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The Very Angry Tea Party

By J.M. BERNSTEIN

Sometimes it is hard to know where politics ends and metaphysics begins: when, that is, the stakes of a political dispute concern not simply a clash of competing ideas and values but a clash about what is real and what is not, what can be said to exist on its own and what owes its existence to another.

The seething anger that seems to be an indigenous aspect of the Tea Party movement arises, I think, at the very place where politics and metaphysics meet, where metaphysical sentiment becomes political belief. More than their political ideas, it is the anger of Tea Party members that is already reshaping our political landscape. As Jeff Zeleny reported last Monday in *The Times*, the vast majority of House Democrats are now avoiding holding town-hall-style forums — just as you might sidestep an enraged, jilted lover on a subway platform — out of fear of confronting the incubus of Tea Party rage that routed last summer's meetings. This fear-driven avoidance is, Zeleny stated, bringing the time-honored tradition of the political meeting to the brink of extinction.

It would be comforting if a clear political diagnosis of the Tea Party movement were available — if we knew precisely what political events had inspired the fierce anger that pervades its meetings and rallies, what policy proposals its backers advocate, and, most obviously, what political ideals and values are orienting its members.

Of course, some things can be said, and have been said by commentators, under each of these headings. The bailout of Wall Street, the provision of government assistance to homeowners who cannot afford to pay their mortgages, the pursuit of health care reform and, as a cumulative sign of untoward government expansion, the mounting budget deficit are all routinely cited as precipitating events. I leave aside the election of a — “foreign-born” — African-American to the presidency.

When it comes to the Tea Party's concrete policy proposals, things get fuzzier and more contradictory: keep the government out of health care, but leave Medicare alone; balance the budget, but don't raise taxes; let individuals take care of themselves, but leave Social Security alone; and, of course, the paradoxical demand not to support Wall Street, to let the hard-working producers of wealth get on with it without regulation and government stimulus, but also to make sure the banks can lend to small businesses and responsible homeowners in a stable but growing economy.

There is a fierce logic to these views, as I will explain. But first, a word about political ideals.

In a bracing and astringent essay in *The New York Review of Books*, pointedly titled “The Tea Party Jacobins,” Mark Lilla argued that the hodge-podge list of animosities Tea party supporters mention fail to cohere into a body of political grievances in the conventional sense: they lack the connecting thread of achieving political power. It is not for the sake of acquiring political power that Tea Party activists demonstrate, rally and organize; rather, Lilla argues, the appeal is to “individual opinion, individual autonomy, and individual choice, all in the service of neutralizing, not using, political power.” He calls Tea Party activists a “libertarian mob” since they proclaim the belief “that they can do everything themselves if they are only left alone.” Lilla cites as examples the growth in home schooling, and, amidst a mounting distrust in doctors and conventional medicine, growing numbers of parents refusing to have their children vaccinated, not to mention our resurgent passion for self-diagnosis, self-medication and home therapies.

What Lilla cannot account for, and what no other commentator I have read can explain, is the passionate anger of the Tea Party movement, or, the flip-side of that anger, the ease with which it succumbs to the most egregious of fear-mongering falsehoods. What has gripped everyone's attention is the exorbitant character of the anger Tea Party members express. Where do such anger and such passionate attachment to wildly fantastic beliefs come from?

My hypothesis is that what all the events precipitating the Tea Party movement share is that they demonstrated, emphatically and unconditionally, the depths of the absolute

dependence of us all on government action, and in so doing they undermined the deeply held fiction of individual autonomy and self-sufficiency that are intrinsic parts of Americans' collective self-understanding.

The implicit bargain that many Americans struck with the state institutions supporting modern life is that they would be politically acceptable only to the degree to which they remained invisible, and that for all intents and purposes each citizen could continue to believe that she was sovereign over her life; she would, of course, pay taxes, use the roads and schools, receive Medicare and Social Security, but only so long as these could be perceived not as radical dependencies, but simply as the conditions for leading an autonomous and self-sufficient life. Recent events have left that bargain in tatters.

But even this way of expressing the issue of dependence is too weak, too merely political; after all, although recent events have revealed the breadth and depths of our dependencies on institutions and practices over which we have little or no control, not all of us have responded with such galvanizing anger and rage. Tea Party anger is, at bottom, metaphysical, not political: what has been undone by the economic crisis is the belief that each individual is metaphysically self-sufficient, that one's very standing and being as a rational agent owes nothing to other individuals or institutions. The opposing metaphysical claim, the one I take to be true, is that the very idea of the autonomous subject is an institution, an artifact created by the practices of modern life: the intimate family, the market economy, the liberal state. Each of these social arrangements articulate and express the value and the authority of the individual; they give to the individual a standing she would not have without them.

