, as spectacle, became great ‘infotainment’, with their eye-catching Revolutionary War era costumes, bizarre slogans, demands to ‘keep the government out of Medicare’, and misspelled signs decrying socialism or portraying Obama as a Kenyan Muslim. The coverage of these spectacles began to dominate the news while more moderate, if not liberal, voices were ignored. Following the town hall meeting disruptions, a number of Tea Party organizations appeared such as the Tea Party Patriots, Tea Party Express, and Tea Party Nation. The media attention resonated with a number of conservative, often reactionary, folks who joined the fledgling organizations. But most members were rebranded conservative Republicans, while some of the leadership and organizational roles were filled by seasoned Republican operatives.

The Tea Party people were angry at

liberal elites, big money interests, a government that served the ‘big guys’, and fearful that ‘Obama the revolutionary’ was moving their country toward socialism. They were anxious, angry and resentful, raging against federal bureaucracy, liberal government programs and policies including health care, immigration reform and labor laws, abortion, and gay marriage. (Berlet, 2010)

There were fears his socialist policies would threaten their status and privileges by supporting the ‘parasitic classes’ who live off the efforts of the ‘hard-working, ordinary folks’. The Tea Party folks ‘weren’t going to take it anymore’. Nevertheless, these platitudes expressed deeper feelings of victimization. As I will argue, to explain the rise and passion of the Tea Party one must consider how socio-economic and cultural changes have assaulted the values, lifestyles and very identities of a segment of the lower middle classes.

Right wing populism, as anti-establishment mobilization, has a long history in which the ‘good, decent, little people’, the so-called ‘innocent victims’, who distrust government, defend themselves against corrupt and evil forces from above whose policies are responsible for their pain and suffering (Kazin, 1998). The Tea Party can be understood as resisting the ‘evil’ elites above and the ‘dangerous classes’ from below who threaten these people’s moral, social and economic status. They tend to be reactionary, nativist, nationalist, and xenophobic (Berlet, 2010).
Within a short time after its 2010 ‘electoral success’, it seemed as if the Tea Party had actually become a formidable movement portending a fundamental change in American politics. That ‘victory’ (due to a small percentage of the voters), however, was pyrrhic. I would argue that they did indeed develop into a ‘genuine’ social movement in which numbers of people, already conservative Republicans, joined networks and organizations with more or less common goals and visions of political change that would reverse the past few decades. But no sooner had they gained enough power to elect a number of officials, than they would overreach, fragment, sputter, and lose support, especially after their Waterloo when the debt ceiling was raised – despite their adamant opposition. The movement turned out to be a paper tea bag, far less powerful that many would imagine. Within a year their approval plummeted.

Most reactionary mobilizations are based on lower middle class resistance to economic and/or cultural changes/crises. Today these mobilizations are collective attempts to preserve these people’s status (esteem), values and identities in the face of challenges that undermine their dignity, recognition and respect. Challenges to one’s very self, one’s values and identities, evoke powerful feelings. Social movement theory needs to pay more attention the role of intense emotions in fostering and maintaining social movements, lest we have one-dimensional accounts of rational actors and their self-interested mobilizations.1

Classical Perspectives on Right Populist Mobilizations

For Marx (1971 [1852]), the petit bourgeois French farmers had gained their small plots of land thanks to the dismantling of feudal estates by Napoleon Bonaparte. But 50 years later, they faced economic hardships with usurious debts to the banks and high taxes that supported their beloved army. Then the crisis of the potato blight reduced their incomes. They then supported the coup d’etat of Louis Bonaparte. Moreover, despite their animosity toward the ruling bourgeoisie, their support of Louis Bonaparte sustained the hegemony of the capitalist classes. As Marx (1971 [1852]) noted:

In the course of the nineteenth century the urban usurer replaced the feudal one, the mortgage replaced the feudal obligation, and bourgeois capital replaced aristocratic landed property. The peasant’s small holding is now only the pretext that allows the capitalist to draw profits, interest, and rent from the soil, while leaving it to the agriculturist himself to see to it how he can extract his wages. At the same time, the peasants felt threatened by the rising urban proletariat and feared socialism. But their isolated way of life precluded their awareness of themselves as a class that might have had common interests with the urban proletariat.

The small-holding peasants form an enormous mass whose members live in similar conditions but without entering into manifold relations with each other. Their mode of production isolates them from one another instead of bringing them into mutual intercourse. The isolation is furthered by France’s poor means of communication and the poverty of the peasants. Their field of production, the small holding, permits no division of labor in its cultivation, no application of science, and therefore no multifariousness of development, no diversity of talent, no wealth of social relationships. Each individual peasant family is almost self-sufficient, directly produces most of its consumer needs, and thus acquires its means of life more through an exchange with nature than in intercourse with society. (Marx, 1971 [1852]: 245)

Marx’s analysis showed how crisis, refracted through class position and ideology that fostered peasant support for Bonaparte, foreshadowed subsequent reactionary mobilizations. As will be seen, the Tea Party of rural/suburban, lower middle class, conservative Republicans, while angry
at evil elites and despising subalterns, nevertheless serves the more reactionary elements of the ruling class and sacrifices its own class interests. The conservative message of cutting taxes and spending, ending programs (especially benefit programs targeted at the poor) and shrinking government, which are long-standing Republican positions, appeal to many Americans. However, very few actually reap the benefits.

**From Astroturf Spectacles to a Movement**

Contentious social movements begin with particular actors within specific social locations and social networks who experience various discontents, grievances and/or crises. Leaders, both iconic and actual, emerge to proffer an ideology that frames reality to ‘explain’ grievances, posit a vision, foster organization, implement strategies, and perhaps attain a degree of ‘success’. But for many contentious political movements, decline begins as they ascend.

Who are the members of the Tea Party? As far back as the 1800s, if not earlier, there was an ambivalent relationship and distrust between the small rural merchants and farmers and the national government. That contentious relationship to the government animated the small merchant classes as well as reactionary segments of the elites. Today, little has changed. The rise of the Tea Party, framed by the media as a ‘new’ and major political force in American politics, nevertheless consisted primarily of ‘rebranded’ Republicans whose social positions and character disposed extremist, less conciliatory policies. The bulk of its members consist of the lower middle classes who were joined by a few political and/or economic elites who were more than happy to lead such movements, especially when running for office. Surely Rick Scott, Scott Walker, and Chris Christie – all multi-millionaires – hardly embody the poor ‘little guy’, victims up against the rich and powerful, but they are more than happy to gain Tea Party support. In general, the Tea Party demographics are relatively mainstream, but it is their class location and extreme conservatism that sets them apart.2 At first, the Tea Partiers were an ‘astroturf’ movement that began largely as media spectacles.

It is not an ‘uprising’ against a corrupt political system or against the established social order. Rather, it set out changing the rules in Washington and across the country. Far from being antiestablishment, the Tea Party is, we determined, a classic, right-wing, rancid and fundamentally Republican epitome of what … Christopher Hitchens once called ‘the essence of American politics’. (Street, 2011: 2)

In a major survey, the *New York Times* and CBS reported that:

23% of Tea Party supporters listed ‘College Grad’ as ‘The last grade in school you completed,’ versus 15% of respondents generally, and 14% of Tea Party supporters have completed post-graduate studies compared to 10% of other respondents. Tea Party supporters were also more likely to have completed ‘some college’ by a 33% to 28% margin, and substantially less likely (only 3%) to have not completed high school than non-supporters (12%), or to possess only a high school degree (35% of non-Tea Party supporters versus 26% of supporters). (Zernike and Thee-Brennan, 2010)

Notably, the *New York Times* survey also revealed that Tea Party supporters are substantively wealthier than the general population, more likely to be either employed or retired and substantively less likely to be concerned ‘that in the next 12 months you or someone else in your household might be out of work or looking for a job.’3

It is often thought that with education, especially college level education, people become more liberal in their social and political beliefs. However, business or technical educations tend to be less critical and more conservative, especially for people that own small businesses such as franchisees,
contractors, realtors, and auto salespeople. Their worldview is rooted in how sales or services are paid directly by the customer. From that revenue come profits; such circumstances mean that the seller, anxious to please, dares not take any position on any issue that might offend.

Social location shapes one’s worldview. Most Tea Partiers tend to be older, lower middle class, white, conservative, Protestant, and often connected to evangelical movements/congregations. Street and DiMaggio (2011) write:

The real Tea Party phenomenon we discovered was relatively well off and Middle American (not particularly disadvantaged), very predominantly white, significantly racist, militaristic, narcissistically selfish, vicious in its hostility to the poor, deeply undemocratic, strongly Republican partisan, deeply hostile to the Democratic Party, profoundly ignorant and deluded, heavily paranoid, wooden-headed, and overly reliant on propagandistic right-wing news and commentary for basic political information. Many of its leaders and members exhibit profound philosophic contempt for collective action; a disturbing and revealing uniformity of rhetoric across groups, cities, and regions; a stunning absence of real and deeply rooted local organizing; and a predominant prioritization of Republican electioneering over grassroots protest of any kind. (2011: 1)

Tea Party supporters include many older folks in their 50s and 60s; many are retirees. Taibbi (2010) was quite impressed with the vast display of medical equipment from scooters and walkers to oxygen tanks and crutches (paid for by Medicare) at a rally. In general, people develop their fundamental political identities and ideologies in their earlier years and retain these generationally based values. Indeed, as many have shown, the politics of the last several decades have been based on the legacies of the 1960s, supporting civil rights and inclusion, anti-war, feminism, and sexual freedom/choice versus defending/maintaining segregation, sustaining militarism, patriarchy and articulating a hypocritical sexual repression.

