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Beyond Fear and Loathing: Tea Party Organizers' Continuum of Knowledge in a Racialized Social System

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BEYOND FEAR AND LOATHING: TEA PARTY ORGANIZERS' CONTINUUM OF KNOWLEDGE IN A RACIALIZED SOCIAL SYSTEM

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Abstract: Making use of fieldwork and *25* open-ended interviews with Tea Party organizers in the state of Illinois, I argue that Tea Party organizers draw from a continuum of knowledge, combining personal knowledge and experience with a conservative corporate media and Tea Party network frame. I draw upon the work of Weber to show how this continuum connects to various types of rational social action. Widening this scope of analysis allows not only for a more complex analysis of how corporate interests are connected to the grass roots movement, but also how the core frames of the movement are located throughout our mainstream political and ideological system.

Keywords: Tea Party; rationality; racism; ideology; social action

"Okay," began Bob, a white retiree wearing a farm company hat, as he read aloud a passage he had written about his awakening to Tea Party politics:

> "We started to wake up when we finally realized that George W. Bush's compassionate conservatism was really a creeping drift towards socialism. We were jolted awake when Bush's snail's pace became Obama's all out sprint, and our President surrounded himself with far left ideologues socialists, and even self-described communists."

He looked at me plainly, as if to ask, "Any questions?". So goes many of my conversations with Tea Party members in the state of Illinois, where I interviewed organizers about what brings them to the movement and how it speaks to issues of concern in their lives. They frequently discuss socialism, fear about rising national debt, and the

resentment that they feel in having to pay, in their view and via their taxes, for a bloated political machine and those that they feel are living off their dollar. Their mix of partial truths and racially coded myths motivates their political action, which is based upon and also resonates with the national discourse around race and individualism. But it is not only fear and loathing that drives Tea Party action. Organizers also draw upon intensely personal experiences such as health scares, financial struggles, and a decline in their local communities to inform their work.

I designed my study to allow Tea Party members to tell me in extended conversation why they joined the movement and how the Tea Party resonates with their lives. I find it true that residents are partially motivated by baseless fears and racially loaded loathing, which is the point at which most prior analyses have stopped. However, it is critical to understand that real issues in their lives, about which they know a great deal, also motivate the Tea Party organizers working in this state. While fear-based rhetoric and imagery of the movement certainly resonates deeply with them, as the analysis below will make clear, it is not *only* emotions or their character structure (Langman, 2012; Lundskow, 2012) that motivate their participation in the movement. They are also, and indeed always, acting in reasonable-seeming response to genuine concerns in ways that come to make sense to them, given the social structure in which they are embedded. Tea Party organizers are studying the constitution, learning about history and politics, and working very practically to enact the kinds of changes that they want to see in their local communities. While racially coded and myth-infused beliefs are certainly activated, they are also frustrated with declining local and personal wealth, corporate welfare, political disenfranchisement, and seemingly insurmountable national and state deficits. Missing one half of their motivations shallows our analysis of the Tea Party, and our ability to resist their politics.

THE PARADOX OF IRRATIONAL RATIONALITY

Depending on a binary framework around rationality also denies the very real social forces that shape both their movement and our shared social world. McVeigh's research on organized racism states, "it is reasonable to assume that social movement participants are at least as rational as the people who study them" (2004:905). After all, we are all—scholars and political lay folk alike -embedded in a shared social system, and while we may consume different media, many of the frames of individualism, racism, and a version of history that legitimates the status quo are often shared. To argue that the Tea Party members are solely irrational misses the ways in which ideology operates more broadly, and the social structures that are intimately

connected to it. It also eclipses an understanding of the continuum of knowledge from which participants draw to motivate and sustain their involvement in the movement and in their communities.

Weber's four basic structures relating rationalities to social action are useful here. Instrumentally rational actions are those most colloquial understood as "rational", involving the use of consciously pursued and calculable actions. Those who have studied the Tea Party have largely employed this conception of rationality to demonstrate the seeming irrational basis on which Tea Party members act—against their class interests, or inconsistently around notions of government intervention (opposing big government but asking the government to intervene to prevent gay marriage, for example). Value-rational action is "determined by the belief in the value for its own sake of some ethical, aesthetic, religious, or other form of behavior, independently of its prospects for success" ([1922] 1978:25). Some have characterized the Tea Party as acting primarily out of this rationality schema, as a result of nihilistic tendencies (Langman, 2012) and authoritarian character structures (Lundskow, 2012), thereby further coding the actors as irrational. The following two types of rationality are affectual action, which Weber notes as "(especially emotional)" (Weber, [1922] 1978:25), determined by an individual's feeling states; and traditional action, which is essentially action out of habit. Some of the same scholars who have emphasized value-rational action have also paid attention to affectual action, often by conflating them into their "irrational" or false-rationality schemas. Eclipsing instrumental action, most previous scholarship insists, Tea Party members rely exclusively on irrational motivations. Instead, I argue that multiple rationalities are at play, not all of them illogical.

