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Writing in 1954—a decade before the conservatives’ ascendancy within the Republican Party and nearly a generation before conservatism would complete its transformation from an elitist ideology to a mass political movement—C. Wright Mills reflected upon what he understood as the absence of the social and historical conditions necessary for the development of an authentic American conservatism. His skepticism is worth quoting at some length: “A noble aristocracy, a peasantry, a petty-bourgeoisie with guild inheritance—that is what is needed for a conservative ideology...in America, liberalism—and the middle classes that bore it as a deep-seated style of thought—has been so paramount as to preclude any flowering of genuinely conservative ideology. Here, from their beginnings, the middle classes have been predominant—in class and in status and in
power. There is one consequence of this simple fact that goes far to explain why there can be no genuinely conservative ideology in the United States: There is simply no stratum or group in the population that is of any political consequence to whose traditions conservatism could appeal.”

Mills’ conclusions about the dismal future of American conservatism may have fit the times in which he was writing, although the “consensus era” would prove to be short-lived (if it ever actually existed at all) in light of the increasing relative strength and growing unification of libertarianism, anticommunism and traditionalism (or social conservatism), the three forms of postwar conservatism outlined by George Nash in his 1976 masterwork, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America since 1945*. As Nash argues, “No rigid barriers separated the three groups. Traditionalists and libertarians were usually anti-Communists...Nevertheless, the impulses that comprised the developing conservative movement were clearly diverse.”

The rising tide of conservatism that would come to characterize American politics and society during the long post-WWII era would have much to do with the backlash against the social movements of the 1960s and 70s (civil rights, gay rights, feminism and peace) and with the economic and ideological changes wrought by the emergent neoliberal era. Aside from the civil rights issue—which he apparently found neither intellectually stimulating nor politically promising—Mills would not live to see these developments, although he too may have been puzzled by them, particularly by the rising appeal of free market libertarianism among working class Americans.

In my survey course on American history, a recent lecture on the topic of Reaganism also baffled a German Erasmus student: how, he asked, is it possible that an anti-state ideology could appeal to the working classes, particularly in light of the history of the New Deal? In attempting to answer his astute question, I tried to explain that the story of postwar conservatism is at once simple (racism, homophobia, religious fundamentalism, etc.) and complex, and that its more complicated dynamics are often of the economic kind: why, indeed, do specific economic policies and a more general economic ideology that would clearly function to the benefit of the upper classes, find such support among ordinary Americans? These sorts of questions have been at the heart of the writing of Thomas Frank, who memorably characterized his own political outlook as a farcical inversion of Marx’s model of social relations in capitalist society. “Businessmen were the working class, I reasoned, because they worked for a living. They were the producers. They paid taxes; they built the buildings; they bought the cars...government on the other hand, lived by imposing taxation. It produced nothing; it interfered with real people’s business and then arrogantly handed out their hard-earned money to a population of parasites. This, then, was the conflict: Workers versus government.”

Frank describes, rather than explains, the prevalence of economic conservatism in the contemporary United States. Indeed, the scholarship on postwar conservatism has tended to focus upon the changes taking place in the attitudes of the American public in the realms of culture and politics, rather than the economy. Traditionalism (whether operating through racism, religious fundamentalism, “family values” or other cultural forms) is arguably more straightforward and easier to come to terms with than the counterintuitive and apparently “irrational” mysteries of economic conservatism, through which American voters have increasingly sided with the anti-tax, deregulatory and free market interests of the nation’s largest and most powerful corporations. To be sure, the libertarianism that continues to have such a firm hold on the consciousness of
many Americans continues to overlap with “cultural” elements, but it would be wrongheaded to reduce economic conservatism, in all instances, to a simple expression of white racism.

