

A New Politics in America - Part 6 - From the Tea Party to Occupy Wall Street

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This is Part 6 of A New Politics in America. Part 5 and links to early parts can be found [here](#).

The Tea Party

The Great Recession and the government's response to it gave a new impetus to the right. President Barack Obama's election in 2008 in the midst of the recession proved an ideal catalyst for the bringing together of a new far right movement.

A Black president whose anthropologist mother's peripatetic career had provided him with a Kenyan father, birth in Hawaii, and a childhood in Indonesia, he was for many conservatives—who believed or claimed that he was not really born in the United States and was a Muslim—the ideal bogeyman. He was not only Black, but in their view a foreigner, and, as a putative Muslim, a traitor in the White House. How, they asked, could a man of such alien origins be our president? They did not accept this possibility in their minds or hearts and they soon took their anger about this foreign-born, Muslim, Black man to the streets.

As early as 2007 the Tea Party took to the streets demonstrating against "illegal immigrants," decrying immigrant access to any government services, and opposing immigration reform as "amnesty." President Obama provided the Tea Party with a target when he proposed his Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, conceived in 2009 and signed into law in 2010. Though it was a market-based insurance law written by health and hospital corporations and the pharmaceutical companies, and similar in many ways to the auto insurance that the states require, the far right attacked "Obamacare," as they called it, as not only a government intrusion into citizens' private lives but also as "socialist."

While the Tea Party movement had genuine local roots in some areas, its growth was fertilized by money from Charles Koch and David Koch and their foundations, Americans for Prosperity and FreedomWorks. Their largesse, as reported by Jane Mayer in *The New Yorker* in 2010, provided the money to propagandize and to organize the Tea Party movement. It was the Koch foundations that actually organized the Tea Party's April 15, 2009 Tax Day Protests. Fox News and its commentators such as Glenn Beck promoted the organization and its activities, as did other rightwing radio and TV

talk-show hosts. By 2009 the Tea Party had about a thousand local chapters across the country. But it was not only a social movement; it was also a political organization that succeeded in electing scores of Republican legislators at the state and national level, often by defeating more traditional conservatives.

Tea Party members and supporters tended to be older whites from the Midwest or the South with higher levels of education and higher incomes than other Americans. They got their information from Fox News programs or from Clear Channel Radio station that broadcast a steady stream of conservative propaganda and rightwing commentary. Tea Party followers opposed Obama, whom they considered a socialist, disliked Democrats and especially liberals; and while most Tea Party members were Republicans, they were also critical of their own party as representing big government and making too many compromises with the Democrats.[i]

The demonstrations against Obamacare became mass protests against the president and his allegedly socialist agenda. Throughout the country Tea Party members showed up at town hall meetings to protest Obamacare and to lambast the president. While they denied that they were racists, Tea Party members either brought or tolerated in their demonstrations signs that carried racist caricatures of President Obama. Such signs either portrayed Obama as an African tribesman with a bone through his nose or as a monkey, while other placards claimed that Obama had turned the United States into Kenya or Uganda. The signs called Obama and his Obamacare law either socialist, communist, or fascist and they were decorated with swastikas or the hammer-and-sickle symbols. Some demonstrators carried signs saying, "We came unarmed—this time."

The Tea Party also targeted the labor unions. When Governor Scott Walker of Wisconsin pushed through the state legislature sweeping anti-union legislation, the Tea Party rallied to him. As I wrote elsewhere:

During the winter of 2010-11 the Tea Party organized demonstrations against labor unions in cities and towns around the United States. Most were counter-demonstrations that pitted Tea Party activists against union members in face-to-face confrontations, many of them shouting matches. While the unions rallied in solidarity with Wisconsin workers, the Tea Party demonstrated to back Governor Scott Walker and to support his attack on public employee unions' bargaining rights in Wisconsin. One Wisconsin Tea Party activist told the media, "We see this as the opening salvo of the 2012 election season. The Tea Party movement facing off against the unions. We like the odds." [ii]

The Tea Party was not only a social movement, but also a political movement aimed at driving the Republican Party and the U.S. Congress to the right. Dozens of Tea Party candidates ran for local, state, and federal offices throughout the United States, often challenging conservative Republicans who were not conservative enough. By 2013 the Tea Party caucus had 48 members of more than 10 percent of the 435 members of the House of Representatives. Many of these would later rally to Senator Ted Cruz's call to paralyze Congress.

So, by the 2010s, the United States had both a far right social movement and a rightwing political movement, and, interestingly, for the first time in 70 years a debate about socialism. The Tea Party had, unwittingly, by attacking Obama as a socialist, overcome the legacy of the Red Scares of the 1920s and the 1950s and made socialism a legitimate subject of debate in American society.