This is not to say that feelings, for example, are always strictly "rational", nor that they have no role to play in social action. Tea Party members experience their own hard work and their own financial pinch, and are apparently willing to believe what a skewed media system tells them in order to analyze it. As Beck (2000) has indicated, it is sufficient for a group to simply *feel* it is losing power in order to act to regain that power. Indeed, such motivations have been key to conservative organizing in the United States for decades:

> "Conservative movements in the United States construct their social problem claims by invoking a virtuous American past inhabited by self-sufficient citizens; they present that past as under siege by big government and immigrants, portrayed as threats to the moral fabric of American society. By constructing a particular collective memory, they evoke emotions such as moral indignation and fear to highlight the threat to what they

perceive as core national beliefs and values." (Lio, Melzer, & Reese, 2008:23)

This allows conservative movement members to act on the basis of a feeling, but it is a feeling that is also informed selectively by facts, myths, storylines, and other elements of the social structure. A dichotomous analysis obscures these links in the social structure.

I believe that all but the traditional (habitual) forms of social action are present along the continuum of knowledge I present in this paper.

Table 1: *Tea Party Rationalities as Ideal Types*

Weberian Rational Action	Tea Party Expressions
Instrumental	Economic concerns including those concerning deficit spending
Value-Rational	Opposition to welfare, immigration; concerns about national security
Affectual	Emotional ties to family, health, community, nation
Traditional	Not present

Further, these ideal types are situated along a continuum, not existing distinct from one another.

Conceptualizing a continuum rather than a dichotomy or even Weber's strict ideal types allows for greater complexity and deeper understanding of the Tea Party than previous scholarship has provided. Instrumental reason and action are found when the organizer is basing his or her participation on personal, tangible fears about their individual lives and communities. Value-rational action is found at the other end where a lack of personal experience with racial Others activates loathing and social action. Affectual action is found throughout, but is heightened along the middle of the continuum, where the political issues are understood on a deeply personal level, particularly around health, children and grandchildren, and their own hard work.

Figure 1: *Tea Party Rationalities along the Continuum of Knowledge*

Weber on Rationality
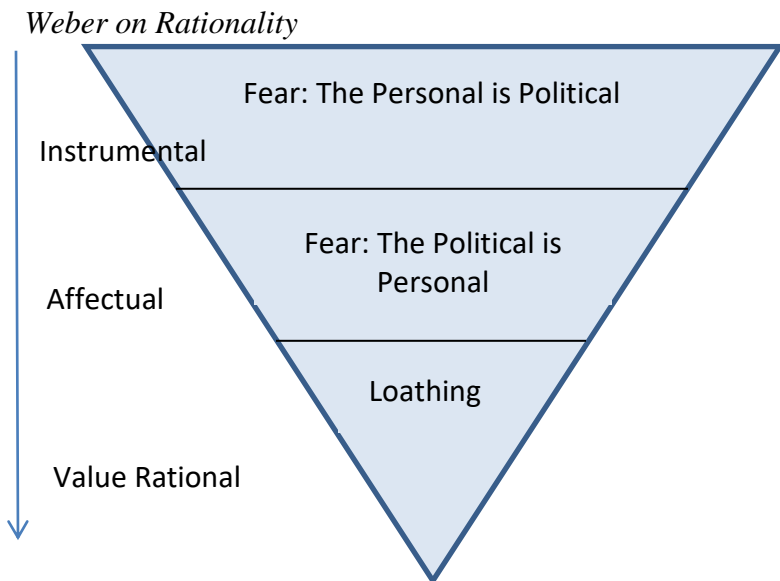
TEA PARTY RACISM IS AMERICAN RACISM

