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Recasting the Founding Fathers: The Tea Party Movement, Neoliberalism, and American Myth



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This article analyzes representative texts from the Tea Party Movement (TPM), a conservative American political movement, to demonstrate the TPM uses the myth of the Founding Fathers as an argumentative strategy to craft and justify a sanitary neoliberal political project. The necessity of such of a project lies in the underlying democratic crisis of neoliberalism, a crisis navigated by the TPM through strategic use of political myth. Neoliberal policies require, in many instances, democratic consent, though those policies often serve to disenfranchise many of the groups supporting them. This essay argues the TPM uses myth for the purpose of creating a salient group identity, recasting modern political conflicts, and articulating a political path forward. Finally, the implications of using political myth in contemporary politics are then introduced and discussed.

Keywords: Founding Fathers, Neoliberalism, Tea Party, Ideology

Donald J. Trump's presidential victory against Hillary Clinton wasn't simply a stunning rebuke of contemporary political prediction and punditry; Trump, for some, signaled a shift towards a more populist, anti-establishment conservatism that threatened the sitting political order (Rosenberg, 2016). A cursory look at the past decade of conservative politics suggests, however, that Trump's ascension reflects less a shift and more a refinement of populist conservative sentiment. The reactionary Tea Party Movement (TPM), an unlikely coalition of grass roots activism and heavy funding through conservative political action committees has been present in national conversations on conservatism since their rise to political prominence in 2010 (Williamson, Skocpol, & Coggin, 2011). However, waning public support for their movement combined with the success of Trump, who did not officially affiliate himself with the TPM, led to some pundits contending the TPM is "pretty much dead" (Jossey, 2016, para. 1). This death, bemoaned by Rich Lowry (2016) in Politico as the destruction of a "potent vehicle against Big Government" (para. 9), suggests the TPM's unique conservative movement will soon be relegated to history books.

Reports of the death of the Tea Party may be an exaggeration, however. The installation of Tea Party darling Rep. Mike Mulvaney (R-SC) as the White House budget chief suggests the TPM's extreme fiscal conservatism will continue to impact political calculations in the future

A version of this project was presented at the 2015 Central States Communication Association in Madison, WI.

(Herb, 2017). Indeed, despite Time's contention in their Person of the Year article that Trump "has little patience for the organizing principle of the Tea Party: the idea that the federal government must live within its means and lower its debts" (Scherer, 2016, para. 56), it appears the former business mogul has more in common with the reactionary movement than not. The TPM embodies a fiery politics broadly appealing to segments of the population who feel disenfranchised from the political process by focusing on extremely limited government, an unapologetic defense of American exceptionalism, and anxiety towards racial and social change in the public sphere (Zernike, 2010). Many of those same ideals, mixed with populism and a rejection of political niceties, describe in large part Trump's candidacy and perhaps portend his presidential actions (Chait, 2016).

A combination of significant electoral success in 2010, large scale political attention on issues such as the debt ceiling in 2011, the ousting of former Speaker of the House John Boehner in 2015, and a sympathetic President, all suggest the Tea Party is far from dead. Rather, the TPM's tactics have actually inspired anti-Trump activists to mimicry (Shreckinger, 2016). This mimicry assumes a viability of the argumentative strategies employed by the TPM, and a portability of those strategies. The TPM's focus on populism, "common sense conservatism," and constitutionalism all function argumentatively to promote the goals of the movement. The goals of the TPM, however, are rather unique; though some have characterized the movement as short lived and reactionary (Fraser, 2014), the TPM is merely the most visible element of neoliberal politics insistent on individualism and capital accumulation (Harvey, 2005; Guardino & Snyder, 2012). As such, the movement adapts to the unique rhetorical and ideological constraints inherent in the adoption of a neoliberal hegemonic project. The proceeding essay will argue that the TPM uses the political myth of the Founding Fathers (Wingo, 2003) to justify a neoliberal political project. That justification manifests through the TPM using myth to create a salient group identity, recast contemporary conflicts in mythopoeic terms, and present a political path forward.