However, we must also consider the importance of place and would note that most Tea Partiers are especially likely to be found among relatively homogeneous suburban sprawls and among rural dwellers – especially in the Old South (see Thompson, in this issue). Indeed, there has been a long tradition in which the conservative, ‘idyllic’ countryside where people are more ‘authentic’ and ‘virtuous’ has counterpoised the nefarious cosmopolitan city with its toleration of diversity, sophistication, and above all, decadence and sites of transgression. That said, there are a number of reasons that suburbia promotes conservatism, conformity and intellectual mediocrity, beginning with its cultural isolation that limits a diversity of viewpoints, especially critical views. Moreover, social and geographical homogeneity reinforce conformity of thought and value. Given that suburbia generally means home ownership, that ownership alone gives the owner a conservative bias toward maintaining/increasing his or her property values and keeping taxes low. There is an inherent bias to keep taxes low and to cut social spending, which is seen to benefit those whom suburbanites would avoid. Finally, we should recall that most fervent support for the Tea Party is found in the ‘old confederacy’ that sent most of the Tea Party representatives to Congress, and self-proclaimed leaders like Mitch McConnell, Eric Cantor and Jim DeMint represent Southern constituencies.

**Identity, Emotions and Social Mobilization**

In the pages that follow, I shall attempt to offer an emotion centered, preliminary theory of contemporary contentious political mobilizations. More specifically, I will attempt to argue that, notwithstanding anxieties over the economy and concerns with government spending and taxation, the Tea Party movement can be best understood as an attempt to preserve certain traditional identities and values that are more typically found among the lower middle classes (petite bourgeoisie), living in suburbs or small towns, especially conservative Protestants in traditionally conservative states.
The starting point for this perspective on social movements has been the shift in social mobilizations from pursuing ‘interests’ to legitimating lifestyles and identities. More specifically, I will argue that to understand such movements we should begin with new social movement (NSM) theory, the legacy of Habermas, Touraine, Melucci and Castells who offer some insights as to how and why certain movements form. More specifically, this perspective attempts to show how identities and meanings play important roles. Such movements may or may not be directly tied to political economic crises, but as Habermas (1975) argued, legitimacy crises in some aspects of the life-world, the economy, polity, or culture can migrate to issues of identity/motivation and foster various kinds of retreatist, progressive or reactionary movements. The NSM perspective argues that contemporary social movements, especially those over civil rights, feminism, ecology, or perhaps cultural movements like punk, goth or metalheads, are primarily concerned with identity and cultural values and struggles over meanings and subjectivity.

For Touraine (1981), the goal of new social movements is to negotiate, create and articulate new identity formations that at some point in the future will become prevalent, if not dominant, in a new kind of society. Conversely, some movements attempt to defend traditional identities, they attempt to resist various social and cultural changes. Struggles are more likely to take place in the public spheres of civil society in order to influence the state. Castells (1997) basically noted that in the contemporary network society, three distinct identity constellations prompting social mobilizations have been evident:

1. legitimating identities such as consumerism or fandom sustain hegemony;
2. resistance identities would stop, if not reverse, social change for the embrace of conservative, if not reactionary, politics, religion and lifestyles; and
3. project identities seek to transform identities in a more progressive direction and understand that these struggles in the here and now are directed toward a future moment.

As has been argued, following Habermas (1975), various crises of legitimacy in the political economy (such as the 2007 meltdown) and/or culture (gay marriage) intrude into the life-world. In some cases, this colonization of the life-world becomes experienced as crises that challenge the dominant legitimating identities, lifestyles and values. In face of such crises, some people would seek to retain or recreate traditional lifestyles threatened or undermined by various social changes, and to do so, they would not only stop and/or reverse history, but use electoral politics as the means to transform civil society in order, to return to an earlier time. Conversely, many other people would indeed look forward to the demise of these traditional identities, as new forms of progressive subjectivity would be negotiated, articulated and emerge in the near future. In this way, both resistance movements and project movements can be seen as attempts to make certain kinds and claims of identity formation normative; the outcome will ultimately rest on struggles within civil society that impact state power. From this perspective, identity, as both a collective narrative and internalized aspect of individual subjectivity, can be seen as contested terrain. The challenges for some may be opportunities for others. In this way, new social movements may compete in civil society, but it becomes necessary to carry out battles in the courts and electoral politics. Insofar as one’s identity and values are central aspect of one’s self, the struggles to defend one’s identity elicit a great deal of anger, hostility, demonization of enemies, and uncompromising, ‘take no prisoner’ attitudes.

At this point, it becomes necessary for us to introduce the centrality of the affective – the missing (or at least underplayed) aspect of NSM. From what has been said, it should now be clear that contentious social movements that seek to implement (or reverse) socio-cultural changes are closely tied to a variety of feelings and emotions that are themselves closely intertwined with
identities. While collective identities, as reflexive narratives based on group affiliation, may well provide us with a variety of meanings and explanations, we must also note that identities are closely linked to various feelings. For example, when our identities are confirmed, when we gain recognition, we are likely to feel self-esteem, pride and joy. And when our selfhood is attacked, we find ourselves humiliated and denigrated; we feel shame, and quite often we might mask that shame with anger (Scheff, 1994).

The arousal of fear and anger that comes from assaults on and challenges to one’s identity arouse intense emotional reactions that may, in turn, foster creating or joining ‘resistance’ social movements such as the Tea Party. In general, most resistance mobilization is prompted by fear, anxiety, anger, and ressentiment. Moreover, such resistance identities typically frame complex social and cultural forces as the actions of ‘evil’ persons and are thus likely to designate certain individuals and/or groups as the ‘enemy’. As such, they are likely to be xenophobic. More recent research in neuropsychology has suggested that reactionaries are more likely to be angry and fearful about the world, and in turn they generate greater amounts of norepinephrine in their brains. At the same time, more liberal people, likely to be more tolerant of diversity, caring and empathic, show higher levels of dopamine, typically associated with pleasure.

When powerful emotions are aroused, and people feel that collective action can change outcomes, ameliorate their distress and lead to emotional satisfactions, they are likely to join with others. (That joining together itself provides the person with recognition, esteem and social ties.) About half of the Tea Party members are or have been members of evangelical churches. Like most movements, recruitment is based on one’s social networks. In Melucci’s terms, they have already been members of networks which ‘constitute the submerged reality of the movements before, during and after [visible] events’ (1989: 338). These networks are located in the small groups we personally interact with on a daily level and in which people negotiate identities and ‘alternative frameworks of meaning’ (1989: 70). They are ‘networks of meaning’ or signs (1989: 58) which put into practice the alternative meanings which they produce and reproduce (1989: 71). The form of the movement is thus itself a message (1989: 60). Most recruitment, like most other new social movements, is most likely based on pre-existing social ties.

The Tea Party and its Discontents

Economics

For the past several decades, advanced technologies, globalization, and the financialization of the economy have left many people vulnerable, displaced, and anxious about their security. Most people have been experiencing wage stagnation (if not deflation) and diminished opportunities. Many small businesses have gone under. Small farms have been decimated; larger farming operations now do contract work. Moreover, to sustain consumerism, there was a tremendous expansion of credit cards, credit and growing mortgage debt that made consumption seem easy. Finally, with the implosion and collapse of the housing markets and growing unemployment and foreclosures, followed by massive government bailouts of major Wall Street banks and financial concerns, there was a great deal of anger toward the government, especially directed at Barack Obama – and the racism was not well veiled since the bailout/TARP was passed by the Bush administration. Housing markets and construction industries have still not recovered, and these many small businesses are often owned by Tea Partiers (see Lundskow, in this issue).

While the meager stimulus plan of Obama halted the plunge, it did little to encourage small business growth, nor did it have much impact on unemployment. Tea Party anger was directed
toward the treacherous liberal ‘elites’ as well as various ‘parasites’ such as those who took out big mortgages and above all those populations who depend on some kind of assistance – like the 50 million Americans who use food stamps. But while these factors fostered a great deal of insecurity, they were necessary but not sufficient to be the primary basis of Tea Party mobilization; rather, the stagnant economy was used as further ammunition to justify the anger toward elites, in general, and Obama, in particular.