This conceptualization of Tea Party interests and actions also help us deepen our understanding of the racism that is mobilized within the movement. A multi-state survey of racial attitudes indicates that, "even as we account for conservatism and partisanship, support for the Tea Party remains a valid predictor of racial resentment" (Parker, 2010). Further, " ... support for the Tea Party makes one 25 percent *more* likely to be racially resentful than those who don't support the Tea Party" (Parker, 2010). While that may be true, their reliance on racial codes, racial stereotypes, and color-blind ideologies in their discourse is not fundamentally different than that of the mainstream in the United States. Such an analysis falls into its own false dichotomy between those who have racism and those who do not, a conceptualization long discarded by race scholars (Bonilla-Silva, 1997). To emphasize the banality of the racism within the Tea Party does not pardon or sympathize with it. Tracing the racism infused throughout the Tea Party is a critical task, one I undertake specifically in the section on loathing. However, to say that the Tea Party is the sole or even the most active location of volatile racists misses both the complexity of their views and, critically, the more pervasive color-

blind racism that is seeped into national politics throughout the political spectrum. To that end, Tea Party racism is simply American racism. This recognition, together with the continuum of rationalities that I propose here, will not allow an easy dichotomy of rational or irrational people, racists or non-racists.

Thus while it is tempting to dichotomize the Tea Party or other movements on the far right as somehow fundamentally different than the mainstream or the scholars who study them, we must resist that urge. As Blee also notes, "to understand the appeal of history's most abhorrent movements, researchers need to account for the similarities of these to mainstream motivations and agendas." (2006:481) McVeigh has made a similar point, drawing on Schwartz's study of the Southern Farmers' Alliance: "Rather than assuming, without supporting evidence, that they are acting irrationally, Schwartz argued that it is more analytically useful to recognize that individuals make decisions based on incomplete information." *(2004:905)*. Doing so allows us to analyze the social system and the social forces that shape these movements, and in which these movements are embedded.

Fundamentally, in the Tea Party I find a coexistence of rationality and myth, racism and a struggle to contend with contemporary economic and social challenges. Based on what members "know" from personal experience or narrow media exposure, an expression of "structured ignorance" (McVeigh, 2004), Tea Party members are acting with the intent to shape and improve their worlds and their country. Most are well-intentioned people genuinely fearful about our economic and national security, feeling disenfranchised and disempowered by a political system that has seemingly left "we the people" behind. Their involvement in the movement is both a form of political empowerment and an insistence on democracy.

That does not mean that it is not also fueled by far-right ideology, racism, and a deeply selective use of quality information. However, following Hardisty, "… if we focus exclusively on such vitriol, we will miss the issues raised by the New Right that we need to examine and address with as much attention as we give to grievances of other groups in society" (1999:42). To understand the Tea Party, and indeed to resist it, we must capture the whole of movement members' views and motivations. Missing this complexity misses the common ground—a desire for democracy and a secure economic future—that is shared across the political spectrum.

METHODS

The scholarly study of the right is laden with challenges and complexities, both theoretically and epistemologically. Issues of access, trust, and objectivity often receive far less scrutiny when we study those with whom we share political or identity-based affiliations, a problem which has plagued much of social movement theory, especially in its early years. As Blee notes, "The circumscribed template of modem social movements may be why, until recently, research on racist movements rarely used the analytic frameworks of social movement studies. Instead, these generally were explained as aggregations of individual pathologies of racial hatred, prejudice, and displaced anger, long after such explanations lost favor in other social movement arenas"(2006:480). This has meant that many studies of the far right are conducted from a distance, in what has been called an "externalist" trend (Goodwin, 2006), meaning that they examine the larger social, political, and economic forces that drive the movement nationally, rather than studying the internal dynamics of the movement or its members directly.

While externalist studies can provide a critical piece of the analysis, telling us about the theories of social psychology and the larger socio-economic forces that shape these movements, it is also necessary to examine the motivations and views of people that are directly involved in producing the movement. As Blee notes, "... without differentiating the external façade of the far right from its internal dynamics it is easy to assume that the public proclamations of its spokespersons are mirrored in the motivations of its activists and the actions of its groups" (2007:122). Much research and reporting on conservative movements, indeed, proves otherwise. Hardisty, who has completed extensive fieldwork on the contemporary right, writes: "The best analysis captures the complexity of the right's ideology, agenda, and methods.... In trying to understand the right, there is no substitute for being there" (1999:6). Being there with the 25 people I've interviewed and in my fieldwork settings has allowed for a depth of analysis, and room for contradiction and complexity, that is often obscured at a distance.

