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Down the Rabid Hole to a Tea Party

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Introduction

Social movements often gain public attention by surprise. They appear to be something new and fresh, a spontaneous critique of established economic or cultural relations. Whether from the left or the right, they seem like contemporary constellations of public discontent that explodes in increasingly creative contrivances of collective outrage against a system that will not otherwise hear their protestations.

As the 2008 election heated up, it was soon evident that the ‘typical’ contest for power in US politics was beginning to show some very dark undertones. While name-calling, mudslinging, and character assassination have long been American traditions in electoral politics, the Sarah Palin rallies revealed a wellspring of rabid anger and aggression toward Obama that was not often seen in public. As she insinuated that Obama was a communist, a traitor, who allegedly ‘palled around’ with dangerous ministers from the South Side of Chicago and even more dangerous terrorists from the Weather Underground of the 1960s, her audiences added their own patriotic fervor as they chanted ‘traitor’ and ‘kill him’. While surely the implosion of the real estate and stock market in 2007, and the subsequent government bailout of the big banks had many people anxious, fearful, and angry, it was nonetheless clear that for the conservative Republicans at Palin’s rallies, Obama was not just a left wing liberal intellectual. More importantly, he is African American, and this made his candidacy and eventual election ‘illegitimate’, a victory that upset the ‘rightful’ order of the presidency as a white man’s club, if not prerogative. Within a short time, stoked by right wing media, especially Fox News, fueled by money and organizational power from Dick Arney’s *FreedomWorks* and the Koch Brothers’ *Americans for Prosperity*, a new, ‘astroturfed’ movement emerged that called itself the ‘Tea Party’. While the astroturf corporate lobbyists and billionaires hoped to organize popular sentiment against Obama to support an end to all regulation on polluting industries, finance, and even lower taxes for the wealthy, a genuine populist aspect constituted an authentic grassroots side of the Tea Party.

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Tea Partiers at the grassroots level believed that the Obama administration was providing support for illegal immigrants and lazy local minorities with tax money in effect stolen from hard-working white people. They viewed Obama's Affordable Health Care Act as radical socialism. As the Tea Party movement staged rallies and disrupted town hall meetings during the 2008 election season, as perhaps 80,000 flocked to Washington for Glen Beck's rally, the media suddenly framed the Tea Party as a major political mobilization that would change the supposed 'leftward' direction of American politics. By the time of the 2010 elections, the Tea Party had indeed become a major political force and perhaps 60 Tea Party-supported candidates were elected to the House as well as a few governors. The Tea Party was seen as the dominant trend that would turn back the 'liberal-socialist' trends of the USA in which the government bailed out big corporations, imposed health care and 'death panels' on honest, hard-working Americans, and forced them to embrace secularism, humanism, multiculturalism, and even submit to an elected African American President.

How can we best understand the Tea Party as a moment of right populism? To be sure, the endless spectacles of incoherent sound bites and humorous sight bites dominated the mass media, but most of the punditry was highly predictable. The mainstream media saw them as a mass, grassroots, popular movement of ordinary folks who were 'boiling mad' with righteous anger at the government that had 'victimized' them. To Fox News and the Republican 'echo chamber', the Tea Party was seen as the vanguard of a reinvigorated conservative populism that would reverse the liberal direction of the USA, cut taxes, reduce government spending, restore the constitution, outlaw abortion, end homosexuality, and reverse the multicultural pluralism sweeping the country. Conversely, the 'liberal media' (much of what little there is exists only on the internet) often saw the Tea Party as a ship of fools – as either stupid, crazy, or both. While such epithets might make critics feel better, such denigration and disrespect of the actors of a major and important social movement – with a radically different world view – does not provide a serious analysis of rightist populism, past or present.

While Tea Party/Fox News audiences have repeatedly shown themselves remarkably ill-informed on current issues, we might still note that the Tea Partiers are quite uninformed about many issues (the Affordable Healthcare Act, for example). But we should not look at this as a personal inadequacy. Rather, they are the product of their class location and cultural milieu, the current manifestation of a long history of anti-intellectualism in the USA, exposure to the endless spectacles of mass media in general, and right wing talk radio and TV, Fox News in particular. Their small-business and technical/vocational middle class locations, belief systems, and personal systems of denial insulate them from many sources of knowledge and information in general, all of which cumulatively discourages critical and self-reflective thought as well. Thus, they see no contradiction in calling for an end to the government that pays the social security and Medicare benefits that many of them collect. However, closer analysis shows that their objection is not so much to the government, but rather that allegedly many lazy and foreign undeserving parasites collect free benefits.