Rather than participating in arranged marriages, as modern subjects we follow our hearts, choose our beloved, decide for ourselves who may or may not have access to our bodies, and freely take vows promising fidelity and loyalty until death (or divorce) do us part. There are lots of ways property can be held and distributed — as hysterical Tea Party incriminations of creeping socialism and communism remind us; we moderns have opted for a system of private ownership in which we can acquire, use and dispose of property as we see fit, and even workers are presumed to be self-owning, selling their labor

time and labor power to whom they wish (when they can). And as modern citizens we presume the government is answerable to us, governs only with our consent, our dependence on it a matter of detached, reflective endorsement; and further, that we intrinsically possess a battery of moral rights that say we can be bound to no institution unless we possess the rights of "voice and exit."

If stated in enough detail, all these institutions and practices should be seen as together manufacturing, and even inventing, the idea of a sovereign individual who becomes, through them and by virtue of them, the ultimate source of authority. The American version of these practices has, from the earliest days of the republic, made individuality autochthonous while suppressing to the point of disappearance the manifold ways that individuality is beholden to a complex and uniquely modern form of life.

Of course, if you are a libertarian or even a certain kind of liberal, you will object that these practices do not manufacture anything; they simply give individuality its due. The issue here is a central one in modern philosophy: is individual autonomy an irreducible metaphysical given or a social creation? Descartes famously argued that self or subject, the "I think," was metaphysically basic, while Hegel argued that we only become self-determining agents through being recognized as such by others who we recognize in turn. It is by recognizing one another as autonomous subjects through the institutions of family, civil society and the state that we become such subjects; those practices are how we recognize and so bestow on one another the title and powers of being free individuals.

All the heavy lifting in Hegel's account turns on revealing how human subjectivity only emerges through intersubjective relations, and hence how practices of independence, of freedom and autonomy, are held in place and made possible by complementary structures of dependence. At one point in his "Philosophy of Right," Hegel suggests love or friendship as models of freedom through recognition. In love I regard you as of such value and importance that I spontaneously set aside my egoistic desires and interests and align them with yours: your ends are my desires, I desire that you flourish, and when you flourish I do, too. In love, I experience you not as a limit or restriction on my freedom, but as what makes it possible: I can only be

truly free and so truly independent in being harmoniously joined with you; we each recognize the other as endowing our life with meaning and value, with living freedom. Hegel's phrase for this felicitous state is "to be with oneself in the other."

Hegel's thesis is that all social life is structurally akin to the conditions of love and friendship; we are all bound to one another as firmly as lovers are, with the terrible reminder that the ways of love are harsh, unpredictable and changeable. And here is the source of the great anger: because you are the source of my being, when our love goes bad I am suddenly, absolutely dependent on someone for whom I no longer count and who I no longer know how to count; I am exposed, vulnerable, needy, unanchored and without resource. In fury, I lash out, I deny that you are my end and my satisfaction, in rage I claim that I can manage without you, that I can be a full person, free and self-moving, without you. I am everything and you are nothing.

This is the rage and anger I hear in the Tea Party movement; it is the sound of jilted lovers furious that the other — the anonymous blob called simply "government" — has suddenly let them down, suddenly made clear that they are dependent and limited beings, suddenly revealed them as vulnerable. And just as in love, the one-sided reminder of dependence is experienced as an injury. All the rhetoric of self-sufficiency, all the grand talk of wanting to be left alone is just the hollow insistence of the bereft lover that she can and will survive without her beloved. However, in political life, unlike love, there are no second marriages; we have only the one partner, and although we can rework our relationship, nothing can remove the actuality of dependence. That is permanent.

In politics, the idea of divorce is the idea of revolution. The Tea Party rhetoric of taking back the country is no accident: since they repudiate the conditions of dependency that have made their and our lives possible, they can only imagine freedom as a new beginning, starting from scratch. About this imaginary, Mark Lilla was right: it corresponds to no political vision, no political reality. The great and inspiring metaphysical fantasy of independence and freedom is simply a fantasy of destruction.

In truth, there is nothing that the Tea Party movement wants; terrifyingly, it wants nothing. Lilla calls the Tea Party "Jacobins"; I would urge that they

are nihilists. To date, the Tea Party has committed only the minor, almost atmospheric violences of propagating falsehoods, calumny and the disruption of the occasions for political speech — the last already to great and distorting effect. But if their nihilistic rage is deprived of interrupting political meetings as an outlet, where might it now go? With such rage driving the Tea Party, might we anticipate this atmospheric violence becoming actual violence, becoming what Hegel called, referring to the original Jacobins' fantasy of total freedom, "a fury of destruction"? There is indeed something not just disturbing, but frightening, in the anger of the Tea Party.

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