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REFERENCES

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- ¹ In the fallout from Obama's reelection in November 2012, the leadership of the Republican National Committee (RNC) called for an examination of the party's failure to unseat the president. The subsequent "Growth and Opportunity Project" was released in March of 2013 and was described by RNC chairman Reince Priebus as "the most public and most comprehensive post-election review in the history of any national party." The report highlighted that Republican conservatism was increasingly out of touch with the youth and with non-white Americans—obviously two important demographic groups in the national election: "Young voters are increasingly rolling their eyes at what the Party represents, and many minorities wrongly think that Republicans do not like them or want them in the country...We need a Party whose brand of conservatism invites and inspires new people to visit us... it should be a more welcoming conservatism."¹ The "Growth and Opportunity" report, a remarkably frank self-assessment of Republican viability, is also noteworthy for a glaring omission: it does not mention by name the tea party movement, that somewhat ambiguous though much-discussed entity that has apparently pushed the Republicans increasingly toward the political right, even while evidence mounts that such efforts have diminished the overall popularity of the GOP in the age of Obama.

- 2 Since the 1960s the Republican Party has absorbed a diverse collection of conservative figures and ideas, and—despite some important discontinuities and conflicts—there is a general ideological consistency that stretches from Barry Goldwater to Ronald Reagan to George W. Bush. Today a new cohort of conservative leadership is guiding the party from its right wing, as House Majority Leader Eric Cantor and other “young guns” associated with the tea party have continued their attacks on Obama’s healthcare reform by tying it to what would otherwise be routine congressional duties of raising the federal debt ceiling limit, thereby regularly threatening (and occasionally forcing) offices of the federal government to shut down. The tea party is also notable for its role in several other high profile public issues related to taxes, gun control and immigration.
- 3 There are several unresolved questions that remain at the center of scholarly writing on the tea party: is it fundamentally consistent with, or divergent from, the historical trajectory of conservative ideology in the post-WWII United States? Put differently, is the tea party just the latest episode in the larger story of American conservatism and the transformation of the Republican Party? If it is not, then what are its social origins? Is it an economic movement, concerned with bailouts, taxes and budgets, or is it a more sinister manifestation of white racism, as its critics have often charged? Is it a genuine grassroots movement, or has it been orchestrated by the conservative establishment, most notably by Fox News? The answers offered by some of the leading social scientists in the United States have varied widely. In his 2011 book, *The Rise of the Tea Party: Political Discontent in the Age of Obama*, Anthony DiMaggio argues that the tea party is not an independent or grassroots movement at all, but a creation of the far-right conservative establishment, whose rhetoric has been uncritically diffused through various national media outlets. In a recent essay in *Rolling Stone*, the historian Sean Wilentz offers a different assessment: the Republican Party reached a “new and more radical phase” with the election of George W. Bush in 2000 and has since “joined a relatively small number of major American political parties that [have become] the captive of a narrow ideology and [have] either jettisoned or silenced their more moderate elements.” For Wilentz, the tea party, “so contemptuous of American history and institutions,” has little to do with the postwar conservatism of Republican Party, although it remains a very real threat to American democracy.²
- 4 A new book, *Change They Can't Believe In: The Tea Party and Reactionary Politics in America*, authored by Christopher S. Parker and Matt A. Barreto, colleagues at the University of Washington, Seattle, sheds some new light on these questions. The book is based on Parker and Barreto’s impressive quantitative multistate survey project (the Multi-State Survey of Race and Politics, the details of which are helpfully available in the book’s appendix) in 2010 and 2011 at the Survey Research Lab at the University of Washington. The authors focused their analysis on those who *sympathize* with the tea party, rather than on movement leaders and participants. They note that in order to explain the success of tea party candidates in the 2010 midterm elections (for example Marco Rubio in Florida, Ron Johnson in Wisconsin, and Pat Toomey in Pennsylvania) it is necessary to look beyond the few thousand citizens who actively identify as tea party members. “Remaining confined to movement members doesn’t come close to explaining the success the Tea Party achieved in these races. Only if we consider those who sympathize with the Tea Party can we begin to appreciate these results” (16).
- 5 Parker and Barreto devote much of the subsequent analysis to showing how their data illustrates that tea party supporters and sympathizers do not represent a slice of