As the minions of the populist right began their struggle to 'take their country back' from the parasites, to restore 'freedom' to Americans, to balance the budget and lower taxes, slowly but surely a counter reaction set in. This was first evident in the massive protests against Scott Walker, the Tea Party governor in Wisconsin who signed a bill to eliminate collective bargaining rights for state employees. In Ohio however, Tea Party governor John Kasich and his Republican legislature attempted a similar bill, but a strong backlash movement forced them to withdraw it. By the end of 2011, a substantial Occupy Wall Street movement had swept the country and minimized coverage of the Tea Party. Whether and to what extent it may reemerge in the 2012 election season remains to be seen.

How can we best understand the rise of the Tea Party? We might first note that the very emergence of such a mass movement in such a short time raises a number of sociological questions starting with its very existence as a movement. Was it really a social movement or an 'astroturfed' simulation of a movement created by money and media? Or, as some people argue, was it simply the conservative base of the Republican Party? While economic stagnation and implosion took place during the Bush administration, there was no outcry of anger from the populist right. How and why did the Tea Party suddenly burst upon the scene? What are the roots of rightist populism in US history? Who are the actors, the leaders? What, if any, might the long-term impact be? The articles in this special issue address these questions and more.

Most of the literature on the Tea Party has come from journalists covering the events, the disruptions, and the rallies as they unfolded. Many of these writers have been quite astute in their observations, and indeed many have been informed by scholarly traditions. But academic scholarship has been wanting. For one thing, the lag between events and publications of scholarly books and articles is much longer than for those who report in daily or weekly newspapers, magazines or websites. Moreover, the academy tends toward apolitical specialization, and scholars interested in the history of populism are not likely to be social movement scholars and vice versa. Meanwhile, academic scholarship usually avoids dealing with issues that point to blatant contradictions, such as how the grassroots Tea Partiers work against their own economic interests and instead willingly sustain the power of the ruling elites.

While academic analyses have been sparse, a number of scholars whose interests antedate the Tea Party have researched and theorized the movement. For example, Street and DiMaggio (2011) came out with one of the first major studies. (They are contributors to this volume). More recently, Theda Skocpol and her student Vanessa Williamson (2012) have a book on the Tea Party, and while it is a careful study, it is mostly a catalogue of demographics and beliefs, already well established in journalistic accounts. Their main conclusion is that the primary concern of the Tea Party was the amount of government aid to the lazy, undeserving parasites. While true, this is a superficial and obvious insight. Known among critical sociologists as '*producerism*', this ideology has been a part of right populist culture for many decades.

While mainstream scholarship has focused on locating the movement within existing frameworks of social movement theory, critical scholarship has seen these movements, typically exclusionary and anti-democratic, as moments of the larger nature of contemporary capitalism and its contradictions. Such scholars emphasize the hegemonic functions that obscure the wealth and power of the capitalist class, even as they overtly exercise their power to compel the government to save their financial (ass)ets when they lose big time at Casino Capitalism. Moreover, critical scholarship has been concerned with various contradictions; how can patriarchal values attract so many women and, indeed, at times have leaders, or spokespersons like Sarah Palin and Michelle Bachman? Similarly, while they are mostly white and racist, they have been very careful to shield that racism, and even supported Herman Cain for a while. A number of scholars from critical/progressive backgrounds have attempted to offer various understandings of the Tea Party.

The hope of the editors of this issue of *Critical Sociology* was to make some of these discussions available to a wider audience. The editors, Lauren Langman and George Lundskow, scholars who work in the traditions of the Frankfurt School, decided to gather some of this scholarship into a single collection to both document the nature of the movement and offer more thorough discussion from dynamic leftist perspectives that are usually excluded from dispassionate and apolitical mainstream discourse. (For the sake of full disclosure, Lauren Langman is on the editorial board of *Critical Sociology*).

Contributors

Chip Berlet began studying right wing populist movements in the early 1970s, becoming one of the foremost authorities on the topic. His contribution provides us with the historic background of these movements which trace back to the colonial era. Berlet illustrates how the Tea Party movement embodies earlier themes including anti-communism, opposition to unions, anger over entitlement programs and, quite often, racism and ethnocentrism. He points out that the Tea Party is itself a coalition of various groups from libertarian isolationists to Christian evangelicals and fundamentalists – networking with a fringe of birthers, oathers and tenthers. He notes that many Tea Party participants, like most right wing populists, embrace a variety of conspiracy theories to explain the ‘downward’ plight of the USA, its ‘drift to socialist tyranny’ and the growing ‘immorality’ of open sexuality and abortion. The usual suspects for the subversion of America, the victimization of its decent folks and its moral decay, are the Bilderbergs, the Trilateral Commission, the Rockefellers and of course, the Jews. Some versions now blame Muslims.