Neoliberalism is an ideological project to "re-establish the conditions for capital accumulation and to restore the power of economic elites" (Harvey, 2005, p. 18). Despite the dominance of neoliberalism in western economic philosophy and policy, Harvey (2005) suggests the ideology faces a crisis of public support in democratic countries. Contemporary manifestations of neoliberalism have fostered unchecked acquisition of wealth that tramples the majority of workers and citizens thus rendering widespread democratic support of those policies tenuous. By promoting unrestrained economic freedom, advocates of neoliberalism have constructed a global economy where select few benefit from globalization and expanded corporate control while a majority of the world's population is subject to deteriorating living conditions and individual rights. In the context of democratic societies, Harvey (2005) asks, "how is it, then, that 'the rest of us' have so easily acquiesced in this state of affairs?" (p. 38). This acquiescence is the central question of this essay, with a partial answer lying in the rhetorical strategies of the TPM.



The present study suggests the TPM makes use of the political myth of the Founding Fathers (Wingo, 2003) to sanitize, and resolve contradictions within, neoliberalism. The mythology of the Founding Fathers consists in part of the history of revolutionary heroes, the philosophy of the American Revolution, and the physical locations and monuments dedicated to the founding of the country. That myth is routinely referenced in American pop culture, education, and politics. These components of the myth, including its plot structure and philosophical undertones, are coupled with neoliberal ideology by the TPM to resolve core contradictions in neoliberalism. That contradiction as evidenced by the TPM is democratic support for economic and social policies that would in practice massively disadvantage those who support them. To garner democratic support for neoliberalism, the TPM has employed a political myth with significant rhetorical currency to articulate a salient group identity and sidestep criticism. This articulation is of the utmost importance for rhetorical scholars, as the linkage between ideology and political tropes exploits public gaps in historical and political literacy, as well as provide political cover for problematic policies and ideologies in the public sphere.

Myths function by assigning importance to culturally shared narratives, with political myth representing “the continual process of work on a common narrative by which the members of a social group can provide significance to their political conditions and experience” (Bottici & Challand, 2006, p. 320). The present study describes the TPM’s employment of political myth as a means to justify the expansion of neoliberalism. To that end, the essay is presented as follows. First, the hegemonic project of neoliberalism is covered alongside theorizing of political myth. Next, the TPM’s use of the Founding Father myth is substantiated through representative texts from TPM leaders and websites. Finally, the implications of the ideological use of political myth are discussed.

The Neoliberal Project

One of the first measures of the Obama presidency, the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, drew criticism from conservative think tanks and politicians upon its passage in 2009. The bill was criticized in distinctly neoliberal terms, with conservative thinkers like David Boaz of the Cato Institute writing in January of 2009 that the bill would essentially “put the government in charge of handing out money” (para. 6). One financial analyst, CNBC reporter Rick Santelli, burst into a tirade on national television inviting the country’s entrepreneurs to a “Chicago Tea Party” to protest the bill as a “subsid[ization] of the loser’s mortgage” (Ciandella, 2014, p. 1). The presence of economic “losers,” and the direct linkage Santelli and others articulate between government regulation and economic catastrophe crafted a rhetorical opportunity seized by conservative activists in the creation of the Tea Party Movement. The goals of the movement, to combat an expansive federal government and intervention in the market, are consistent with neoliberalism as articulated by Harvey (2005).

Though neoliberal economic policies were advocated in some intellectual circles in the

1950s and 1960s, thinkers such as Friedrich von Hayek and Milton Friedman¹ were able to push an “anti-collectivist, anti-statist ideology which designates the market as the guarantor of individual freedom” that gained traction following the 1970 global economic downturn (Guardino & Snyder, 2012, p. 528). The ideology fetishizes the individual and promotes market-based solutions by problematizing regulatory bodies and state level economic planning. The role of the neoliberal state, according to Harvey (2005), is to “favor strong individual private property rights, the rule of law, and the institutions of freely functioning markets and free trade” (p. 64) whilst clearing away impediments to the free market. This is not to say neoliberalism functions simply as a government lead project. Rather, neoliberalism is simultaneously material and symbolic, a configuration of policies and discourses working in concert to rationalize themselves and resolve internal contradictions.