Occupy Wall Street 2011

A new left also began to appear in the wake of the Great Recession after the government moved to save the banks while leaving the foreclosed and the evicted, the jobless and the homeless to fend for

themselves.[iii] The Occupy Wall Street movement began in Zuccotti Park near Wall Street in New York City in mid-September 2011, crying out against the overbearing power of the corporations, the enormous inequities of American society, and the inordinate role of money in politics—and within a few weeks the movement had spread across the country. The brilliant slogan “We are the 99%” captured the imagination not only of the participants, but of large swathes of the broader American public as well, and for good reason.

Over the previous decades, there had been an epoch-making upward re-distribution of income to the top 1%, while capital and the rich had established a stranglehold on politicians and government not seen since the Gilded Age. During the fall months of 2011, thousands participated in Occupy encampments in cities from coast to coast while tens of thousands participated in marches and protest demonstrations organized by the movement. Occupy emerged as the largest and most important social movement in the United States since the 1960s and 70s, though it lacked the depth, breadth, and it would turn out the endurance of the movements of that earlier era. Still its impact was huge.

Occupy Wall Street and its offspring were the first serious response by working people to the economic crisis of 2008, and it briefly played the role that in an earlier period in American history or in another country might have been played by a mass labor movement or an emergent populist or socialist party. Occupy’s “Declaration” represented a wide-ranging radical challenge to the economic and political establishment and to the status quo such as we had not seen since the civil rights and Black Power struggles, the anti-Vietnam War movement, and Students for Democratic Society (SDS).[iv]

The Occupy movement’s antecedents were in the anti-globalization and global justice movements that preceded and then rapidly expanded after the Battle of Seattle, the massive environmental and labor protests against the admission of China to the World Trade Organization at its meeting in Seattle, Washington in 1999. The Battle of Seattle brought together a range of environmental organizations and unions such as the United Steel workers, Teamsters, and International Longshore and Warehouse Union that shut down the streets of Seattle, providing a model of militant direct action against corporate globalization.

The Battle of Seattle encouraged the global justice movement’s massive and militant demonstrations of radical youth, environmentalists, and labor unions at a series of international trade and policy meetings of government and corporate leaders around the world in the following couple of years. Though never socialist, the global justice movement represented a significant, radical social movement, but it was suddenly interrupted by the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks and the almost immediate rightward turn of both government and society.

Mass protest didn’t return to American streets until the spring and summer of 2006 when millions of immigrants, most of them Latinos and most of those Mexicans, demonstrated for a reform of immigration laws that would allow them to live and work legally in the United States. In cities like Los Angeles and Chicago as many as a million immigrants filled the streets—the largest protests in American history—carrying their own nations’ standard and the American flag. While the movement was not radical and the demonstrations were not militant, in Los Angeles, Chicago and some smaller cities where some employers supported it, the movement became something like the 2004 film “A Day without a Mexican,” somewhere between a virtual general strike and a national Latino holiday.

Though President George W. Bush had sparked the movement with his call for immigration reform in 2004, Congress refused to act and the movement, defeated and disappointed, dispersed. Its million of participants returned to their mostly low wage jobs in the fields and on construction site, in hotels and restaurants, and in private homes and gardens. From the streets the immigrants were

driven back into the shadows, but the children of these immigrants, many of them citizens and growing old enough to vote, would not forget their disappointment, and some would become part of the new progressive and radical movements.

The immediate predecessor of Occupy Wall Street was the Wisconsin protest of 2011, a reaction against Governor Scott Walker's anti-union legislation. As many as 100,000 union members and their allies protested in the state capital of Madison, as thousands occupied the capitol building itself while at the same time teachers engaged in wildcat strikes. Though the labor bureaucracy and the Democratic Party worked to end the protests as quickly as possible and succeeded in channeling the movement into the recall efforts and electoral politics, still the Wisconsin uprising had provided the model of the occupation of public space, mass protests by working people, and wildcat strikes. Wisconsin, occurring at the same time as the Egyptian occupation of Tahrir Square, and both of those provided the prototyped for Occupy Wall Street.

When the Occupy movement began, the rightwing Tea Party movement filled the pages of the newspapers, television screens, and the radio waves, but almost from the moment that it appeared, Occupy pushed the Tea Party off the front pages and the TV screens and took center stage, spreading its message through the Internet and social media. Virtually the entire political establishment had been pushing austerity—reductions in workers' standards of living—as its basic response to the economic crisis, and, only weeks before, the Obama administration, following its own Bowles-Simpson commission, had proposed a “grand bargain” for reducing government spending and balancing the budget, especially by cutting social security, Medicare, and Medicaid. But, in a matter of months, the Occupy movement had changed the national conversation from the Tea Party's rightwing agenda of tax-cuts and budget-cuts to discussions of the inordinate salaries and bonuses of the bankers and CEOs, the financial contributions of the wealthy to the politicians, and, above all, the economic crisis facing tens of millions of Americans. Obama himself had to drop, for the time being—until after the election—all talk of belt-tightening.