Race

As often noted, the underlying racism of the Tea Party, nascent during the election, became blatant when the ‘natural order’ of the US leadership by WASPs abruptly ended with the election of Obama. While the Tea Party leadership has gone to great pains to shroud its racism, from the threats to Obama’s life, to the denigrating treatment of Obama by the Republican leadership during the debt ceiling crisis, their racism has been all too evident. As will be noted, for white nationalists, and many populists, race is not just a notion of difference; racial differences evoke fears of pollution and, in turn, danger (Douglas, 1966). For such folks, races must be kept separate and unequal to secure the purity of the sanctity of the ‘white race’ – as a basis for privilege.

Gender/Power

For most American families, women entered the workforce since it took dual incomes to maintain living standards. But with independent incomes, their relative power began to increase, both within the family and as a social political force. Male power, sometimes called ‘hegemonic or heroic masculinity’, supposedly strong, tough and confident masculinity, has been challenged by a number of women. For some men, the failure to fulfill the traditional breadwinner role undermines a sense of potency that challenges their self-esteem and arouses castration anxiety. For conservative men, affirmations of patriarchy attempt to symbolically maintain a male power that is in decline. Pro-life movements represent attempts to sustain traditional subordinated roles of women as mothers and not much else.

Employed women often experience a problem of reconfiguring family relationships in face of the growing power they gain through employment, but at the same time most such women, especially lower middle class women, are ambivalent about the empowerment they gain within the family in face of the loss of the full time housewife role. Therefore, it is not by accident that we now see the entry of large numbers of lower middle class women into conservative politics. Some are distressed about ‘abandoning’ families in order to work (out of necessity): much like some earlier cadres of women’s movements, they seek to preserve a waning family structure, to ‘protect the family/support traditional motherhood’ through conservative legislation that is typically contrary to the interests of women, especially their reproductive rights. At the same time, many such lower middle class women are not employed and have time for political organization – many of the Tea Party leaders and followers are women.

Demographic changes

For the right populists, several moments of demographic change are upsetting, beginning with growing populations and proportions of minorities and immigrants. As a result of civil rights struggles we have seen an increasing number of educated minorities entering the upper echelons of the workforce. Society is becoming more multiracial, multicultural and more cosmopolitan, and at
least socially more liberal – as evidenced by the election of Obama. These changes, by themselves or in tandem with economic changes, foster various kinds of racial/ethnic resentment and assertions of xenophobia and nationalism. Secondly, the majority of households now consist of single (divorced/widowed) women whose voting patterns challenge male power and agendas. Finally, as younger cohorts enter adulthood, and older people exit, there are generationally based shifts in values and younger people are less conservative and more tolerant of racial/ethnic diversity, sexuality and sexual orientation.

Culture and identity

The economic, cultural and moral changes of the last several decades have impacted the economic, social and moral status of numbers of traditional Americans. The social status, dignity, recognition, and respect of traditional groups have been under assault from a number of quarters. Their cultural values have been challenged by a pop culture that celebrates hedonism, extols sexuality, and tends to be gay-friendly. Following the impact of the 1960s generation that embraced civil rights, feminism, sexual freedom, alternative lifestyles, and progressive political activism, conservative political, cultural and moral values have been under assault by what seem to be alien and hostile forces. Their moral frameworks have been challenged by both cultural elites and the increasingly liberal tendencies of youth – often their own children. Almost half of all young couples cohabit. ‘Porn chic’ has permeated the culture. Gay rights are now acceptable to the majority of Americans. The Republican Party has been able to frame these cultural differences as a ‘class war’ pitting the decent, hardworking, God-fearing folks who go to Church and mow their lawns against the affluent, secular, Chablis drinking urban snobs with their fancy college degrees, cosmopolitanism, toleration, big words, and command of facts who look down their noses at the ‘good and decent’ folk (Frank, 2004).

Leaders/Frames

Anger over grievances does not usually lead to mobilization. That is the role of leadership. Events must become framed within an ideology and future vision to determine how people will understand them and react. Certain actors, located in social networks, accept and/or articulate frames of understanding grievances, remedies and visions. Some will organize, lead and mobilize others. As Snow and Benford (1992) have so forcefully argued, one essential feature of every social movement is framing reality to interpret events and determine strategies of action. A frame is an interpretive schema of instances and typifications that enable people to understand, explain and respond to the world. Otherwise said, frames filter reality to make it understandable. Frames serve diagnostic functions by identifying problems, attributing blame or causality, and specifying remedial action. Certain ‘elaborative’ master frames, often rooted in a ‘history’, allow a number of groups to find common ground over a number of different, often contradictory, grievances. For example, while some Tea Partiers may be opposed to ‘big government’ as well as abortion, gay marriage or pornography, they see no contradiction in supporting government actions to enforce their values.

But as social constructions, frames may or may not have any kind of factual basis. Indeed, many frames are typically based on an ideology. Some people might understand the current economic crisis as due to the Jewish bankers. For others, it is a dysfunction of capital. Similarly, many Tea Partiers see national health care as a reparations program that would shift their tax dollars to ‘compensate’ the descendants of slaves. Frames typically have an elective affinity with an individual’s existing character structure and the everyday understandings gleaned through one’s networks. In
other words, the extent to which a master frame taps into existing beliefs, folktales and myths can tell us a great deal about its power to mobilize actors. It is at this point where hegemonic ideologies, as master frames, can encourage people to sustain dominant class worldviews that indeed maintain subordination. Understanding master framing allows us to understand the clustering of social movements and their cyclic nature.

As Marx noted, while religion was the opiate of the people, prayer was the wail of the oppressed, the cry of genuine pain and suffering. In the same way, right populism as an expression of actual pain promises to assuage through restoration of the past, while anger directed towards imagined ‘villains’ provides feelings of revenge and self-justification. But it is an expression of the genuine pain and duress that people experience when their traditional views, values and identities face assault. While the economic crisis and subsequent election of Obama may have precipitated the Tea Party, the ‘normalcy’ of white privilege, patriarchy and puritanical sexuality have been under attack for decades; Tea Party populism can be seen as a rearguard defensive mobilization, a resistance movement against the larger political, economic and cultural factors and social changes of the past few decades that have undermined traditional values and identities (Castells, 1997). Populist ideologies

(1) exalt the ‘good people’ and specify and denigrate the ‘enemies’ to provide various short term palliatives to the self while
(2) valorizing cultural frameworks facing contention and
(3) offer a set of explanatory frameworks and alternative visions of restoration.

Yet, like religions, motivated by unconscious desires, their understandings are not just illusory but serve hegemonic functions – sustaining the very power of the ruling classes responsible for adversities.

As has been argued, the embrace of ideology is not a simple matter of reason and logical deduction, but of accepting ideas and values that are consistent with a person’s character structure; such values provide him/her with a number of personal meanings, gratifications and palliatives, as well as acceptance and incorporation into a group that shares such meanings and values. The Tea Parties provide and recognize a valorized, dignified collective identity that is tied to membership in ‘patriotic’ (white) organizations that provide people with recognition and dignity – especially at times when their status based identity claims may be challenged or even face demise. The organizations, meetings, rallies, and actions incorporate people into an emotionally gratifying culture of meaning that represents the heart and soul of a largely mythic America.

The Puritan work ethic provided the context in which people were located within a morally based hierarchy of status: workers who were successful were the ‘winners’, ‘moral’ and ‘chosen’; on the other end of the spectrum were the parasitic ‘losers’ who were damned. This would be called ‘producerism’ by Hofstadter (1965) and adopted by Berlet and Lyons (2000) to understand the populist right. As Berlet (2010) has suggested, populist ideology explains how and why the ‘good people’ have been assaulted and victimized: producerism, demonization, scapegoating, and the embrace of conspiracy theories are central elements of Tea Party ideology. For Berlet (2010):

Producerism describes a world view in which people in the middle class feel they are being squeezed from above by crippling taxes, government bureaucracies, and financial elites while simultaneously being pushed around, robbed, and shoved aside by an underclass of ‘lazy, sinful, and subversive freeloaders’. The idea is that unproductive parasites above and below are bleeding the productive middle class dry.
However, these values themselves require an underlying authoritarianism. Given its authoritarian character, right populism designates ‘enemies’ of the ‘people’ who are responsible for their duress, the enemies are scapegoated and demonized. As we have seen, the ultimate demonization consists of seeing Obama as the antichrist incarnate with 666 on his forehead. Perhaps the classical example remains Hitler’s blame of the Jews for Germany’s woes, especially for ‘stabbing Germany in the back’. Although some more extreme elements of the populist right may blame the Jews for economic meltdown and subsequent stagnation, far more popular scapegoats for economic woes are the African American, the Muslim, and the undocumented Mexican worker. Thus, among the populist right, xenophobic, anti-immigration sentiments are extremely powerful. Indeed, there are elements of the Minute Men and white power movements in the Tea Parties, especially in Arizona.