At its core, neoliberalism is contradictory because it promotes unbridled acquisition of capital by corporate entities while holding the rights of the individual to be sacrosanct (Harvey, 2005). When rights to profit conflict with regulations, civil liberties, or a community’s well-being, neoliberalism would champion the accumulation of capital above all else while nominally defending individual rights. As a political project, then, neoliberalism must contend with structures and ideologies that enshrine democratic rule, a rule that in theory would oppose and prevent economic and political dominance by the moneyed few. This dilemma has given rise to political movements either overtly or inadvertently supportive of a broader neoliberal project of globalization (Harvey, 2005). To wit, Guardino and Snyder (2012) suggest the TPM works to expand neoliberalism by cementing previously disparate voting blocks of working class white voters, libertarians, and social conservatives. Of specific note is the method of unification; as a neoliberal project, the TPM may not represent a worthwhile political endeavor for groups with divergent economic concerns (DiMaggio, 2011).

Early TPM affiliated candidates, such as former Dominos CEO Herman Cain, made waves in the 2012 presidential election by advocating regressive economic policies such as a national sales tax that would disproportionately impact a majority of Americans (Sharockman, 2011). Indeed, even contemporary policies advocated by Tea Party affiliated political leaders such as Sen. Rand Paul (R-KY) promise to substantively change the economic landscape of the United States. Paul’s defection in early 2017 on the passage of the federal budget was one of a long list of actions promising to dramatically shrink the size of government and reduce the regulatory burden on the free market (Weyl, 2017). These cuts, most often advocated for

1. Both Hayek and Friedman significantly influenced the study of economics in the mid to late twentieth century, and had notable intellectual roles in the development of neoliberal ideology and policies. Jones (2014) recognizes Friedrich von Hayek’s (1944) work *The Road to Serfdom* as one of the foundational works in early formulations of neoliberalism. Hayek won the Nobel Memorial Prize for Economic Sciences in 1974 with Gunnar Myrdal. Milton Friedman’s academic work at the University of Chicago, combined with his influence in the Reagan and Thatcher administrations, cements Friedman as a significant intellectual and material contributor to the rise of neoliberalism. Friedman won Nobel Memorial Prize for Economic Sciences in 1976.



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entitlement spending on programs such as WIC, TANF, Medicaid, and even Social Security, would impact a significant portion of the self-identified base of the TPM (Guardino & Snyder, 2012). Despite economic inconsistencies that would logically hinder the TPM's political attractiveness, Aravosis (2013) estimated following the 2010 midterm election that the TPM was represented by approximately "39% of the Republican Party in the Senate, and 62% of the Republican Party in the House" (para 5). In more recent years, Norman (2015) suggests roughly "four in 10 (42%) [Republicans] still support the Tea Party" with 17% of the American public expressing support for the TPM prior to the 2016 election (para. 7). Significantly, however, many of the policies advocated by TPM candidates and legislators appear inconsistent with the economic goals of a majority of the electorate, privileging unrestrained capital acquisition in opposition to insulating the less fortunate from the ills of the free market (DiMaggio, 2011; Guardino & Snyder, 2012).

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As a movement, the TPM advocates reducing the size of government alongside political and ideological conservatism championing the individual (Burghart & Zeskind, 2010; Abramowitz, 2011; Williamson, Skocpol, & Coggin, 2011). Rallies conducted following Santelli's call in 2009 were focused on cutting government spending and protesting the Affordable Care Act and other Obama administration actions as curtailments of individual freedom. Combined with these political goals, consistent in many instances with broader conservative and libertarian platforms, was a paranoia that questioned the legitimacy of the sitting president and standing political institutions (Skocpol & Williamson, 2012). Additionally, the TPM unifies supporters under the banner of racial anxiety. Parker and Barreto (2013) indicate, "supporters of the Tea Party are statistically more likely to hold negative attitudes towards immigrants and sexual minorities across a range of different issues and topics" (p. 157). Harvey (2005) suggests racist ideologies can be mobilized in a neoliberal project in "cultural nationalism of the white working classes and their besieged sense of moral righteousness" (p. 50). A large component of the TPM's view of entitlement cuts is a broader discussion of what constitutes "hard work" and "deservingness" in America, notions which are inextricably linked with race (Gilens, 1996; Katz, 1989).