5 The 1978 “property tax revolt” in California remains an important moment in the recent history of economic conservatism. During the 1970s, California housing prices were skyrocketing largely because of immigration and inflation. So too were property taxes, which were pegged to the increasing value of California homes. Many Californians faced massive tax increases after their homes’ values were reassessed by the state. This situation led to an aligning of the public mood and the life’s work of Howard Jarvis, a southern California industrialist, who devoted much of his life to opposing state and federal taxes. Jarvis had created the United Organizations of Taxpayers (UOT), an organization that unsuccessfully attempted to introduce tax limitation measures in 1968, 1971 and 1976, having failed on all three occasions to gather enough signatures (a requirement of California’s unique ballot initiative process). Beginning in 1977, Jarvis began to link the UOT to other organizations, such as the Los Angeles Apartment Owners Association, various chambers of commerce, and the People’s Advocate, which was founded by Jarvis’ eventual anti-tax partner, Paul Gann. Together, Jarvis and Gann authored another attempt to change the California constitution to place severe restrictions on property taxes. The resultant “People’s Initiative to Limit Property Taxation,” otherwise known as the Jarvis-Gann Initiative, restricted property taxes to only 1% of the value of a home. The initiative, California’s Proposition 13, passed on June 6, 1978, by a lopsided two-to-one margin. The victory for Jarvis and Gann resulted in an immediate 60% across-the-board slashing of property taxes, effectively erasing the $6 billion California surplus and setting the stage for massive budget cuts and crises in subsequent years. In a televised press conference in the aftermath of his stunning breakthrough, Jarvis declared, “We have a new revolution against the arrogant politicians and insensitive bureaucrats whose philosophy of tax, tax, spend, spend, spend, and elect, and elect, and elect, is bankrupting, we, the American people! The time has come to put a stop to it!...The taxpayers have spoken. We have made clear our goals. Now we are watching you. It is your responsibility to [cut] the barrels of lard out of the government budget!” One of Jarvis’ supporters proclaimed, “It’s kind of like a Boston Tea Party!”

6 A common interpretation of the California tax revolt is that it represented a “grassroots” expression of economic conservatism and the increasing appeal of libertarianism among the American public. However, Daniel A. Smith has argued that it was merely an instance of faux populism, “a populist-sounding message without the political mobilization of ‘the people.’... Absent from faux populist movements is the active laboring and protest of the masses.” He continues, “While steeped in populist rhetoric, Prop 13 was centrally orchestrated, as Jarvis relied on large property interests for much of his financial and especially his organizational backing.” Smith’s unwillingness to treat the “tax revolt” as an authentic expression of grassroots conservatism is indicative of the persistent disagreement among authors who are attempting to come to terms with another and more recent high profile manifestation of American conservatism: the so-called tea party movement. While some characterize it as a genuine populist movement that has sprung from the grassroots of American society, others view it as being led (if not created by) the right wing political / corporate establishment.

7 Among those in the latter camp is Anthony DiMaggio, author of The Rise of the Tea Party: Political Discontent in the Age of Obama. DiMaggio’s book advances several important points
about the tea party, although his insights are generally overshadowed by the book’s stylistic and substantive deficiencies. Its cover image, an up-side-down depiction of three tea party activists (two of whom are donning colonial-era costumes) is provocative, although the surprisingly dry language of the text tends to reduce the polarizing nature of the movement to a matter of hypothesis testing, to the validation of predictive models and to reporting on the subsequent “findings” that are akin to scientific discovery. “Materialist filters are those that relate to the tangible lifetime advantages...These variables [sex, race, income, education, political efficacy, class and race-based religious fundamentalism] are expected to play a role in the public’s formation of political attitudes. All of these variables are statistically differentiated...[and] are characterized by a marked differentiation in affluence, with the former of each pair being more affluent in that they earn high incomes, and the latter being less affluent and earning lower incomes” (20). The book occasionally gives up on the use of paragraphs, reverting to a series of bullet points to advance its arguments or to tidily present “findings.”

Beyond the stylistic shortcomings, DiMaggio’s book is situated within the field of media studies, and one of its principal aims is to show how the “propaganda model” (developed by Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky, in which they show how state-sanctioned discourse and ideology is legitimized and adopted by the public through a subservient mass media) is a useful device for understanding the tea party. One of the primary arguments of DiMaggio’s book is that the mass media, particularly Fox News—but also “liberal” outlets including the New York Times and the major television networks—have essentially propagated the continuation of the tea party by either collaborating in the creation of their talking points (as was the case with Fox) or by uncritically repeating their rhetoric (as was the case with several columnists of the New York Times). Together, the media have not only perpetuated the appearance of a viable grassroots phenomenon, they have shaped public opinion, particularly in relation to the Obama health care overhaul. “The media played the defining role in influencing what Americans saw and did not see regarding healthcare reform. Surveys from 2009 and 2010 found a strong correlation between media attention to healthcare and public interest in the issue.” In other words, “Simply by dominating the issues and how they were discussed, Republicans and Tea Parties influenced policy preferences through the media. By transforming the healthcare debate into a discussion of ‘death panels,’ ‘rationing,’ government ‘socialism,’ and ‘cost,’ Tea Partiers and other Republican officials were able to direct public attention to the perceived drawbacks of reform” (200).