Conspiracy theories reduce highly complex events into easily understood simplifications that relieve the individual of any need to understand complexity and contradiction – anti-intellectualism has long been a significant element in American culture. Conspiracy theories are generally simple, easily understood, and, above all, both erroneous and incapable of empirical refutation. Authoritarians readily believe conspiracy theories in which secretive elites such as liberals, Templars, Bilderburgs, or the Council of Foreign Relations conspire against ‘ordinary Americans’ and support ‘one world government’ and/or aid for the undeserving, parasitic, freeloaders who are prone to hedonism. Moreover, these elites support sexual indulgence and pornography, they celebrate homosexuality and embrace many other forms of sin and deviance. When the conspirators who run the economy are either invisible or members of a shadow power behind the government, their existence can never be disproven. Adverse events and circumstances are thus explained as the actions of imagined enemies and evil conspiracies against the ‘ordinary’ Americans.

Character and Identity

Character

As will be noted, understanding the character structure undergirding a collective identity common to a class location is crucial for understanding the Tea Party. Wilhelm Reich (1970 [1933]) pioneered integrating the Freudian theory of character with the Marxist critique of capitalism to understand the rise of German fascism. The authoritarian family typical of the lower middle classes, and indeed some segments of other classes, instilled a guilt based sexual repression to socialize obedience to authority. Such folks valued obedience, order and impulse control as ways to repress aggression and sexuality. A consequence of this repression and propensity to blind subjugation to superiors was aggression that was, however, repressed and/or projected onto subordinates and out-groups. In the face of the economic crises of the 1920s, there was a great deal of frustration, resentment, fear, anger, and hatred that fostered fascist ideologies that promised the restoration of national greatness (restoration of collective self-esteem) and revenge on enemies such as Jews and Communists.

The Frankfurt School continued efforts to synthesize Marx and Freud. Erich Fromm launched a major study of ‘authority and the family’ that informed his study of the rise of capitalism and embrace of Protestantism (Fromm, 1941). With modernity came social and economic freedom, and a sense of alienation from one’s community; this lead to fear, anxiety and feelings of powerlessness. People attempted to ‘escape their freedom’ through submission to authority, conformity with others, and/or aggression towards out-groups. The petit bourgeois farmers and merchants embraced authoritarian preachers like Martin Luther and John Calvin to assuage their anxieties. These same factors later disposed submission to Adolf Hitler and the embrace of fascist ideology.
Authoritarianism

The psychological appeals of right populism must begin with understanding how the class location, material circumstances and power-assertive socialization practices of the lower middle class family foster a sadomasochistic, authoritarian character structure. Adorno et al (1950), following Reich and Fromm, identified an ‘authoritarian character type’ prone toward a hierarchical view of social relations – readily submitting to superiors while demanding deference and subordination from those below – many of whom were dangerous out-groups. Authoritarians are fearful of what the enemies are doing, they are hostile and angry about the world, they celebrate strength and toughness to deal with the dangerous world and they tend to be punitive toward those ‘responsible’ for their problems. They value power and ‘toughness’, destructiveness and cynicism – aspects of a ‘strict father morality’, a narrative of the self-sufficiency and toughness needed to survive in a dangerous world (Lakoff, 2008). They deplore the ‘nurturant parent morality’ that accepts dependency, and encourages actual individuality, empathy, egalitarianism, and an interdependent world where people are concerned for others – especially for the weak and/or under-privileged. Authoritarianism is associated with conventionalism, conformity, anti-intraception, anti-intellectualism, either/or black and white thinking that disdains complexity, superstition, and stereotypy, and in turn, given an intolerance for complexity, nuance and ambiguity, they embrace simple explanations and compartmentalized thinking that elides contradictions.

Authoritarians are predisposed to uncritically submit to charismatic populist leaders who articulate their anger and discontents which are directed toward ‘enemies’. Some leaders may actually be allied to the elites, but quite cleverly mobilize and manipulate populist anger in order to further their own agendas. Consider Father Coughlin, George Wallace, Ross Perot, or more currently, ‘newly converted’ Tea Party elites who appeal to populist sentiments such as Sarah Palin, Michelle Bachman, Herbert Cain or long-time conservative shock jocks such as Glenn Beck or Rush Limbaugh that are taken seriously by their audience.

Authoritarians are primed to embrace various moments of conservative, if not reactionary, ideologies from patriarchy and racism to xenophobia, anti-immigration, hyper-nationalism, and militarism. Right populist ideology ‘explains’ their victimization through producerism, demonization, and scapegoating, and poses conspiracy theories and justifiable aggression toward the demonized – it is thus ego syntonic with an authoritarian character structure (cf. Berlet, 2010). Such ideologies, internalized within character and articulated through one’s identity, can act as a material force and impact mobilization, voting and policies. Their anger (authoritarian aggression) assuages feelings of anxiety, insecurity, loneliness, and helplessness.

One of the central features of the authoritarian that fuels right populism is the tendency to project sexuality and aggression outward; they see sin and perfidy everywhere, especially among various scapegoats, hated ‘enemies’ who are demonized as ‘evil’ and ‘responsible’ for adversities, such as left-wing elites, African Americans, Muslims, or undocumented Mexican workers who are sapping the vitality of the American economy – stealing jobs, but also getting welfare, healthcare and a variety of benefits paid for by ordinary people. ‘Legitimate anger’ is expressed toward venal elites, despicable subordinates or nonconformists that must be punished, if not destroyed. The tendencies to blindly accept certain authorities, anti-intellectualism, avoidance of complexity, and tendencies to project aggression mean that they accept various simplistic conspiracies toward which their aggression is projected and toward which they may ‘justifiably’ express their aggression. Tea Partiers readily accept all kinds of irrational malevolence, such as myths about how undocumented workers are lepers or terrorists, American cities are embracing Sharia law, Jews control the Federal Reserve, and Obama is establishing ‘death camps’. Among the most extremist, the Federal Reserve is often
seen as the site through which billionaire George Soros and other Jews control the global economy. The good people must always remain vigilant and ready to defend themselves against the various evil conspiracies – some of which may even be found in the halls of government.

It might also be noted that when resentment toward the elites begins to shade into conspiracy theories that sustain this projection, there is also a degree of compensatory, narcissistic gratification through the possession of ‘inside’ knowledge not generally known to the larger society. Having the ‘knowledge’ that the economy is controlled by conspiracies gives one a narcissistic ‘specialness’ through the possession of knowledge not generally held. And surely, as we know all too well, the production of conspiracy theories and the plethora of books describing these conspiracies in detail is a growing cottage industry. Thus, for example, while it may be relatively innocuous to assume that the government is hiding the bodies of aliens taken from flying saucers at Roswell, when specific groups or individuals are seen as members of the evil conspiracy undermining the nation, various fringe elements of right populists, especially white nationalists, might consider actual violence justified.

Ressentiment

Authoritarianism is not sufficient to understand why some people are likely to despise and loathe various authorities. Firstly, Tea Partiers do accept those leaders who embody the toughness, aggression and punitiveness they value so strongly. But further, a crucial element of Tea Party populism is that its authoritarian character fosters a ressentiment of the ‘evil’ elites considered the ‘enemy’. The concept of ressentiment, as articulated by Nietzsche (1956), can help understand the paradox of the tendency to both submit to (some) authorities while at the same time expressing hatred against others.

The prototypical expression of ressentiment was the antipathy of the early Christians toward the Roman elites who had power, wealth and sexual freedom the Christians might wish for, but were denied. Since these were denied them, they embraced an ideology that valorized their asceticism, and celebrated their powerlessness and poverty as virtues. Their ‘herd mentality’ valorized mediocrity and submission. In turn, they denigrated the wealth, power and unbridled lusts of the Romans who dared express their ‘will to power’. Thus, early Christian ideology made a virtue of their lowly status; poverty was a sign of being blessed since Jesus embraced the poor and promised them eternal life. Christianity created an ‘enemy’: ‘the evil Roman sinners’ responsible for the inferiority and misfortune of the Christians. And thus the Christians themselves were absolved from any culpability for their condition; they were indeed morally superior. Much as Nietzsche (1956) understood early Christianity as an expression of ressentiment toward the Roman elites justifying the ‘spirit of revenge’, so too do right populist ideologies provide a variety of alternative compensations and emotional gratifications to those who see themselves as victims, who externalize blame, and in turn express anger toward oppressors.

This phenomenon is both quite common and quite easy to understand. An ‘external’ enemy is responsible for one’s misfortune, hardships and duress. What is loathed and hated about the enemy is that s/he has or is what the person himself or herself unconsciously wants to have or be. Those who rail against sexual indulgence, homosexuality, and pornography, and would seek to control that behavior through laws and state power, are indeed fighting their own evil demons and believe that if they were to eliminate such factors from society, then they themselves would not have to struggle with their own impulses. This is the underlying reason they despise the ‘parasitic classes’ below who are seen as hedonistic, lazy and unable or unwilling to control their sexual passions. In both cases, the ‘ordinary people’ are morally superior and their victimization is understood as the machinations of the elites.
American Identity

Protestantism had considerable impact in shaping American culture and identity. The combination of devout faith, individualism and the Protestant notion of work as moral 'calling' (Beruf) helped the Puritan colonizers survive the many hardships and eventually prosper. Hard work, combined with asceticism, might provide the individual with a sign of his or her salvation. The early settlers believed that the ‘new’ land had been given to them by God (the aboriginal inhabitants notwithstanding) and henceforth they had a spiritual mission to inspire the world; indeed, their ‘city on the hill’ promised to be a beacon of hope for the entire world. Later this would become known as American Exceptionalism. And so long before colonies had formed a nation, there was a divinely inspired justification for territorial expansion – to realize God’s will.