The TPM certainly resembles what Harvey (2005) would call a neoliberal project. Notably, however, that project has garnered substantive popular support inconsistent with the aims of its policies. Harvey (2005) suggests neoliberalism is internally incoherent, and tenets of the ideology are jettisoned the moment they appear to contradict the broader project of capital acquisition. Harvey argues neoliberalism is a utopian philosophy, and material projects to promote neoliberalism did "whatever needed to be done to achieve [their] goal. [...] when neoliberal principles clash with the need to restore or sustain elite power, then the principles are either abandoned or become so twisted as to be unrecognizable" (p. 18). Harvey indicates there are "enough contradictions in the neoliberal position to render evolving neoliberal practices (vis-à-vis issues such as monopoly power and market failures) unrecognizable in relation to the seeming purity of neoliberal doctrine" (p. 21). He proposes scholars look to fissures between ideology and materiality as spaces of critique. Such a fissure exists in the TPM's use of political

myth. By articulating neoliberal principals such as “individualism,” “freedom,” and “the free market” alongside the myth of the Founding Fathers, the movement fuses neoliberal ideological goals with persuasive strategies.

Myth and the Tea Party

The myth of the Founding Fathers, according to Wingo (2003), recasts American revolutionaries as forward thinking heroes positioned opposite a callous tyrannical government. The myth, following the chronology of contemporary historical understandings of the American Revolution, casts the notable politicians and war heroes against the British in a struggle for independence. A mythopoeic telling of the revolution, however, diverges from the historical record to suggest the revolutionaries triumphed against insurmountable odds through ingenuity, determination, and (depending on the context) divine providence to topple a seemingly invincible foe. Despite the defined structure of the Founding Fathers myth, with definite characters and plot, political myths need not be invoked in full form. Rather, images, allusions, or even discussions of physical location can all transfer cultural memories from the myth onto a given subject (Wingo, 2003). Contemporary remembrances, such as monuments, historical sites, and even portraits on money, create a simplified and sanitary vision of the foundational figures of the revolution. Flood (1996) argues myths can resist critical evaluation because they tap into salient historical constructs. Myths routinely serve as the first and most memorable exposure a person has to a given history, and as such can “function as the basis for generalization, categorizations, and expectations which are not easily or always adequately revised” (p. 87). Historical myth, then, has the capacity to recast an ideological argument as naturalized and unassailable.

A litany of scholars (e. g. Barthes, 1972; Levi-Strauss, 1955; Malinowski, 2011; Rowland, 1990) have discussed myth in social discourse, suggesting myths function narratively to articulate values and make sense of experiences (Kerényi, 1963). Political myth is theorized as distinct from broader social narratives in terms of process, form, and function. In the context of politics, myth is “marked” by its use. Flood (1996) distinguishes political myth from sacred myth (e. g. Barthes, 1972, Levi-Strauss, 1955; Malinowski, 1992) by indicating political myths have a complicated relationship to the historical markers they purport to represent, a distinct form and characteristic ideological marking, and a defined audience prepared to accept that myth in a particular way. Bottici (2011) further refines Flood by suggesting political myths are narratives that develop situated significance over time, and continually morph to fit contemporary needs. Ultimately, Bottici (2011) rejects the importance of form for myth (see Rowland, 1990) in favor of a delimited definition emphasizing the ideological role myth plays.