A second central task of DiMaggio’s work is to show how the tea party is not an “outside” or “independent” political force. Rather, its leaders and goals are squarely part of the right wing political and corporate establishment. DiMaggio cites surveys conducted by Quinnipiac and Pew Research Center, which show the high correlation between those who participate in tea party activities and identification with the Republican Party. “In short, public claims from conservative and mainstream pundits that the Tea Party is not fundamentally a Republican operation are unwarranted and contradicted by the available evidence” (94). DiMaggio also uses his own observations of tea party meetings and marches he attended in the Chicago area shortly before the 2010 midterm elections, which were devoted to promoting Republican candidates. “By the end of the march, the message—delivered implicitly and explicitly—was this: one need not engage in regular activism in the future, but simply vote in the fall midterms for the Republican candidates who attended the rally. A group fronting for Republican interests could not have offered a
more consistent message” (92). Furthermore, DiMaggio points to the strong connections between the tea party and various individuals and institutions associated with the Republican Party either as party politicians, advisors, strategists or consulting agencies: Dick Armey, Matt Kibbe, Mark Meckler, the Koch brothers, and the consulting firm Russo, Marsh, and Rodgers. Thus, DiMaggio concludes that the tea party hardly comes from the grassroots. Rather, it is merely the Republican faithful, masquerading as an “outside” and “independent” political force.

10 Taken one step further, we can see how the above points shaped the central theme of DiMaggio’s book: the tea party is not a social movement. It is a construction—an illusion perpetuated (mostly) by the conservative media and the Republican Party. Furthermore, individuals who claim to identify with the tea party, DiMaggio shows, are not only ignorant of social movements and what they require, but their individualistic and libertarian philosophical orientations make them inherently hostile against the concept of collective action. The second chapter of the book, “The Tea Party Does Not Exist,” succeeds in delivering this message, and it is repeated throughout the text. “The Tea Party is lacking in all of the requirements for a social movement. For a movement to undertake sustained collective action, it must include regular meetings throughout a large number of localities. Wide levels of participation must be maintained, with an empowerment of local members, rather than top-down dominance of organizing by elitist actors. The Tea Party is fundamentally lacking in such participatory aspects” (46). Thus, the tea party is not a grassroots social movement, but an “Astroturf” construction of the media and Republican Party.

11 The question remains, however, as to the timing and purpose of the creation and propagation of the tea party by the conservative establishment. In short, why would the conservative establishment create, foster and sustain the appearance of the tea party? DiMaggio’s answer is compelling, although it tends to get lost under the weight of his emphasis on the movement’s “nonexistence.” DiMaggio argues that the tea party was created in an effort to “rebrand” the Republican Party as being aligned with the interests and concerns of middle class (white) Americans. “Republican officials probably have little interest in what makes a genuine social movement...Rather they saw a growing general public anger...and tried to take advantage of it in their attempts to win office in 2010 and beyond...The [George W.] Bush administration was intimately associated with the failed deregulatory politics that caused the economic crisis, and that link between Republican politics and economic decline remained in the public mind for years. To overcome this major hurdle, Republicans and Tea Partiers sought to repackage their party as the ‘party of the people,’ specifically through the rise of the Tea Party phenomenon” (101).