Progressive values, movements, and education in the form of feminism, queer theory, identity politics, and Afro-centrism have joined the ranks of evil conspirators. A significant number of fundamentalists see the devil, Satan himself, behind these conspiracies. It is a few short steps from belief in a vast conspiracy to prejudice and discrimination toward the named scapegoats, especially minorities and the foreign-born. If they are not conspirators, they are at best parasites. For Berlet, much like Hofstadter, the core of right wing populist ideology is producerism: the division of society into the hard-working producers and the lazy, hedonistic freeloaders. These parasites live off the taxes paid by the hard-working productive classes and add deficits to the national budget. It is communism, Satan, the homosexual agenda (whatever that is), inferior breeds, and subversion from within that explain reality, so the productive people know what needs to be done to ‘take their country back’. This world view is ‘common sense’ to insiders, but to others, it strains credulity. Berlet argues that these kinds of movements are best understood as based on fears of losing social power and truly becoming an isolated individual.

Leonard Zeskind examines the institutional connections between the six main national grassroots organizations and the role of the astroturf organizations – the lobbying fronts supported by wealthy and powerful individuals, including Dick Arme and the billionaire Koch brothers. While the astroturf groups existed originally to promote lower taxes on the rich and an end to regulations, especially on pollutive industries, they needed popular support for much of their agenda, and they found it in the anti-Obama sentiment of far-right populism. Thus, Zeskind argues that economics motivate the Tea Party from the top, and racism from the bottom. The more provocative finding for Zeskind is that this relationship has endured for decades, and now firmly constitutes the basis of right populist nationalism – in other words, a racial state. Yet this is not the personal politics of the charismatic leader in historical fascism, but a racial nationalism in combination with a literalist understanding of the US Constitution, equally a matter of faith as of law for the far right.

Beyond race and class, a number of other factors gave rise to the Tea Party, but one factor that has had little attention has been the extent to which the built environment impacts people’s experiences and understandings. As most students of politics know, urban areas tend to vote for liberals while most suburbs, exurbs and rural folks vote for conservatives. **Michael Thompson**, following the Marxian insight that material factors shape ideology, argues that it is not an accident that the great suburban and exurban sprawls, especially in the South, have fostered conservatism in general and support for the Tea Party in particular.

He argues that certain kinds of socio-spatial structures are more or less open or closed. Urban spaces, as Simmel noted, promote a wide range of frequent and unavoidable interactions with a wide range of different people, often strangers who are apart from family and peers and accordingly, they foster more open and flexible world views subject to revision and negotiation. Closed socio-structural spaces discourage these kinds of interactions and instead foster more isolation and separation. This is one reason why stereotypes are employed in lieu of actual interaction and knowledge of the Other. Such kinds of spaces and the limited range of interactions with very little diversity foster ever more ingrained world views that are not only resistant to change, transformation, and modification with experience and/or counterfactual information, but when challenged evoke anger and aggression.

This ultimately leads to certain kinds of moral/political reasoning that take on political import once we see that central to this process is the construction of moral value systems – the way individuals code their world of power, authority, legitimacy, social acceptance, toleration, fear, and so on. For Thompson, this erodes the capacity for democratic citizenship and legitimates closed, authoritarian thinking with limited capacity for self-reflection and examination, discussion, or debate outside a small circle of similar friends and family. This detachment from the outside world, an ‘anomic provincialism’, disposes conformity within hierarchical kinds of social relations such as in one’s family or church.

In accordance with various critical theorists, moral cognition is not much based on reasoned world views, but is acquired on the basis of interactions where certain types of people become a salient aspect of identity and trigger certain powerful emotions. Consequently, moralistic actors perceive systematic or logical reasoning on the basis of facts and evidence as a waste of time, an abstract activity that carries no real sense of meaning or purpose. Thus, Tea Party ideology is not simply conservative, but enacts a great deal of rage when confronted with facts that might require them to change or modify deeply held values and convictions. For Thompson, not only are the Tea Party values extremist, but also its ideology (antipathetic toward elites, anti-statist, racist/xenophobic, patriarchal, puritanical) resonates with a large number of people whose similar character structures, anti-logic, and moral political categories of understanding and evaluation have been shaped by the spatial and cultural contexts of suburbia.