Bottici (2007) argues scholars ought to imagine myths not as discrete objects to be debunked, but rather as processes used to justify social formations. Bottici (2011) suggests “political myths are mapping devices through which we look at the world, come to feel about it, and also to act within it as a social group” (p. 44). Myths can be understood as mechanisms to achieve social change and coalesce identity around culturally shared symbols. Roy and Rowland



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(2003), in their study of Hindu Nationalist movements, argue, “nationalist sentiment serves as the motive, but myth forms the engine for the movement” (p. 226). Political myths are transcendent narratives, collective stories continually (re)articulated to ascribe significance to a cause or course of action. Historically grounded myth explains the past, simplifies the present, and predicts the future (Roy & Rowland, 2003). Additionally, historical myth refocuses the debate not on accuracy, but on justifications for future action. In the TPM’s use of the Founding Fathers myth, the debate decenters from whether the founders would (not) have supported the contentions made in their name.

The Tea Party and the Founding Fathers

Given the interspersed and divergent nature of TPM membership, centralized texts do not exist in the traditional sense. As such, the Tea Party response to the State of the Union, occurring every year since 2011, is taken as a representative anecdote of TPM discourse. These responses represent an opportunity for the TPM to introduce themselves to the American People, as the movement is not a fixture of American politics (Guardino & Snyder, 2012). Furthermore, the responses represent deliberate persuasive attempts to position the movement as legitimate opposition to established political parties and leadership. These speeches, combined with various TPM websites of their largest political action committees, represent an appropriate cross section of the movement’s discourse. As the speeches selected feature a number of notable TPM leaders, including Tea Party Caucus founder and former Congresswoman Michelle Bachmann (R-MN), former GOP presidential candidate Herman Cain, and current Kentucky Senator Rand Paul (R-KY), the texts selected here represent the discourses provided by the public faces of the TPM.

The TPM’s use of the Founding Fathers myth functions in three distinct ways. First, the myth of the founders is a tool of unification, a means of articulating an identity for TPM members that erases and transcends economic disparity. Second, political myth is a mechanism to recast contemporary conflicts not as tensions between economic policies and social well-being, but as battles between righteous revolutionaries and tyrannical government forces. Finally, the Founding Fathers myth offers a path forward, capitalizing on an understanding of conflicts in mythopoeic terms by justifying neoliberal solutions through mythic appeals.

Myth as a tool of identity

Group differences are salient drivers of political action (e. g. Bottici & Challand, 2006; Mouffe, 2013; Roy & Rowland, 2003). One of the central crises of neoliberalism is the manifestation of extreme group differences through the concentration of wealth in the hands of few individuals while relying on ideological consensus to mobilize democratic nations (Harvey, 2005). By focusing on a culturally shared trait such as national pride, it is possible for disparate groups to transcend economic differences in favor of shared heredity or cultural identity. Roy and Rowland (2003) indicate the use of historical myth is a means to simultaneously define group boundaries and sharpen the salience of an identity in the context of nationalist groups. The Teaparty.org website uses shared national identity to articulate an in-group, indicating:

...our very own heritage held the key to unleashing the American Spirit. The Tea Party was the perfect choice. The Tea Party concept was far superior because it removed all the obstacles of party lines along with the baggage of confused issues, and focused only on a few key points. (Eichler, 2011)

Numerous scholars of political myth (Bottici, 2007; 2011; Burke, 1939; Row & Rowland, 2003) discuss both biological and ethnic heritage as a twofold unification strategy. First, unification is achieved through the erasure of difference. As a political impact of neoliberalism, economic difference is particularly salient; Guardino and Snyder (2012) suggest neoliberal policies are ultimately problematic for many of the groups supporting them due to economic alienation and commodification of labor, aspects which benefit a select few members of the wealthy elite. Despite the material impact of these policies, however, a wider coalition of economic elites and working class individuals is necessary for the adoption of neoliberal politics in a democratic system. As such, economic difference must be erased, explained away by the myth of American greatness to justify the larger political project. Former Republican Presidential candidate and Domino's CEO Herman Cain, in his 2012 State of the Union Response, downplayed economic differences in favor of ideological homogeneity, stating "if you believe in less taxes, less government, the free market system, more individual responsibility, and enforcing the Constitution, you are a tea party person" (Cain, 2012). By wrapping ideological messages consistent with neoliberalism in rhetoric designed to erase difference, the TPM is able to unify disparate economic groups.