For this paper, I conducted 25 in-person interviews with Tea Party organizers in the state of Illinois. Interviews typically lasted about an hour, but ranged from 40 minutes to over three hours. Therein, I asked open-ended questions about what motivates and sustains involvement in the movement, and concrete details about participants' personal involvement. Interviews were transcribed and coded with respect to topics of discussion such as welfare, immigration, the Constitution, free markets, children, Republicans, liberals; and themes within those topics such as fear, generations, patriotism, gender, race, trust, etc.

I also supplemented my interviews with field observations when possible, attending campaign trainings and Tea Party conventions in the state; the former was attended by 60-70 Tea Party members and the latter more than 1000. I took extensive field notes from those events, where I paid particular attention to the stories told by organizers, the side banter around campaign-related strategy, and informal conversations with Tea Party members at the events, where I offered that I was there simply to listen and learn. The organizers of these events knew my research interests, and the events were otherwise paid and open to the public.

All of the participants in my study are white. Although I've heard buzz about black and Latino/a members of the Tea Party coming to protests and rallies, I have yet to find or be introduced to any people of color inside the movement. If they are present, they were not actively involved in any of the local chapters that I was able to access, nor were they connected to the organizers I met throughout the state. At the large 500+ person Tea Party convention I saw perhaps a dozen people of color; I did not get an opportunity to interview them. I also interviewed more women than men by a ratio of 3 to 2. Participants indicate that women are slightly more involved in their local chapters than men, a matter which some attribute to time and ability and others to passion and talent. Although I am developing a separate paper on the gender dynamics of the movement, it is critical to note that the movement is gendered in important ways, some of which will be highlighted here.

I did not collect formal demographic information from participants, but most are either self-employed, retired, or have otherwise flexible work schedules. This certainly is common among organizers of any political persuasion. But between that and discussion of indicators like homes, retirement, gifts of homes and schooling to children, inheritance, savings, vacations, and other financial measures, I assert that the majority of participants I interviewed are middle class and above. Certainly all are middle aged and above. The youngest members I've met are in their mid-40s, with most in their mid-late 50s or their 60s. They are rural or suburban; only one member was living in a large city at the time of their involvement with the Tea Party, but this person was not active in her city but rather with groups in a nearby suburb. As such, given U.S. residential patterns, most are likely living in communities with people of their same race and social class. This is key to understand given my argument below about the continuum of knowledge that motivates and legitimates members' involvement in the party. It also builds a strong relationship to the prior literature on conservative and right-wing movements, as the demographic characteristics of those eras' supporters are identical to that of the Tea Party (McGirr, 2001).

THE CONTINUUM OF KNOWLEDGE IN THE RACIALIZED SOCIAL SYSTEM

The analysis presented from here forward demonstrates a move along the continuum of knowledge presented in Figure 1, beginning with personal knowledge and individual realities, the place of instrumentally rational action. This continuum moves from one of fear, where very real individual and family problems are being discussed, to a value-rational loathing, where the fears are informed less by personal experience than by the conservative corporate media and Tea Party networks. Significantly, it is in the loathing where racial fears and resentments are most strongly mobilized, as pervasive racism and segregation keep that personal experience at bay. Examining this continuum, and these rationalities in their social context, helps us analyze the broader racialized social system, driven by corporate conservative media, in which we are all embedded. While this paper, in the interest of space, does not include examples from the middle of the continuum, detailing the difference at each end begins to reveal its presence.

Fear

The fear end of the continuum is directly relevant to, and stemming primarily from, organizers' personal lives. The concerns expressed in this section are in no sense irrational. People are worried about job security, the ability to retire, and the viability of small businesses. The following passage comes from my field notes, during the first session at a daylong conservative campaign training led by a national organization. The trainer, Amy, began the session, titled, "Way to Getting Involved (sic)", with the idea of becoming a better citizen activist.