12 This is DiMaggio’s strongest contribution in terms of his analysis of the tea party, and one wishes that it would have been more forcefully made, instead of his repeated emphasis on its “nonexistence” as an authentic social movement. Through his dismissal of the tea party as essentially “not real,” one is left with the impression—despite his use of objective language and statistical models and “findings”—that DiMaggio falls short of taking it seriously. Instead, we are left with a book that is too concerned with validating Herman and Chomsky’s “propaganda model” and less concerned with understanding the individuals who identify with the movement and why they do so. DiMaggio’s book is devoid of interviews with tea partiers themselves, and instead looks from above, resting upon survey results and other forms of quantified data such as the compositions of nightly news broadcasts and newspaper articles—it is, after all, a work of “media studies”
rather than a book about people participating in a social movement. Of course, for DiMaggio, this is precisely the point: the tea party is not a social movement; it can only be understood by looking at the political elites and media establishment.

At the other end of the methodological and stylistic spectrum stand Theda Skocpol and Vanessa Williamson, whose *The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism* could hardly be more different than DiMaggio’s book—despite some overlap between their analyses and conclusions. In a methodological sense, Skocpol and Williamson are not out to validate models or to present “findings.” Despite an occasional table or reference to a national survey, theirs is a qualitative rather than quantitative analysis. Their book is full of interviews with tea party members, and it relies upon a somewhat ethnographic account of the movement and its participants. In terms of style, Skocpol and Williamson write with a strained informality. It is as though their time observing the tea partiers—well known for their distrust of the academic establishment—has left them with either an inability or distaste to write in mainstream academic prose. This is not necessarily a bad thing, and the book is a refreshing and much more enjoyable read than DiMaggio’s. However, there is a sense in which Skocpol and Williamson (both of Harvard) are trying too hard to mimic the anti-intellectualism of the movement about which they write. “Democrats have no hope of attracting Tea Party support, no matter how hard they tack toward the right—especially not while Barack Obama, virtually the Devil incarnate for Tea Partiers, remains in the White House. When Tea Partiers are faced at the polls with a choice of Republican versus Democrat, the latter can ‘fuhgettabouddit’.” Elsewhere, “In this book, for good reason, we have designated the conservative media complex as one of the three main interacting forces that make up the Tea Party and give it oomph” (123). Such is the stylistic quality of two researchers who believed that they escaped from the ivory—rather, ivy tower, and blended into to the rank and file.

Aside from issues of style, Skocpol and Williamson treat the tea party as a chaotic social movement that contains competing factions—in one memorable phrase, the tea party is characterized as “a disunited field of jostling organizations” (130). They point to the persistent tension, for example, that exists between the social and economic conservative factions. They recount a tea party member who complained about the anti-abortion pamphlets being distributed at a local meeting. He was subsequently left with a sense that the movement had become “too churchy” (39). In another instance, a tea party member distinguished between her attendance at the “Christian Tea Party” and the “regular Tea Party,” although Skocpol and Williamson maintain that “differences between social conservatives and libertarians do not lead to organizational breakdowns, however, because members show sensitivity to one another’s beliefs and leaders find a way to blend concerns” (37). They go on to show how social conservatives readily translated their ways of practicing Christianity into a fundamentalist method of interpreting American history (particularly through a “fundamentalist” interpretation of the Constitution) and in a more general conservative proselytizing effort (48-52).

In further contrast with DiMaggio, Skocpol and Williamson survey the “panoply” of grassroots and national tea party organizations and show their varied and nuanced relationship to one another, and more importantly, to their changing dynamics in relation to the political, economic and media elites of the conservative establishment. Unlike DiMaggio, who sees the grassroots as an offshoot of top-down orchestrating (indeed, he rejects the notion that the tea party is at all a grassroots phenomenon), Skocpol and Williamson show how the ties between the various local tea party groups and
the national conservative establishment was a mutually beneficial relationship, both in terms of funding and promotion. “Fox News soon recognized a major conservative phenomenon in the making and moved to become cheerleader in chief…The Tea Party idea was presented as the ‘coming thing’ to an audience primed for the message. Conservative Fox viewers across America heard that people like them were ready to stand up to Obama and the Democrats—and they were told when and where” (130). They argue it was only after the 2010 midterm elections, which saw huge gains for conservative Republicans in Congress, that the political elites moved to the foreground of the tea party movement. “The Tea Party...originally captivated the mainstream because it was seen as a mighty grassroots force. But the needs of the media outlets themselves increasingly privilege the parts of the Tea Party panoply that are anything but truly grass roots. With national spokespersons such as elected office holders and paid professionals gaining clout, grassroots Tea Partiers tend to lose visibility...Media outlets can run a bit of footage showing people in costumes with signs—and then proceed to feature the likes of Michelle Bachmann and Jim DeMint from Congress, or Dick Armey from FreedomWorks, or Mark Meckler and Jenny Beth Martin from Tea Party Patriots. The mass movement portrayed in 2010 can simply be reassigned to the role of backdrop for pronouncements from such elite soothsayers” (152).