American culture and identity can be understood in terms of a number of polarities: individualistic, yet conformist; idealistic, yet pragmatic; ascetic/repressive, yet hedonistic (Langman, 1991). These cultural legacies become mediated through class, gender and even race, such that different classes embrace different moments of the cultural narratives/identities that have shaped American character. Certain elements of that historically based cultural identity can be seen among the lower middle classes, especially in rural/suburban communities, with authoritarian forms of fundamentalist religiosity, asceticism, conformity, anti-intellectualism, individuality, and a work orientation, as well as its hyper-patriotism, patriarchy, racism and xenophobia that sometimes assume almost paranoid forms. Given the individualism noted (the individual actor as a free agent), there is little concern with social forces and social explanations of social/political reality. This, in turn, facilitates what Hofstader (1965) called ‘the paranoid style of American politics’ which plays a major role in Tea Party understanding of the world.

Like most reactionary movements, Tea Partiers find secular, rational, tolerant, egalitarian, and culturally diverse aspects of modernity anathema to their traditional identity and would seek to turn society back to a ‘better’ time, perhaps the 1950s before the revolutions of the 1960s, or perhaps the 1850s with the ascent of the Know Nothings, or even the Revolutionary War era they extol. The country that they ‘want to take back’, a country of their ‘selective memory’, was a mythical period when white racism and patriarchy were unchallenged, when religion was unquestioned, when there was steady economic growth, job security, and a reasonable chance of achieving the ‘American dream’ of mobility, home ownership, and a better life for their children. Meanwhile, US economic and military dominance was also unchallenged. That era is now facing demise, but they will put up the good fight to preserve the country now gone.

Assuaging the Wounds

The lower middle classes are the typical bearers of right populist/nationalist ideologies. As such, given their character, values and frames of understanding, Tea Partiers experienced a number of grievances over the economic downturn and the government bailout by the Bush administration (many forget that it was the Bush administration’s decision). Stagnation, the changing nature of race, gender, demographic change, and challenges to selfhood/identity evoked a number of strong emotional stresses and strains. Populist ideologies and support for, if not actual participation in, Tea Party actions and organizations provide compensations and amelioration and target aggression.

For these groups, the social/cultural legacies of the 1960s were experienced as challenges/threats to their values, lifestyles and very identities that evoked powerful emotions, from anger to disgust. Ever since 1968, they have supported reactionary political agendas that would seem to alleviate fears and anxieties and preserve their status, celebrate their values, and punish the ‘enemies’. The
economic crises of 2007–8, followed by the election of Obama, fostered a variety of emotional responses: fear, anxiety, anger, shame, and disgust. These ‘shocks’ led to the embrace, or affirmation of emotionally soothing, populist ideologies and gratifying camaraderie with those with a shared identity and common values (as noted, most already had these values). Right populist ideology offers illusions that promise to assuage anxiety and ameliorate the suffering and distress of the self through renewal and affirmation of traditional values and identities. Further, to paraphrase Durkheim, their political beliefs and practices regarding the good (themselves) and the profane (vile leaders/parasites) unite the members into a social movement community. Right populists believe they are the heart and soul of America—or their imaginary of what it was—that has been under attack. A central theme of reactionary populist ideologies from Bonapartism to the current Tea Party is that their narratives, as wish fulfillments, promise alleviation of current economic, social and/or emotional distress through promises of the restoration of an earlier ‘greatness’. Berlet called this ‘palin genesis’ what was lost when infidel elites, communists, Satanists, and traitors took power. Further, those false elites embrace secularism, pluralism, social/racial/gender diversity, toleration of sexual- ity and, last but not least, they espouse radical social/political agendas such as socialism or Islam.

While the Tea Party folks face genuine economic uncertainties, their mobilization can be better understood as reactionary, identity-preserving movements defending their traditional values, hierarchal social status, identities, and claims for recognition. Such resistance movements are attempts to counter the impacts of modern network society (Castells, 1997). In other words, right populism like the Tea Party speaks to the nature of the dignity and worth of classes (status groups). Tea Partiers face a number of assaults, challenges and injuries as much to their psyches and values as to their wallets. Given both the authoritarianism of their ideologies and character structures, they are already predisposed to perceive reality in certain ways that, in turn, lead to certain courses of action that defend their notions of self and identity. They easily accept conspiracies, simplistic either/or explanations, and are intolerant of complexity and ambiguity, with a remarkable ability to insulate themselves from evidence that might challenge their beliefs.

Melucci (1989) makes it clear, as will be argued, that the submerged networks that enable social movements are largely concerned with meanings and identities that have typically developed outside of a political context. They are likely to ‘translate their action into symbolic challenges that overturn the dominant cultural codes’ (Melucci, 1989: 75). In Castell’s (1997) analysis, influenced by Melucci, resistance identities are attempts to preserve values, meanings and identities that are facing assault from social forces. In general, most resistance identities are prompted by anxiety, anger, and as has been often said, ressentiment. Moreover, such resistance identities typically frame social and cultural forces as the actions of ‘evil’ persons and are thus likely to designate certain individuals and/or groups as the ‘enemy’. As such, they are likely to be xenophobic. As has been suggested by NSM, most contemporary movements are less concerned with maximizing ‘interests’ than either preserving an identity under assault or fashioning a new identity to be realized in the future. There is less concern with what folks have than who they are, and the challenges to one’s status and identity cause a great deal of emotional pain and duress. What is being suggested is that we must consider the importance of intense emotions and feelings in fostering and sustaining social movements. This is not to suggest that such people are irrational, nor that social movements can be reduced to psychology.

**Fear and Anxiety**

As was earlier noted, for Eric Fromm (1941), the emerging freedom of the individual at the time in which the growing capitalist class rendered small merchants powerless gave rise to a fear of
freedom that, in turn, led to the embrace of Protestantism. In much the same way, the consequences of World War I left many people anxious, fearful, and disposed to embrace fascism and its ‘powerful’ leaders that promised pride, dignity and renewal.

As De Tocqueville (2000) first noted in America, without a traditional class system in a heterogeneous, rootless society, there was a great deal of anxiety as well as a constant scramble for secure status and respected identity. Hofstadter (1955) and Lipset and Raab (1970) developed the notion of ‘status anxiety’ to link reactionary politics to fragile social status. At times of change, people seek enemies that affirm the superiority of their own status and seek to target blame in a social order they cannot control. Upward mobility often fosters ‘status anxiety’ that encourages conservativereactionary politics. Tea Partiers are in a contradictory set of locations. They are educated, but rarely with an elite education and lacking the cultural capital and social graces of the professional upper middle classes whom they often disdain. They have above average incomes, but are not secure. Moreover, even despite or because of their relative affluence, they seek acceptance into higher strata (with its higher status and material security). They are likely to experience relative deprivation and, in turn, feel especially angry about a government that seems to tax them so highly and give their money to the undeserving poor. They typically despise lower classes and fear they may be reduced to that class, especially those who have been upwardly mobile from working class origins.

As we have noted, Tea Party members tend to be fearful and anxious. This course begins in childhood where people that are raised in a ‘strict father’ milieu are socialized to believe that the world is indeed a dangerous place and they must ever be on guard, and strong and tough to meet the various challenges of the world. Second, as has been noted, we live in a world in which status is problematic. At the same time, globalization and financialization have led to major changes creating the kinds of uncertainties that give rise to fears and anxieties. We live in a time of ‘liquid modernity’ (Bauman, 2001) with greater individualization; at the same time, there is greater freedom, emancipation and personal uncertainty. Finally, the financial crisis and uncertain directions of the economy, as well as the election of an African American president, generate fears of both racial pollution and what his policies may bring. From a psychoanalytic point of view, we can see that social and economic changes and crises have led to a great deal of both castration anxiety and narcissistic rage. Men facing economic decline, uncertainties, and genuine hardships are especially prone toward feeling that their masculinity has been assaulted. In an individualistic society like the USA, the individual is seen as responsible for his/her own fate or destiny. The often used term of freedom is used to describe an individual’s ability to work, succeed, and provide for his family through his own efforts. Thus, much as the petite bourgeoisie embraced Protestantism, Bonapartism, then Nazism, right populism similarly assuages anxiety. But what must be noted is that, given the characterological basis of that anxiety, such amelioration is episodic.