> She asked what the important issues were for conservatives/ Tea Party members. One man quickly and loudly stated, "JOBS." Amy said, "Jobs, OK, what else? How about taxes?" Taxes got affirmation from 5-6 of 50+ people in the room. Someone said "business double tax", which Amy affirmed as "Good". Someone mentioned state budgets, and the comment was made that maybe it was good that CA may declare bankruptcy. Someone else said, "Can't retire". (field notes)

There are two important things to notice about this passage. The first is that the concerns raised by a room full of Tea Party organizers from around the state were centered around very real economic problems: jobs, taxes for small businesses, and retirements. These are concerns that have a strong basis in organizers' everyday lives, and which are

affecting their families and communities in tangible ways. The second is that despite the national organizer's attempt to prod organizers to rant about taxes, they remained focused on those key objectives. In fact, after this happened, she continued to try to refocus them into more mainline conservative politics: "Amy then turned discussion to the question as to whether conservatives are listened to in Chicago. It was at this point that she polled about whether or not being conservative made them a minority in their community; 3-4 said yes but it seemed Amy expected more to say yes." Clearly Tea Party organizers are not only taking marching orders from corporate interests and ideologues at the top. They are driven by the genuine interests and experiences of Tea Party members themselves.

This is well exemplified by the following passage from my interview with Barb and her husband Chad, who work together to organize in their rural community:

> BARB: But, you know, it can be difficult for those that have already retired. But there's going to be people who can't even think about retiring, who wanted to retire.... Look at the percentage of people that cannot find work, and the unemployment rate. And that doesn't even include those who quit looking a long time ago. People have been looking for two years.
> CHAD: If you go into, oh, you go into McDonald's, you can go in any of the Home Depots or Walmarts, you see these really old folks working, and they're working because they need to supplement their income.
> BARB: It's heartbreaking.

This segment of my interview with Barb and Chad could have taken place at dinner tables around the country, regardless of political persuasion. They are talking about things that they see in their community, be it on a visit to the big chains or, as they also discussed, in a conversation at the local café about who is working and who is having trouble. Their heart is broken by these conditions, and their fear about their community and the security of their own retirement is both real and rational. Following Weber, it is "determined by expectations as to the behavior of objects in the environment and of other human beings" ([1922] 1978:24). Certainly it would be ideal if they could see the connection between the Wal-Mart and the boarded up local business on main street, but their inability to do so is embedded in our social system, rather than, as other research has theorized, their pathologies.

The same is true even in standard conservative discussions about taxes. I asked Pamela, as a way of closing down our interview, if there was

anything else she thought someone studying the Tea Party should know. She answered,

> I guess if I had a ten second moment with somebody, I guess it would be the fact that don't you realize that inflation is a tax increase. We can't afford it. I mean, individually I am not going to be able to afford it. My salary doesn't go up. If they keep inflating the dollar, that's a tax increase, and I can't afford it. And I'm getting close to retirement. And perhaps that's what all of us worry, why it tends to be a little more the older sector in the Tea Party. But maybe that's why, because we all realize once we're on a fixed income, we're in trouble.

Is Pamela's analysis of inflation driven by conservative media and politics? Most likely it is, given that she, like most participants I interviewed, relied exclusively on those sources of information. But that analysis is calculable and rational to her because it speaks directly to her real life: her salary, her budget, and her ability to retire. She also provides a key insight into what she believes motivates Tea Party organizers: as they near retirement those realities are increasingly challenging difficult to manage.

The concerns expressed above are echoed by the vast majority of Tea Party organizers whom I've interviewed thus far. These specific concerns —about jobs, retirement, pensions, and governmental budgets- are fueled by personal experience. They are forms of instrumental reason that are coherent with their value-rational politics. As the following sections will reveal, there are certainly times when instrumental reason is abandoned and value-rationality or affectual rationality are instead activated. Their knowledge base may be filtered through a conservative lens with the goal of advancing corporate interests that may harm their lives in the end, making their pursuits "irrational" in the Marxist sense. Despite that, their knowledge base is intimately real, personal, and quite often rational.

Loathing

The other hand of the continuum is what I call loathing, specifically because it is most distant from personal experience and knowledge, and instead fed most strongly by mechanisms in the wider social system. Significantly, this social system is a racialized one, " ... in which economic, political, social, and ideological levels are partially structured by the placement of actors in racial categories or races" (Bonilla-Silva, 1997:469). While race is not the exclusive terrain of this distant loathing, the ongoing segregation of American society makes "knowledge" around race something we typically do not gain from

firsthand experience. Studies continue to reveal the pervasiveness of American segregation, citing the workplace as the most likely place where most Americans will cross the color line in their everyday experiences (Ellis & Wright, 2004). It is worth repeating, then, that most of the organizers that I am meeting in Illinois are retired or small business owners living in segregated suburban or rural communities, who are likely to have little to no personal, regular contact with people of color at home or at work. Further, as Bonilla-Silva (2003) has shown, this contemporary form of racial ideology often takes on abstracted, rational-seeming legitimations, removing most action from the sphere of affectual rationality. This makes them ripe recipients of the racial project advanced by the conservative media and "grapevine", and particularly subject to value-rationality over instrumental rationality.