To the extent suburban/exurban contexts erode the capacities for open, democratic thought, and instead foster more closed, moral dogmatism, as seen in the embrace of conservatism in general, and the Tea Party in particular, then whatever the immediate fate of the Tea Party, and even the outcome of the next election, the closed minded conservatism of a large segment of the population is not likely to change in the near future.

For **Paul Street and Anthony DiMaggio**, the Tea Party embodies where the GOP has been going for many years – a rightward drift of the entire party system, driven by the neoliberal era of rising economic inequality and the growing concentration of wealth and power at the top – fully manifested by huge government bailouts and tax cuts to the very elites who brought the system down while individual wealth at the top soared. Meanwhile, the majority of people have faced stagnation at best, unemployment and home foreclosures at worst. Moreover, much of the largesse to the elites and their corporations was paid for by major retrenchments in social programs and cutbacks in government employment. This has been called ‘democracy incorporated’ or the ‘dictatorship of money’.

But the rightward shift of the Republican Party served to obscure two basic realities: first, that the rich and powerful were able to manipulate the economy so successfully for private gain, and second, that Republican elites organized the Tea Party (at least initially) and most of its rank-and-file members were long standing conservative Republicans. There is not really much difference

between Tea Party and Republican policies that benefit the financial elites, though patriotic costumes and even silly signage might obscure the fundamental unity. As they argued in their book, *Crashing the Tea Party: Mass Media and the Campaign to Remake American Politics* (2011):

The 'Tea Party' is a loose, elite-directed conglomeration of partisan interest groups set on returning the Republican Party to power. Despite protestations to the contrary, it is partisan Republican at its core, its leading activists and main supporters accurately described by one mainstream reporter as 'super-Republicans'. It is not an uprising or protest against the existing political system. Rather, it is a reactionary, top-down manifestation of that system, dressed up and sold as an outsider rebellion set on changing the rules in Washington and across the country.

Of special note is the willingness of the Democrats to accept entitlement cutbacks, obscured by a 'Tea Party made me do it' excuse by Obama who cleverly diverted blame away from the Democrats – but who nevertheless agreed to the Republican demands. They were joined in this mirage by a number of journalists and pundits that blamed the 'crazy' Tea Party extremists and exonerated the so-called 'moderate' Republicans and 'liberal' Democrats. Although the Democrats were once a liberal party, that derived from an era when much of their power came from unions, and from civil rights, anti-war, and women's liberation movements. No longer politically organized, such progressive forces allow the Democrats to move to the right and support the agenda of big business (especially finance) and extremely wealthy individuals. As Street and DiMaggio note, contrary to what is often presented by the corporate controlled media, most Americans are far to the left of the Democratic Party and do not want cuts to Social Security or Medicare, education, and in fact call for significant increases in infrastructure spending. Most Americans also seek expanded benefits and job creation, not cuts and austerity. (Editors' note: the emergence of the Occupy Wall Street movement suddenly changed many of the debates from austerity and cuts to job creation and investment. At the time of this writing, it is too early to tell what impact this will have on the 2012 elections since the Occupy Wall Street activists have correctly noted that that for the most part, the Democratic party has been on the same payroll of the top 1 per cent as have the Republicans.)

George Lundskow has studied the interconnections between religion, economics, and character for over a decade. In this contribution, he places Tea Party identity within the critical social psychology of Erich Fromm, augmented with recent empirical research on authoritarianism and right wing character. He begins with the assumption that the human condition is a complex admixture of rational thoughts, emotional compulsions, and a longing for community and meaning that, when unfulfilled, often drives the individual to the emotional intensity of nihilism and destruction. Yet the relationship between social forces and individual identity and perception is dynamic, such that different experiences and different choices instill and build different character tendencies.

In the case of the Tea Party, Lundskow argues that a combination of authoritarianism and destructiveness creates a rigid and dichotomous perception of the world that, if violated, inspires hostility and aggression. Class and a culture of racism prove decisive. Shaped by their small business livelihood and technical professional fields, and increasingly, non-union wage-earning class positions, Tea Partiers experience the world beyond their own relationships as strange and dangerous, a world of competitors, criminals, and moral transgressors, such that suspicion rather than curiosity dominates their world view. Fear of difference and dread for the future motivates the grassroots Tea Party, not joyous expressions of patriotic love of country. Thus, the Tea Party is generally a negative orientation, the outcome of unfulfilling lives, insecurity, and declining opportunity perceived as a natural right of white people.