Victimization

As has been argued, both historically and today, right populists see themselves as victims. Despite their relative economic security, the Tea Party members feel victimized by cultural and social changes as well as by economic factors. There is some truth in that position. They are indeed facing the legacies of the social and cultural changes of the 1960s that have challenged their hierarchical authoritarian views of the traditional family, their racial privileges, and puritanical sexual morality. But given their social locations, personalities and educations, they are not likely to understand the nature of social change. For example, when women work, it not only changes the power dynamics of the family, but working women are more likely to have fewer children. Similarly, Tea
Party members are less likely to find themselves in the kinds of multicultural urban milieus where racism is less likely found. Moreover, for many, they are not likely to find themselves in work and/or social situations with minorities at the same income and education levels. Thus, it becomes easy for them to accept the views of their leaders, especially various shock jocks and hate mongers, and regard these socio-cultural changes as assaults from despicable, demonized others, if not conspiracies. In much the same way, they are prone to personalize economic forces and blame particular individuals and ‘evil’ elites for their victimization.

There are at least two ways that they deal with feelings of victimization and powerlessness. Tea Parties transform the passivity of perceived victimhood into expressions of illusory agency that seemingly empowers those who fight to ‘take their country’ back. The rallies and mobilizations provide realms of agency, expressions of the very freedom that is seen as eroding, even if it is extremely unlikely that such mobilizations will actually impact or reverse the larger social trends. And much like any other organizations that seek political power and/or change, what can be more empowering than participation in various meetings, rallies, and political organizing? Its members believe they are defending the ‘real’ (white, Christian, rural) America; they will gather together and fight to reclaim their nation of memory from evil forces or misguided elites. But at best, they are fighting rearguard battles against historical trends.

The other way to deal with victimization and powerlessness is the disavowal of blame: ‘It’s not my fault.’ For Nietzsche (1956), Christianity made a virtue of necessity. That is to say, by embracing a slave mentality, Christians gave themselves an elevated moral status that would not only compensate for their suffering and inferior status, but leave them blameless for their circumstances. One of the consequences of our individualistic cultural heritage is to blame ourselves for things which are really not our own fault. In an individualistic society like the USA, the individual is seen as responsible for his/her own fate or destiny. As noted earlier, the often used term freedom is used to describe the individual’s ability to work, succeed, and provide for his family through his own efforts. Thus, for people who have been experiencing economic hardship and uncertainty, stagnation of income, or even the loss of a job or business, disavowal of blame through the attribution of causality to an evil elite exonerates the person from culpability. A merchant whose business has declined and folded, or a lower echelon official who lost his/her job due to budget cuts – such individuals are nevertheless likely to blame themselves and feel some guilt. They often wonder if they might have done something different if adverse circumstances had not taken place. Bader (2009) writes, ‘If we regularly encounter conditions over which we’re powerless and which put us into states of dependence, but such feelings are intolerable, what solutions do our minds generate? … One of the main things we do is blame ourselves. If our overinvestment in being free agents leads us to refuse to face feelings of helplessness, then we have no choice but to make our suffering our own fault.’

Thus, the embrace of various conspiracy theories in which evil elites are responsible for victimization leave people exonerated from blame. Those elites who take our hard-earned tax dollars, and transfer those dollars to the poor, not only limit our freedom but support the indolence and immorality of the undeserving freeloaders that are, first and foremost, dependent upon the hard work and sacrifices of the ‘good and decent, ordinary people’ who bust their butts and obey the rules (and these rules include ‘proper’ sexual behavior; for example, the repression of sexuality and its restriction within marriage. Of course, that rarely happens but that is beside the point). Bader (2009) goes on to note:

But self-blame and guilt are the automatic and natural byproducts of our intolerance of helplessness and our belief in freedom and choice. So, what do we do with these toxic feelings of self-recrimination that are
continually stirred up? Project them. In other words, blame others. ‘It’s not my fault, it’s yours or hers or his.’ … It momentarily restores some sense of innocence. I’m an innocent victim. I had no choice. I’m back on the moral high ground. Blame is a powerful antidote to guilt, albeit a temporary one. Because it’s not a real solution, the innocence it creates is not based on an accurate view of ourselves. These feelings of guilt, these irrational feelings of responsibility and self-blame, don’t go away. They’re still there. They have to be projected over and over. Government is a good target for these projections. For the right, it’s the perfect target. It’s big and powerful. It’s anonymous. It interacts with our lives everywhere, all the time. What other institution does this? What other force is there in our lives that is so ubiquitous, so full of laws, rules, restrictions, restraints, obligations?

Right populism exonerates the individual and leaves him/her blameless for his/her circumstances – s/he is rendered an innocent victim of the elites and/or the parasites below. By joining together with others of the same mind s/he is ready to ‘fight back’. Now we can understand how conspiracy theories not only project aggression and sexuality, but protect the self and preserve dignity. Right populist ideologies and organizations provide realm of agency in face of victimization and exonerate the actor from culpability over his/her circumstances.

Anger, Rage and Aggression

There are a number of reasons that right populist (sado-masochistic) authoritarians are likely to be angry and aggressive, beginning with a characterological disposition. As a result of repressive socialization that frustrates the emergence of creative selfhood, aggression toward parents becomes displaced onto enemies. The lower middle classes tend to see themselves as victims of elites and threatened by dangerous classes below. As noted above, for Nietzsche (1956), the spirit of revenge thwarts self-fulfillment. For Fromm (1973), thwarting of creativity and self-fulfillment ultimately led to nihilism, the love of death and destruction, what he called ‘necrophilia’ (see Lundskow, in this issue). Authoritarians value power and toughness, cynicism, destructiveness, and punitiveness toward out-groups. They need to find targets for their aggression and scapegoats to blame for their adversities. As Sartre (1948) put it, if the Jew did not exist, the anti-Semite would create him. Given the grievances we noted, such as economic stagnation and crisis, and perceived victimization of the ‘little guy’ at the hands of elites that have prospered, their anger is not entirely irrational – even if their understanding may be. Wall Street was bailed out by the government, but not Main Street or home buyers. While Tea Partiers may be more affluent than most Americans, they are nevertheless anxious about the economy since their tenuous status depends on maintaining their lifestyle. On the other hand, they are angry that many of their hard earned tax dollars are transferred to undeserving groups, ‘parasites’ such as the black urban poor (producerism).

As we have also noted, one of the more important underlying factors for the emergence of the Tea Party was the election of an African American president. Most of the supporters of the Tea Party tend to be white and generally racist; not so much in the more classical expressions of the Ku Klux Klan or George Wallace, but generally considering themselves superior to African Americans as well as perhaps Mexicans. This racism was evident in 1968 with the Nixon ‘southern strategy’, white flight to the suburbs, and the continued celebrations of the Confederacy in the South – a Tea Party stronghold. While racism may have had economic roots (that is, slavery was needed to produce cotton and tobacco and thus slavery served an economic purpose), slavery was justified by considering slaves sub-human pack animals needed for work, or perhaps to be (ab)used sexually. What is crucial for understanding racism in general, and the Tea Party disdain of African Americans, especially Obama, is the extent to which whiteness is the basis of a privileged identity, an alienated self-esteem, a group narcissism that in turn depends on the subordination of the racial Other (cf.
Kovel, 1984 [1970]). Any recognition of the equality of the Other in turn elicits narcissistic rage, projected onto the Other which fuels right populist sentiments. Thus for racists, white nationalists and Tea Party types, most contact is with the lower class whose subordinate status confirms racist prejudices and/or sustains a group narcissism. But for such folks, the equality of the educated, talented Other is a special danger to privilege and dignity based on beliefs of white superiority. She evokes resentment and anger.

Mary Douglas (1966) posited that dirt/impurity is out of place and a threat and danger to a group whose rituals of separation maintain solidarity and status privileges. The separation of the ‘untouchables’ from the Brahman was essential for boundary maintenance. The notions of equality strike at the very heart of a dignity-maintaining identity dependent on social boundaries. Equality would be an anomaly and dangerous, so it must be avoided and/or denigrated to preserve group boundaries, identities and the framework of categorization. Her analysis suggests how and why the Other, the black, the gay, and the immigrant, evokes disgust: the reaction to the unclean, the crossing of boundaries that makes one vomit. And thus it should be clear that the intensity of the anger and rage toward the black Other is not so much as an economic rival per se, nor simply his or her hedonism and/or parasitism. Rather,

1. racial/ethnic diversity and toleration undermines a central aspect of status, esteem and identity as ‘superior’;
2. insofar as the Other is seen as a subordinate, the greatest fear of the lower middle classes is the ‘fear of falling’ to the level of the subaltern – or his/her elevation to a superior status; and finally,
3. racism/ethnocentrism/integral nationalism provide targets for aggression.