Occupy criticized the continuing high rate of unemployment, the foreclosures on homeowners, the inadequacy of the health system (including Obama's health plan), and the crisis in the costs of higher education. While never explicitly anti-capitalist and certainly not pro-socialist, Occupy's critique of the economy and politics tended to challenge the system as a whole—and the system was capitalism even if it usually went unnamed. The movement's cry, “We are the 99%!” rang out not only in the stone canyons of Wall Street, but also in cities, towns, and university campuses across the United States and soon reverberated around the world as Occupy sites were established in countries in Europe and Latin America.

The Rejection of Demands and Politics

The Occupy movement defined itself negatively as the rejection of traditional organizations and political organizations that had so often failed the people. Movements, unions, and parties all had representative and delegated leadership structures where the leaders soon escaped the control of the members. Occupy would have none, adopting the old slogan: “We are leaderless. We are all leaders.” Occupy declined to make specific demands in large part as a defense against cooptation by the Democratic Party, the labor unions, and the far left sects all of which urged the movement to define itself by a list of demands. Such program seemed to Occupy's activists to be the first step toward institutionalization and co-optation.

While many of Occupy's practices, such as its interminable open assemblies may be criticized, they arose as part of a healthy rejection of everything that was undemocratic, bureaucratic, and stifling about many more traditional movements, NGOs, unions and parties. Occupy represented an idealistic if naïve—yet still tremendously inspiring—attempt to begin society and politics anew:

transparent, democratic, and participatory. And though Occupy rejected politics, would have a profound political impact, eventually finding expression in the Democratic primary campaign of 2016.

The combination of a radically democratic movement, with the socially disaffected, and with workers employed and unemployed, together with leftists, and all of it taking place in the heart of the city and poised to mobilize at a moment's notice in forays against banks and corporations, posed a serious threat not only to city governments and the corporate elite headquartered downtown, but also represented a general and potentially more dangerous threat to the system and the state precisely because it might be only the beginning. The perception of this threat would lead to massive and sometimes brutal repression by the mostly Democratic Party mayors and city councils throughout the country, apparently in coordination with the Obama administration in Washington.[v]

Occupy encampments were demolished, as occupiers were manhandled and roughed up, beaten, pepper gassed, and arrested by the hundreds. Throughout the country there were thousands of legal actions against occupiers ranging from tickets and fines to misdemeanor and felony indictments. Altogether there were 7,361 arrests in 117 cities in the United States between September 2011 and July 2012.[vi] The authorities also sought to link Occupy to leftwing group and brought charges of terrorism and use of violence against persons in Cleveland and Seattle who could be linked to or had been involved in or been on the periphery of Occupy movement.[vii]

The Obama administration and state and city government—most of the cities run by Democrats—suppressed the Occupy movement, but its primary political ideas—economic inequality and the inordinate role of money in politics—not only continued to reverberate throughout American society but would in a few years find expression in the first seriously left leaning and openly socialist campaign by a major political figure in the entire post-war period: Bernie Sanders, socialist, candidate for president in the Democratic primary.

[i] <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/tea-party-supporters-who-they-are-and-what-they-believe/> and <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/poll-tea-party-activists-small-but-passionate-group/>

[ii] Dan La Botz, "The Tea Party and the Unions: Class Struggle in America at the Opening of the 21st Century," in: Roger Chapman, *Social Scientists Explain the Tea Party Movement* (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2012), pp. 211-243.

[iii] I have here from "The Significance of Occupy," an essay written by myself, Robert Brenner, and Joel Jordan and published on the Solidarity website at: http://www.solidarity-us.org/significance_of_occupy

[iv] <http://www.nycga.net/resources/documents/declaration/>

[v] <http://www.dailykos.com/story/2011/11/15/1036711/-Updated-Homeland-Security-FBI-Others-Advise-US-Conf-Mayors-Coordinated-Occupy-Crackdowns>;
<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/dec/29/fbi-coordinated-crackdown-occupy>

[vi] <http://stpeteforpeace.org/occupyarrests.sources.html> - arrests at Occupy sites or of individuals involved in Occupy continued into 2014.

[vii] http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/12/23/fbi-occupy-wall-street_n_2355883.html