The reliance on the conservative "grapevine" is evident in Jim's discussion of welfare, below.

> I believe in welfare when our people need it, those that truly can't work.... But just like an email I got the other day. This lady says my grandma told me I'm the breadwinner for the family. She's in her early 20s. She's on her tenth pregnancy. She's been pregnant basically every time she was eligible, from her early teens. And what they did, this particular family, and I'm sure it's played out millions of times, she is having all these babies and claims that she can't take care of them, which everyone agrees, so she hands them over to DCFS, and then the grandmother says, well, I'll be foster parent. So then the grandma gets these kids, so they all are staying in the same house. And I forget how many thousands of dollars per child, and she's making a lot better living than I am doing absolutely nothing but making babies. That's just wrong....

After the interview, Jim sent me the email he was talking about, which a quick internet search revealed to have been in e-circulation since at least 2000. It contained a large, color photograph of a young black woman surrounded by nine healthy-looking black children. The mythic nature of the welfare queen, who seems reborn yet again for this political moment, has long been documented, and its racialized nature is quite clear (see Quadagno 1994). sit there for the rest of their lives and get money from me. And that's not, in my opinion, what it was intended to do.

The welfare queen and associated myths are as pervasive today as when they first emerged as a journalistic racial appropriation of Myrdal's under-class term in 1964 (Gans, 1995). They are pervasive in the mainstream media and tap value-rationality in most Americans who

share these "ethical, aesthetic, [or] religious" values (Weber, [1922] 1978:25). Yet it is the conservative media and grapevine that pushes the deepest and most unfounded of these myths, particularly because they most actively tap value-rationality in their viewers. Several recent polls and studies have shown FOX News Viewers to be consistently misinformed and more reliant on trust than scrutiny of their chosen news source.

The discourse around immigration espoused by many Tea Party organizers is just as myth-driven, racially loaded, and value-rational. Patty had been describing her vision for the future of this country and her desire to return to the ethic of individualism when she said,

> And we've always been a melting pot—people who saw us as the shining city on a hill and wanted to come and they came legally, and they were required to show that they could support themselves. I want us to go back to that so that people who come here do not go on the welfare rolls and they are here for the right reason. They want to bring up their kids to be strong individuals and provide for themselves. And they could set the world on fire if they were allowed to, if they were free to do what they dreamed of without any rules and regulations.

Here Patty embodies the essence of what Bonilla-Silva (2003) has called the "abstract liberalism" frame. This frame, central to color-blind racism's discourse, is specifically rational, as it takes reasonable-seeming ideas like Patty's discussion of the melting pot and her selective version of American immigration history and follows logical-seeming steps to conclusions that work to uphold the racialized social system. In fact, such "logic" depends on the very myths about history that her discourse employs: "Conservative groups actively construct the past in ways that lament the impending or actual loss of what they believe to be fundamental American values, namely, individual responsibility and freedom, embodied by white and male historical figures" (Lio, Melzer, & Reese, 2008:14). This is the essence of value-rationality. It is critical to note that the assumed and yet unstated races of who came legally and those who "go on the welfare rolls and they are here for the right reason" are quite clear, as is the history of tremendous welfare programs that helped those same white male historical figures. This coded discourse is critical for both upholding color-blind racism and its often sympathetic-seeming nature (see Bonilla-Silva, 2003).

However, not all of that discourse presents a reasonable-seeming and sympathetic front. The loathing nature of Betty's answer to why she gets involved in causes in the Southwest despite believing that local people

should control their own fate makes this quite clear:

> AUTHOR: I guess I just wonder what motivates you to get involved outside of your own home state?
> BETTY: Because it's my country and I don't want my country full of illegal people that are here possibly to harm my country for my grandkids and my kids.... But I hate to see these people get into our country ... number one, they're getting into our country, they're not adding anything. They're earning money, they're sending it back to Mexico. They're sucking off of our system.
> They're basically closing a lot of our hospitals along the borders because they're [clogging] in there with their abdominal diseases and their health problems, having their babies. We're paying for that. Because the doctors don't do it for free. So our government is evidently paying to have this done. So what that does is it weakens our system. It also compromises the people who came in here legally and learned the language and took the tests and got their citizenship, which is a very honorable, respected thing.