It is often the case that ‘acting out’ is a way of masking or avoiding feelings, and indeed anger and aggression are often ways of avoiding various feelings. Aggression, real or fantasy, as a form of ‘acting out’, not only avoids dealing with the underlying feelings, but locates an ‘evil’ enemy that is responsible, and that aggression, whether in fantasy or practice, becomes a form of compensatory agency. And thus it should now be apparent that the intensity of rage toward the government, especially toward various social programs, coupled with denial/ignorance of the benefits gained from that government, stems from anxieties over status and tenuous social ties. And regardless of the target, whether the government, a conspiracy, minorities, immigrants, or distant Muslim terrorists, the anger and aggression of authoritarian movements come largely from within.

Anger based aggression toward out-groups, as a form of agency, serves to maintain social barriers, protect the dignity of the self (recognized as superior), and avoid feeling underlying emotions like anxiety and shame. Feelings of dignity, self-worth, self-esteem or, conversely, shame and humiliation, play an important role in social life including support of and/or recruitment into social mobilizations. Various scholars have seen dignity, respect or recognition as a central human motive. Given the stagnation of wages and many bankruptcies over the last several decades, exacerbated by the great meltdown, many people have suffered financial losses, and as a result of such losses have created anger. But part and parcel of that anger is an attempt to deal with or actually avoid dealing with underlying shame and depression. Nevertheless, in face of crisis, many individuals feel personally responsible for their fate, shame over their condition, and the depression that comes with loss of status. Shame, as the failure to glean positive recognition and/or avoid humiliation (an assault on one’s very self-identity) can foster intense reactions including an irrational rage and revenge that would destroy the ‘enemy’ and serve to mask assaults on the self to protect one from unacknowledged, unconscious shame that one’s self has been denigrated (Scheff, 1994).
Moreover, in our individualistic society, being dependent can be a source of shame. Part of being human is being dependent upon other people. As Slater (1970) argued, the denial of dependency and community has long been an essential part of American individualism. Those who are seen as dependent on others are considered weak, inadequate and surely unworthy. Save for young infants and children on the one hand, and the elderly and the infirm on the other, people should be self-reliant and act on their own. In much the same way, Lakoff (2008) has argued that the authoritarian, ‘strict father’ narrative sees independence as good and dependency as bad. Thus, we can understand a disdain of government programs that sustain dependent classes, while in practice, many accept these benefits. As Bader (2009) has shown, this fear of dependency is closely tied to various aspects of anti-government paranoia. He writes:

I think that one answer to this puzzle lies in the psychological perils of helplessness and dependence, defenses against which lead to anti-government paranoia. The process by which this occurs is complicated and takes a bit of explaining …. If there’s one thing I’ve learned from my clinical practice, it’s that people hate feeling helpless and dependent. And yet, we’re all born this way and only gradually relinquish this position over the course of our lives—until, that is, we become elderly or ill and have to re-experience it intensely once again. (Bader, 2009)

Thus, as he argues, the intense fear of acknowledging one’s own dependency upon others and indeed upon the government leads to a vehement rejection of the very government programs upon which so many are dependent. Thus, for example, many Tea Partiers are retired and not only collecting Social Security, but dependent upon Medicare to cover their medical bills. But they demand that the government stop supporting the very programs upon which they are dependent. While this may not make logical sense (why would people reject entitlements that benefit them?), it is perfectly clear, in the psychological sense, that they do not want to be dependent, especially on the loathsome government.

**Denial**

We might finally emphasize the role of denial that is the product of the interaction of class location and (authoritarian) character that collude and sustain the elite power structures that insure that Tea Partiers support those same structures. We have already noted how denial of dependency serves to sustain a mythical individualism that leaves one blameless for adversities and most of all, insulates the person from countervailing information. This can be seen in the denial of global warming, the denial of the how the elites have profited enormously by gaming the system in ways that have hurt most Americans – including Tea Partiers. To be sure, the constant diet of talk radio and Fox News reinforces this denial – and sustains the illusions that the problems of the USA are due to dangerous evil foreigners and vile progressive elites. Thus for example, they are immune to any ‘evidence’ coming from actual experts that might contradict their beliefs.

**The Tea Pot Cools Off**

Contentious social movements have natural cycles of growth and decline. The popularity of the Tea Party is now in decline, or perhaps it never really did have the numbers, power or support that its leaders claimed and the mass media reported or perhaps created. Yes, the rallies and disruptions were well covered infotainment spectacles, and yes, some of its candidates did well, but the impact of the Tea Party, as if it were anything but part of the Republican base, was overstated. How many
are there? Its actual numbers are small, they are poorly funded, its organization lacking, and its power has waned. The actual membership claimed by the Tea Party Federation is slightly over a million in 85 affiliated organizations – about 0.3 percent of the country. Other estimates are lower, around 330,000. It is worth noting that after Glenn Beck lost many of his sponsors, despite having over 2 million viewers, Fox fired him. Rush Limbaugh has also lost one third of his audience.

The power of the Tea Party peaked on 5 November 2010, when Tea Party Republicans scored major congressional victories. About 60 representatives were elected who were hailed as the new force in politics. However, as we have seen, it was little more than punditocracy that celebrated the ‘rising’ power of the Tea Party as a new political force. Also as we have seen, the Tea Party was initially an ‘astroturf’ movement that consisted primarily of rebranded Republicans articulating a right populist tradition that was already evident in the 19th century. But this election was not a major political realignment. First, the party out of power typically gains in off-year elections. (There is typically a voter drop and the more motivated, typically older voters show up.) Second, much of the Democratic base, especially young minorities, was demoralized and unenthusiastic about Obama/Democrats after the failure to pass single payer health care bill, continued wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, a stagnant economy, and high unemployment. Much of the victory was due to the ‘enthusiasm’ gap between the highly motivated ‘patriots’, trying to save the republic from either Satan or communism and those apathetic and/or disappointed over the gap between Obama’s promises and delivery. However, the media amped the victories, much like they created the rise of the Tea Party. Then came the manufactured crisis over the routine raising of the debt ceiling that became a media spectacle in which the newly elected Tea Party vowed to oppose raising the debt ceiling. They not only lost that battle, but with growing impatience with their negative politics, public opinion turned against them – and would soon turn to support for the Occupy Wall Street movements. The majority of Americans do not support the Tea Partiers. More than half explicitly reject them. The number of events sponsored by Tea Party Patriots and Americans for Prosperity has declined; the attendance keeps getting smaller and the Tea Party Nation is bankrupt. Is there still a movement there?

Electoral victories often mean the demise of social movements when ‘winners’ (also known as angry activists) go to Washington and either sell out and join the establishment (gaining lots of perks) or find themselves isolated and marginalized. Many new Tea Party representatives, while they may have been true believers, like establishment Republicans want to get reelected and understand that extreme positions mean lost elections. When massive opposition to Paul Ryan’s plans for cutting Medicare became evident, it was dropped. The same thing occurred when the debt ceiling was approved; despite fervent opposition by the true believers unwilling to compromise, many of the Tea Party folks voted for it. Some of the new Tea Party members complained that the leadership, people like John Boehner and Mitch McConnell, were RINOs, and they threatened a revolt. Most soon learned the rules, and rule number one is that Wall Street and major corporations have more sway than the Tea Party. So, in sum, we have seen a loss of enthusiasm from within and growing opposition in the larger society.

Reactionary mobilizations in general, whether nationalistic, fascist or right populist like the Tea Party, are not just responses to socio-economic crises; they are reactions to insults and humiliations to one’s very self, identity and values and/or to one’s people (nation). This explains why they are so virulent, aggressive and fundamentally irrational. As Fromm (1941) noted, the embrace of Protestantism was a reaction to feelings of worthlessness that Protestantism assuaged, suggesting that the ‘successful’ were indeed better and chosen by God. In other words, their anger and resentment seeks retribution toward enemies that well deserve their opprobrium. This is what Nietzsche (1956) called the ‘spirit of revenge’. The Tea Party will ‘settle the scores’ with all those
backstabbing traitors – secularists, cosmopolitans, socialists, communists, homosexuals, foreigners, parasites from below, and corrupt bankers – who have banded together in various conspiracies to appropriate its members’ hard earned wealth, deplore their religious values, undermine racial hierarchies, and denigrate their selfhood. They would establish the ultimate dystopia: a ‘one world’ government whose society was based on equality, democracy, justice, toleration, and actual freedom – all anathema to the ‘herd mentality’ of the Tea Party.

As Nietzsche (1956) noted, ‘the spirit of revenge’ thwarts the ‘will to power’, turns on the self and destroys the ‘avenger’ who then embraces nihilism, despair and self-destruction. And thus, for Nietzsche, the combination of the conformity and mediocrity of the herd mentality, together with its disdain of what was different – transcendence beyond the herd – and ressentiment toward the elites become an all-consuming passion that ultimately fosters a self-destructive bitterness, self-hatred, and nihilism that will in the end destroy the self. In any case, the passion of the movement and desire for revenge will either wane or turn back upon the self. In more psychoanalytic terms, when aggression cannot find release, when it can neither harm nor destroy the target, it can either dissipate or turn upon the self, often seen as guilt, self-blame, endless brooding, self-destruction, cynicism, and nihilism. In either case, such movements often wane.