mainstream public opinion. Rather, tea party supporters are statistically distinct from tea party “skeptics” and, importantly, also from “mainstream” conservatives on a wide range of issues: from general support for Obama, to various indicators of social tolerance such as gay marriage and immigration issues. This of course begs the question: what has caused this divergence, and how can these attitudes be explained? Through statistical techniques, the authors “hold constant” various possible causal factors that could explain these opinions. They conclude that Obama himself appears to have some sort of *sui generis* impact inexplicable by racism, party affiliation or various other ideological or political factors, such as a disdain for “big government.” For Parker and Barreto, the tea party is a manifestation of identity politics: Obama (as president and thus as “America personified”) represents a “symbolic threat” to the historic white monopoly of political, economic and social power in the United States. “We argue that these [anti-Obama] sentiments are driven by anxiety that associated with the perception that Obama and his confederates are subversive forces, ones that threaten to steal ‘their’ country” (35).

- 6 In advancing this claim, the book bears the stylistic hallmarks of conventional American political science, as complex historical processes are reduced to a series of quantitative variables that supposedly uncover a positivistic causal relation. “Critics may assert that the effect we observe for Obama is really about expressing dislike for what they see as Obama’s socialist agenda, not fear of subversion per se...That would be a credible claim had we not controlled for ideology, preference for small government, and partisanship. For good measure, we also added social dominance orientation, authoritarianism, and ethnocentrism” (100). Throughout the book, the authors use support for the tea party as an independent variable that explains attitudes about the president and various social issues, although this causal relation is never engaged in a more critical conceptual or methodological sense. Only once do the authors acknowledge that the causal mechanism they repeatedly identify may in fact be the exact opposite than what they propose. “So far, we’re sure that the reader probably presumes that direction of causality runs from support for the Tea Party to attitudes about Obama. While identification with the Tea Party may conceivably cause someone to believe Obama is not a practicing Christian, for instance, it may also be the case that the causal relation is reversed. In other words, people may come to support the Tea Party because they don’t like the president, or don’t trust him. In the absence of experimental data, there’s no way for us to know for sure what’s causing what” (213).
- 7 These sorts of methodological uncertainties are well known issues that quantitative researchers tend to downplay in favor of more orderly and easily summarized conclusions. But this is not the only way in which Parker and Barreto gloss over potentially deeper conceptual issues. Throughout the book, the authors recognize that American conservatives are not a homogeneous group—and that they never have been. For example, in his important book, *The Conservative Intellectual Tradition in America Since 1945*, George Nash argues that American conservatism is historically derived from the intermingling of anticommunism, social conservatism and libertarianism, and that these distinct strains of conservative thought have formed a coalition that is not necessarily intuitive or permanent. But in *Change They Can’t Believe In*, the only sub-grouping of conservatism is between “mainstream” versus “reactionary.” And for Parker and Barreto, tea party support is a proxy for reactionary conservatism, which is at odds with mainstream conservative ideology and its media outlets such as *National Review Online*. Surprisingly, little mention is made of Fox News and whether it qualifies as mainstream

or as reactionary, and on what basis this distinction would be made. In advancing their reactionary versus conservative framework, Parker and Barreto compare the tea party to two earlier examples of similar movements in American history: the Ku Klux Klan and the John Birch Society—both of which, they argue, are departures from “mainstream conservative” values in that they undermine public order and social unity. In the case of the John Birch Society, its anticommunist doctrine was “a flagrant violation of freedom, a chief goal of [mainstream] conservatism” (254).