While the loathing aspect of her remarks is quite clear, notice that she also guesses about some of the impact of this population: "...So our government is evidently paying to have this done". This demonstrates the distance at which she imagines, rather than knows, this racially-loaded issue. I should point out that Betty, along with one other woman roughly her age, were the most overtly racist that I interviewed. But the point is not to label Tea Party activists as racist. First, most are not nearly as overt as Betty. Further, as my analysis of the welfare discourse in part makes clear, I am seeing no clear data to indicate that the discourse and core racial ideology employed by Tea Party activists is located outside the mainstream US racial discourse. To that end, Tea Party racism is American racism. What is much more revealing and critical to appreciate is how that mainstream discourse and racism can be mobilized by people whose real lives seem touched by otherwise distant threats, like welfare recipients and immigrants, fueled by the racial projects of the conservative media and "grapevine". After all, as Blee has noted in her review of scholarship around right wing extremism, "Such groups need to convince recruits that extremist, even bizarre, ideas are valid and that a movement around these ideas is feasible.... Cultural practices are essential in this process, by creating bonds among members and normalizing the ideas and actions of the far right" (2007:124).

The facts of the matter, from a social system and ideological perspective, are beside the point. Organizers are fueled clearly not by

facts but rather what they feel that they know.

This is, in my view, why the myth of Obama's socialism also seems to resonate so strongly with organizers. Paula's passage, below, is just one succinct version of this common theme in my data:

> They're overstepping constitutionality and they are inflicting all of their social standards on all of us. And not only do they want to control all of us and everything we eat, everything we do, everything we don't do, but they want us to have our standard of living lowered for the first time in American history, where our children and our grandchildren will not have the same standard of life or expectations of a future ever again, because everything—when everybody is the same, you bring everybody down to a much lower level.

To Paula, this makes good sound sense, even if it is not based in reality. "However muddled and contradictory the content of right wing ideology appeared to its liberal and left-wing critics, and however difficult to understand –particularly in its more apocalyptic and conspiratorial forms—right-wing ideology did evoke a distinctive worldview that provided a message of real meaning to its adherents" (McGirr, 1999:148). Failing to pay attention to the value-rational and instrumental meanings embedded in Tea Party organizers' politics, and the continuum of knowledge from which they draw, limits our understanding of the movement and our ability to address it.

LOOKING WIDER, LOOKING DEEPER

It is crucial to appreciate the range of sources and knowledge bases from which members draw in order to both motivate and legitimate their involvement in the movement. This certainly allows a close examination of the myths that some members hold, most often about the distant racial. Other, but far more important is the process by which those myths become connected to movement members' social realities. Focusing only on the myths that are informed by the conservative corporate media misses the other, more personal and more experiential, forms of knowledge that organizers use to legitimate their work in the Tea Party.

Further, most of those myths and ideologies are present not just on the right but are instead pervasive throughout our political and ideological system in the contemporary United States. After all, as Vertigans has pointed out, "The far-right is utilizing the popular history of America that is disseminated within mainstream society" (2007:655). This is a

history, as we typically tell it, of individualism and white meritocracy that is the hallmark of contemporary racism and value-rationality. This color-blind racism is not only located in the far right or even solely among conservatives. It has also been demonstrated among the left (Hughey, 2012), including among pro-diversity liberals (see Burke, 2010, 2012). Therefore, to target the right exclusively is to miss the pervasiveness of these beliefs throughout our political spectrum. We need to look both more broadly and more deeply within our entire social, and especially ideological, system.

The Tea Party is nothing more than the most recent manifestation of a long-standing conservative politics that will continue to flourish as long as their concerns are not addressed by an alternative framework. As McGirr has noted, "By failing to take into account the deep-seated conservative ideological traditions on which the Right drew and by refusing to closely examine the ideological universe of conservatives, liberal intellectuals underestimated the resilience and staying power of the Right in American life" (2001:148). This is the unfinished business of progressives and the left in the United States. As Reese notes in her study of welfare reform, "Although many working families within the U.S. face many of the same challenges as welfare mothers—finding decent jobs, obtaining health insurance, finding child care, and paying their rent—anti-welfare propaganda and the targeted nature of U.S. welfare programs have effectively divided these two groups" (2007:59). To overcome this division, we must be able to grasp the full scope of knowledge and meaning from which the right draws power.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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