Skocpol and Williamson follow their careful examination of the forces that comprise the tea party with further analyses of its relationship to the Republican Party. Unlike DiMaggio, who characterizes the movement as a party appendage, Skocpol and Williamson argue that the tea party can “cut both ways” for the Republicans. On one hand, the tea party can serve as a public grassroots organizing and motivating force for Republican and independent voters in national, state and local elections. But on the other hand, Skocpol and Williamson maintain that the tea party also carries inherent risks: not only are Republican-oriented business interests weary of shortsighted and “uncompromising stances in budget battles” whose recklessness could potentially wreak havoc on the American economy, the tea party could also alienate political and ideological moderates who might otherwise be inclined to vote Republican if not for the apparent interchangeability of the party with conservative extremists (186). These risks for the party, when coupled with the authors’ observations of the movement, would seem to have been borne out by the results of the 2012 presidential election and its aftermath. They report “very scattered” support for particular conservative presidential candidates, and that they “heard universal skepticism or negativity about Mitt Romney (because of his health plan, the precursor to ObamaCare, and because he is not considered trustworthy)” (194). Furthermore, political analysts are increasingly pointing to a “crisis” of viability faced by the Republican Party in terms of its leadership and ideological direction concerning a number of pressing issues, including the budgets and taxes, immigration policy and guns, in which conservative extremists are out-of-step with mainstream American opinion.

Like DiMaggio, Skocpol and Williamson acknowledge (but similarly underemphasize) that the tea party, whatever else it might be, was an opportunity for the Republican Party to “rebrand” itself as a party of the people and to ensure the grassroots anger of ordinary Americans stays aimed at Obama, the Democrats, and “government” more generally, rather than at the corporations and the bipartisan free market ideas that led to the current global financial crisis. It is indeed deeply ironic that the tea party frequently points to an impromptu speech made by the CNBC reporter Rick Santelli as its founding
moment. Santelli, of course, admonished the federal government in his diatribe for “rewarding the bad behavior”—not of the banks and financial institutions who either made (Goldman Sachs) or lost (AIG, Lehman Brothers) billions of dollars through credit default swaps and other instruments of deregulated finance gone amuck—but of the greedy first time homeowners, a disproportionate number of whom, we now know, were black and Latino—the ultimate “losers” of America’s Great Recession. Indeed, only in the United States could a populist movement have been ignited by a speech made on the floor of a global mercantile exchange. No doubt such a turn of events will ensure the continuation of the Great American Conflict brought to mind by Thomas Frank—workers versus government—despite the existence, or figment, of the tea party movement.

NOTES

3. Mills wrote in a 1960 letter to his imaginary Russian pen pal Tovarich, “I have never been interested in what is called ‘the Negro problem.’ Perhaps I should have been and should be now. The truth is I’ve never looked into it as a researcher. I have a feeling that if I did it would turn out to be ‘a white problem’ and I’ve got enough of those on my hands just now. But that isn’t quite good enough is it? The only answer—I didn’t say practical program, feasible plan, etc., I said answer—is so obvious that it has no intellectual interest, and so in the long term, as matters now stand, it has no political interest. The answer, of course, is full and complete marriage between members of all races.” Kathryn Mills & Pamela Mills [eds.] C. Wright Mills Letters and Autobiographical Writings (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 314.
5. Quotations in this paragraph are from the KPBS video, “Proposition 13.” See http://video.kpbs.org/video/1695956926/.
12. Skocpol and Williamson, The Tea Party, 28. The slang term ‘fuhgettaboudit’ (working class Italian-American speak for ‘forget about it’) was popularized by Johnnie Depp's title character in
the 1997 film, *Donnie Brasco*, after which time the phrase briefly became part of American pop culture.


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