For Tea Partiers, the government has become complicit in its alleged oppression of white people, but this is a carnivalized vision based on imagined and preferred versions of reality. At its center, the Tea Party movement relies on moralism (conservative values), essentialistic fantasy (racism and religiosity), and Manichaeian categorization (good/evil) to explain the reality of job loss, rising prices, and severe real estate decline. With its strong sense of self-righteousness, it does not matter whether the vision of reality that Tea Partiers prefer is true or not in an empirical sense. What matters, is that it feels true in an emotional sense. Rather than interrogate finance capital and deregulation, the Tea Party movement instead indulges in spectacle as both individual gratification and to herald renewed white privilege. However, the simultaneous rejection of the established institutions of power, simplistic policy formulation, and condemnation of outgroups suggests a racially motivated authoritarianism and destructiveness rather than any particular political commitment. Overall then, the Tea Party is nihilistic. They cognitively know that much of their criticism is factually inaccurate or logically inconsistent, but at the same time, they emotionally feel that they are justified in whatever they prefer to believe. Hence, Manichaeian and contradictory labels applied to Obama, such as ‘liberal fascist atheist Muslim anti-military warmonger’ make perfect emotional sense; Obama embodies everything evil.

Lauren Langman argues that the classical Marxist understandings of Bonapartism, supplemented by Frankfurt School understandings of authoritarianism provide a starting point for understanding the Tea Party. But unlike the petit bourgeois French farmers supporting Louis Napoleon, or the small merchants and underclasses supporting Hitler, the Tea Partiers were in general, more educated, more affluent, lower middle class suburbanites or rural dwellers. To more adequately understand this particular instantiation of long-standing right populist, anti-statist movements in US history, he suggests that we supplement our classical frameworks by first reviving Nietzsche’s concept of *ressentiment* as a moral compensation for the subordinated status of ‘victims’ who believe they are ethically superior to the elites. But then it becomes necessary to consider certain developments in new social movement theory as well as the sociology of emotions in order to more fully understand the feelings of victimization, anger, *ressentiment*, and aggression toward certain elites, and most people of lower social rank, etc.

In his analysis, the central moment of Tea Party ideology and in turn the social mobilization is the defense of a particular traditional identity formation tied to world views and values that have been undermined by long term social changes that have been precipitated by recent events. More specifically, white, conservative identities and values, typically racist or at least exclusionary, patriarchal, homophobic, and ethnocentric/nationalistic have been under assault since the 1960s, a period in which challenges to the status quo gave us civil rights legislation, feminism, gay rights and multiculturalism – all of which together and/or singularly confronted and challenged the more traditional identities and privileges of the Tea Partiers. This feared or imagined loss of status and power has been manifested frequently in populist right mobilizations, from the KKK to the Moral Majority and now to the Tea Party, all of which follow a pattern of blame – evil elites and hidden conspiracies have usurped power. In face of crisis and strain, growing fears and anxieties foster fervent embrace of reactionary ideologies that in turn assuage the self and provide a number of compensatory gratifications, including solidarity with other members of the besieged community, restoration of the assaulted self, and targets for anger and aggression in the form of the evil Other. More specifically, the 2007 meltdown, followed by bailouts and the election of an African American president aroused a number of class- and generation-based fears and anxieties. In essence, the Tea Partiers feel a crisis of legitimacy, both for their own identity, and the government they both worship and fear for the same reason – its immense power. Immense power is OK so long as the right kind of people wield it.

Conclusion

If we start by considering a number of legitimation crises of the economy, the government, and cultural changes (values regarding sexuality, feminism, homosexuality), we suggest that such crises, mediated through a class-based pattern of character, thereby migrate to the levels of identity and motivation. Given an authoritarian character, already filled with anxiety and anger over the precarious economy, and *ressentiment* toward left elites, as well as toward the lower classes with their perceived freedom from responsibility and lax morality, the election of a seemingly liberal, African American president shattered the traditional world views and challenged the identities of a segment of the American people, especially those in the Republican base. Certain highly conservative Republican elites, aided and abetted by the constant goading of right wing shock jocks, organized the fears, anxieties, and angers of the base and created the various astroturfed patriots to do battle against a socialist interloper whose very citizenship was in doubt. All blame was channeled to Obama and the Democrats, while the malfeasance of the economic elites, together with the contradictions of capitalism were cloaked. The intense emotions of anger, fear, and *ressentiment* inspired lower middle class authoritarians to join 'resistance' mobilizations – conservative if not reactionary movements that would resist the cultural changes of recent history and preserve traditional identities, values, and world views that have been challenged and undermined.