**Reaction and Return**

Nietzsche (2006 [1911]) embraced a cyclic theory of history, the ‘eternal return’. Eliade (1961), also influenced by Durkheim’s notion of the sacred and profane, then argued that modern man is living in a rational, secular age without cosmic (transcendental) meaning; he does not experience the sacred, especially the *illud tempus*, the sacred time of origins. I would like to suggest that most reactionary political mobilizations similarly seek to challenge the nature of present life, rid the world of unpleasant changes, and return to a status quo ante, a ‘golden age’. For many conservatives, the 1950s were such a ‘golden age’ of meaning and vitality.

In other words, while modernity has privileged vast numbers of people, it has also led to economic insecurity for some, and perhaps more important, late modernity has challenged what has long been considered ‘typical’ notions of self and identity that provided status, dignity and honor for many people. In the USA, religious communities have been an important aspect of social life and identity. Religious morality has not only been an enduring aspect of the American character, but remains a dimension of status honor (distinction) for many people (cf. Lamont, 1992). Most Tea Partiers come from highly conservative, Protestant backgrounds and thus, populist movements can be seen as attempts to preserve a fundamental basis of valorized identity and social honor in such communities. The ascent of minorities, coupled with immigration, has challenged traditional white hegemony. The changing roles of women have threatened patriarchy and traditional family life. The growing toleration of hedonism, sexuality and alternative lifestyles, such as cohabitation or gay marriage, has been an affront to more traditionally religious folk that arouses status anxiety and narcissist rage to assuage that anxiety. McVeigh (2009) saw a similar dynamic in the rise of the Ku Klux Klan as a response to the loss of status and ‘devaluation of power’.

Many of the efforts and means by which people try to reverse history undermine the very attempts. Weber noted how asceticism produced the very wealth it abhorred. In much the same way, the visibility of the Tea Partiers’ rallies and town hall disruptions, their intransigent positions, and growing buyers’ remorse over their policies and/or elected leaders has led to their growing unpopularity in the larger society. But insofar as the economic, social and cultural ‘evils’ against which they mobilize are products of social change, there is little that they can do save rearguard holding actions.
Activist Fatigue

The election of Tea Party candidates did little to stop business as usual. More specifically, many in the rank and file, and indeed some leaders such as Michele Bachmann, considered raising the debt ceiling a Rubicon they would not cross. However, the Republican leadership nevertheless negotiated a deal to raise that ceiling. Thus, many feel that even after organizing and winning, things do not change. Moreover, while the newly emergent leadership, often seasoned Republican operatives, may embrace typical conservative policies, many of the rank and file do not want to see Social Security or health care privatized. Further, as now seen with Ron Paul supporters, there is a growing rift over defense spending and a growing isolationism. However, like religions as wish fulfillments, motivated by unconscious desires, the simplistic Tea Party understandings are not just illusory – they serve hegemonic functions sustaining if not increasing the very wealth and power of the ruling classes responsible for adversities. Thus as the Tea Party Republicans have pushed through various spending cuts, the elites have prospered – while they languish and in the process, often burn out.

Conclusion

For most of American history, there have been fundamental political and cultural conflicts between its political and economic elites and its rural small businessmen and farmers who love their nation but have been fundamentally opposed to the state and many social, cultural and economic changes. But in the course of this history, we have also noted a change in the conflicts that have moved from economic factors to issues of identity and values. Thus, for example, whereas at first racial and ethnic prejudices stemmed from potential economic competition, today we see that the fundamental question has more to do with various social/cultural factors that have undermined the status, honor and dignity of more traditional identities, lifestyles and values of the more rural, if not suburban, lower middle classes. With the economic stagnation of the last few decades and the financial implosion of 2007, many people became fearful, anxious and angry. However, with the election of Obama, we saw the sudden rise of the Tea Party that consisted primarily of rebranded Republicans filled with sound and fury, but what did they signify?

I have argued that while many people who have joined the movements faced economic uncertainties and anxieties, the primary factor behind these movements was the attempt to maintain a traditional identity, resting on authoritarianism, that is often intertwined with racism, sexism, homophobia, and a hypocritical Puritanism. And within the American framework, there can hardly be a more valorized identity than the ‘patriots’ who dumped tea into Boston Harbor and proceeded to establish independence from England. In order to understand the rise of this movement, I suggested that new social movement theory offers a far better understanding of this kind of movement than do resource mobilization theories that rely primarily on notions of rational self-interest and the efforts of social movement entrepreneurs who take advantage of political opportunities. To be sure, while people engage in movements in order to accomplish goals, this is not to suggest such goals are rational. Similarly, all movements require leaders, but the kinds of acceptable leadership in any organization will depend on various aspects of the group’s character and identity.

Therefore, by considering the extremely important role of (authoritarian) character and the powerful role of emotions first explored by the Frankfurt school, we can begin to understand the politics of rage and ressentiment and how and why movements like the Tea Party emerge, rise, and then face demise. More specifically, the Tea Partiers have a number of grievances over the stagnating economy and the growing concentration of wealth by elites, the changing nature of race, gender, and the acceptance of various gender orientations that have challenged the more traditional
identities. Similarly, the greater toleration for a hedonistic popular culture, cosmopolitan lifestyles, and the acceptance of sexuality have fostered various ‘resistance’ mobilizations, of which the Tea Party is the latest expression. Given their social locations, as well as authoritarian ‘strict father’ orientations, we have witnessed a great deal of anxiety and anger, and the resulting rapid growth of the Tea Party that had a major influence on the 2010 elections. But as the extreme nature of their reactionary positions became clear, and their intransient rejection of ‘normal’ politics became more visible, as there were various retrenchments and promises of major cuts in social security and Medicare, there was growing ‘buyer’s remorse’ and their popularity and membership dropped. A number of folks have suggested that however much Obama’s popularity has declined, the popularity of the Tea Party Republicans is far lower and indeed, some suggest, has generated fear and anger that will return Obama to the White House and the House to the Democrats.19

For those interested in fostering a more progressive society, we must understand how capitalism fosters various movements that sustain and oppose it. This understanding of social movements needs to consider the social psychological factors of character and emotion that inform social movements, left or right. This essay has been an early attempt in that direction.

Notes

1 To consider the importance of emotions and selfhood is not to suggest that Tea Partiers are irrational lunatics or irrational mobs.
2 See: http://www.gallup.com/poll/127181/Tea-Partiers-Fairly-Mainstream-Demographics.aspx
3 See http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-503544_162-20002529-503544.html
4 It is not exactly clear what ‘membership’ and/or ‘support’ means. Most were and remain Republicans. Moreover, 78 percent of Tea Party supporters never donated money or attended meetings or rallies. Most of their local organizations are not well organized; they tend to be quite remote from the main organization structures with well paid leaders that garner most media attention.
5 In the 2010 election, Tea Party candidates did not fare well on the coasts or in highly urban states.
6 See below, in the section Character and Identity, subsection on Ressentiment. As will later be noted, such movements are also based on unacknowledged shame and fears of dependency.
7 Authoritarianism will be more fully discussed below, in the subsection Authoritarianism in the section Character and Identity.
8 The most recent review on authoritarianism is by Altemeyer (see his website: http://home.cc.umanitoba.ca/~altemey/). For comments on the Tea Party, see http://home.cc.umanitoba.ca/~altemey/drbob/Comment%20on%20the%20Tea%20Party.pdf
9 It should also be noted that a number of segments of the corporate elite support various populist media heroes like ‘hate jocks’ from Rush Limbaugh to Glenn Beck; perhaps Sarah Palin can also be included. The corporate support for this kind of populism is clearly intended to protect corporate profits.
10 There is a long tradition of research on ‘status anxiety’, affective responses, and suggestions of psychopathology. This fell out of favor with the rise of civil rights movements and resource mobilization theory. While Tea Partiers may not necessarily be pathological, I will argue that they nevertheless have very strong feelings that must be incorporated into social movement theory.
11 Like most Americans, they have anxieties over the market, but given their ‘producerism’, one of their central fears is that their money is going to either lazy parasites or urban elites.
12 Given that only 40 percent voted, the actual margins of the Tea Party candidates were roughly 1.2 to 3 percent of the country, hardly a tsunami of politics.
It might be interesting to note that Dominionist theology says much the same about leaders—at least the ones chosen by God.

For Nietzsche, it would not be the powerless Christians who meted out revenge; rather, God would provide this punishment. Tertullian and Dante catalogued the various punishments the sinners would find.

Many modern nationalists similarly argue that the ‘culture’ of the ‘people’ was suppressed, and only when the people gained control of the political could their culture be realized.

As we saw with the bailouts, stimulus, and debt ceiling, there is no way that the big capitalists will support the election of a wild card when they have a perfectly compliant president.

See http://www.commondreams.org/view/2011/08/08-1


References