- 8 The conceptualization of conservatism as either “mainstream” or “reactionary” leads directly to the authors’ difficulty in explaining fissures between libertarians and social conservatives in today’s tea party. For example, they write, “Libertarianism and these anti-gay, socially conservative impulses create great tension in the tea party, tension that is evident both in...campaign websites and Tea Party message boards.” But although Parker and Barreto acknowledge tea party in-fighting, both libertarians and social conservatives are apparently classified as being “mainstream,” if for no other reason than they’ve “been around since the 1950s”(174). Thus, the authors’ analytical categories are unable to absorb and explain the contemporary and historical dynamics of the tea party and of conservatism more generally. Furthermore, their framework downplays the ways in which “reactionary” elements have been incorporated into the “mainstream” conservative fold during the postwar era. Although many conservative leaders eventually *did* distance themselves from the controversial organization, they did not do so because of an ideological incompatibility between their “mainstream” conservative ideas and the more “reactionary” anticommunism of the Birchers. Instead, in the aftermath of the Goldwater defeat in 1964, conservative leaders recognized that they needed “a more welcoming conservatism,” to borrow a phrase from the recent RNC report noted at the outset of this review. Indeed the Koch family fortune, instrumental in the rise of the Birch society, would continue to fund conservative organizations and politicians for decades to come. And a vehement anticommunist ideology, dormant since the end of the Cold War but resurrected with a vengeance in the age of Obama, would continue to shape conservative ideology long after the JBS itself fell out of fashion. The same might be said of explicit racism and the KKK. For example, as the work of Kevin Kruse and Matt Lassiter have shown, in the years after the civil rights movement, southern white Americans devised new code words as they attempted to present their racism in more “respectable” ways. Thus, it would seem that “mainstream conservatism” varies in degree rather than in kind from more “reactionary” elements, and that the intermingling of these forms have been so central to the ascendancy of the American conservative movement in the post-WWII era: from the “southern strategy” of Nixon and Phillips, to Phyllis Schlafly, Anita Bryant and the patriotic hardhats who fought to woo white racists and to keep the feminists, gays and uppity students in “their place,” respectively. Thus, I do not take issue with the historical claim that the tea party resembles in its ideology and demographic constituency earlier forms of “reactionary” conservatism. Rather, I would suggest that these “reactionary” groups cannot so easily be separated from “mainstream” conservative elements. Instead of seeing various “reactionary” movements as key to the rising conservatism of the postwar era, Parker and Barreto are more inclined to see them as something that occasionally “crop up” (245) before being pushed back by “mainstream” forces.
- 9 There are two other general weaknesses of the book. First, the authors make no mention of economic factors in the rise of the tea party. Anthony DiMaggio has argued that the

rise of the tea party was designed to “rebrand” the GOP as a party of “the people” in the aftermath of the economic meltdown of 2008, which was triggered by the bipartisan deregulatory efforts of free market ideologues and business interests during the 1980s and 1990s. Parker and Barreto dismiss any economic “causality” of reactionary movements: “it appears that the state of the economy can tell us little about the likelihood of [their] emergence”(34). This may or may not be the case, although it rules out a key dimension emphasized in much of the tea party scholarship, including the role of political and economic elites, via Fox News and other conservative outlets, in fostering and maintaining the appearance of the tea party movement. Finally, the authors draw from several disciplines of social science, particularly from social psychology, in their analyses of reactionary social movements. Perhaps this criticism stems from my own background in sociology, but their use of childhood psychology to explain reactionary conservatism as “guided by the social learning to which the individual is exposed in childhood” feels somewhat out of place (101, 103, 224, 238).

- 10 In conclusion, *Change They Can't Believe In* is an important work that contributes to our understanding of the nature of the tea party through an impressive quantitative study of the movement and those sympathetic to it. The strength of this book is its empirical data rather than its conceptual treatment of the tea party or its historical analysis of American conservatism. The book can be recommended for its unsurpassed summary of the political and social attitudes of tea party sympathizers. Although the definitive book on the tea party movement has yet to be written, Parker and Barreto have provided a unique contribution toward that end.

NOTES

1. The “Growth and Opportunity” report is online [here](#).
2. The *Rolling Stone* essay by Sean Wilentz can be found [here](#).

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