The crucial issue for an academic understanding of right populism in America is not the day to day events, but the underlying factors that foster the episodic emergence and waning of right populist movements. As we have seen, the various authors have noted cultural traditions, class location, the importance of space and place, underlying character traits and reactions to capitalist contradiction/crises, etc. For the Tea Party, as an expression of the Republican base, the crucial role of the media and money proved essential, primarily to the extent it arranged events and promulgated rightist reactions.

At the same time, for several of the authors here, and as is well documented by many scholars of right wing populism in America, the Tea Party reflects a long-standing continuity in America's cultural politics and the often radical expressions of individualism and democracy in which a combination of antipathy to elites, anti-statism, anti-intellectualism, racism/ethnocentrism and conformity, all documented in the early 19th century by De Tocqueville, have had a major impact on American culture. Character and its cultural politics have informed American exceptionalism from the earliest days of the USA. They have inspired ideological positions that often lead to claims of self-righteousness, but sometimes also lead to actual policy, such as Prohibition or faith-based education. At their worst, they lead to invasions of Viet Nam, Iraq, and Afghanistan.

We have seen this before, and will surely see it again. The pattern of today follows the essentialism typical of right wing thinking in general, that of the racial state. Whether for the '*Blut und Boden*' of Nazi Germany or the hard-working whiteness of contemporary America, status, rights, and privileges are not achieved, but inherent.

If the isolation and fragmentation of suburban/exurban life and interaction fosters particular kinds of interaction and an ego structure that is closed to reflection and transformation, then the very thought of progressive social changes, especially those inclusive of difference, fosters anger, rage, and the embrace of conservative politics. As in the early days of nativism, so the present context of late capitalism similarly challenges the Tea Party kind of authoritarian identity. With their patriarchy, racism, ethnocentrism, and homophobia, Tea Partiers see evil in diversity and equality, whether in terms of gender, religion, sexual preference, or

ethnicity. This social, psychological, and cultural clash typical of the lower middle classes provokes the anger, rage, and *ressentiment* that fuel right populist social movements – which all the while conceal class conflict.

Fomented by money from the right wing, and encouraged by the media, the Tea Party is a hybrid formation, partially a populist movement and partially an astroturfed spectacle that served to mobilize the Republican base, push the Republican party farther to the right, and bring the Democrats along for the ride. As the USA now faces serious economic problems such as unemployment, the collapse of its housing markets, a deteriorating infrastructure including its public education system, extravagant military spending, and immense accumulation of wealth at the top – all foregrounded by hegemonic decline – radical transformations of its political economy are not just desirable from a progressive standpoint, but necessary. As we have argued, however, one main response to the various crises has been the rise of the Tea Party, part of a potential long range shift to the right that has favored the large corporations and top 1 percent of the earners. Simultaneously, this rightward shift will only hasten the decline of infrastructure, education, and broad-based earnings, and hence tax revenue, which further stymies the economy, further exacerbates infrastructure decline, earnings, and so on in a downward spiral. The far-right agenda risks negating itself even as it more successfully achieves its policy goals.

So, even as this issue of *Critical Sociology* was going to press, the power and popularity of the Tea Party, at least as something separate from the Republican Party, had already waned. This was due to many factors, not the least of which was that once elected, many of their bills and/or gubernatorial actions proved very unpopular to the general public. Indeed there were massive mobilizations against Scott Walker and John Kasich, the Tea Party governors of Wisconsin and Ohio, respectively. The Tea Partiers failed to stop the Affordable Health Act, the debt ceiling was raised, and their support of candidates like Michelle Bachman, Herman Cain (until he dropped out) Rick Perry, and Newt Gingrich, all as anti-Romney candidates, took on all the qualities of a carnival. The featured flavor of the week indeed.

The Tea Partiers are much better as agitators than politicians. Complaining is easier and a lot more fun than the diplomatic skills, technical competence, and all manner of fortitude necessary to govern. Whatever the reason for their election, people raised to elected office need to bring home the bacon and actually improve the lives of their constituents. Often, right wing populists discover that they must support the very spending they decried as candidates. Finally, the Occupy Wall Street movements, their rapid growth, and the violence used to displace them has erased the Tea Party from the spotlight of the media. But will Occupy Wall Street become a political power moving the country to the left, or will it dissipate and wither? Will the Tea Party return, by whatever name? These questions must await the advance of history.

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