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Second, unifying behind a social category such as race or nationality is a mechanism to elevate the in-group's status. Appealing to innate characteristics transcends status afforded by wealth or education in favor of shared heritage deemed more important. Sen. Rand Paul (R-KY), in his State of the Union Response, argues as much, erasing biological and ethnic differences by elevating neoliberal values of individualism and economic success:

[I]t's not the complexion of our skin or the twists in our DNA that make us unique. America is exceptional because we were founded upon the notion that everyone should be free to pursue life, liberty, and happiness. For the first time in history, men and women were guaranteed a chance to succeed based NOT on who your parents were but on your own initiative and desire to work. (Paul, 2013)

Exceptionalism is marked here as neoliberal individualism, a person's "desire to work" being that which "made us great" (Paul, 2013). By juxtaposing historical myth and neoliberal dogma, Paul articulates American history as a natural progression of individualism and unrestrained capitalism. Exceptionalism is appropriated to justify economic policies of bootstrapping, reduced regulation, and reduction of social programs in America.

Finally, the use of the Founding Fathers myth crafts a palatable identity by casting the TPM as heroes, prepared to vanquish the villainous. Sen. Mike Lee (R-UT), in his State of the Union Response suggests, "Americans have a natural instinct to stand up and speak out when they know something is wrong" in reference to expanding government power under the Obama



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administration (Lee, 2014). These “natural instincts” cast the TPM, and by extension all Americans, as capable combatants in the war against tyranny. Indeed, businessman and political commentator Wayne Allan Root, in his State of the Union Response, contends history is on the side of the TPM and the American public, as “we can take back the White House and turnaround America. It’s really not difficult. Just follow the Founding Fathers and put your faith in the American people” (Root, 2016, emphasis original). In the same breath, Root recasts the Founding Fathers and the American project in contemporary terms: “Always turn to the American people and the taxpayers and small business to save America. They’ve never failed us...and they never will” (Root, 2016). The ideological crisis of neoliberalism is rearticulated by positioning the American people as economic subjects capable of restoring a system of capital accumulation. The American spirit, that foundational fight against tyranny and oppression, is elevated as an identity marker to justify policies consistent with a neoliberal hegemonic project.

As frame of conflict

Following the creation of a salient group identity, political myths can be used to recast modern conflicts in the spirit of mythopoeic interactions. TPM supporters often articulate the movement as the underdog in conflicts with forces of tyranny. Cain (2012) contends, “We the people are coming and we know that we are up against Goliath, but this is why the tea party movement will become not a single David trying to slay Goliath. We will be an army of Davids” (p. 1). Roy and Rowland (2003) argue symmetry is significant, as the villain must offer an appropriately difficult task to the hero without being an insurmountable challenge. The use of an Old Testament story that Hays (2005) argues casts the forces of Christianity as disadvantaged, but destined to win, is no accident. By suggesting the TPM and its supporters will become like the fabled king of Israel, Cain cloaks supporters in a mantle of righteous power to concretize identity and re-contextualize contemporary conflicts. To that end, Cain’s (2012) use of biblical imagery is supplemented with direct historical and mythic evidence:

...the colonists got fed up with Old King George and the Brits, and their act of defiance was the Boston Tea Party in 1773. Two years later, we had the start of the American Revolution. Eight years later, we won. We can do it again. (p. 4)

Combining biblical and revolutionary imagery casts a historical enemy, the English monarchy, in a modern drama to articulate an argument against taxation and government regulation in near religious and mythical terms. Similarly, Sen. Mike Lee (R-UT) draws parallels between modern political opponents and the British Crown, describing a “London-based national government that had become too big, too expensive and far too intrusive” (Lee, 2014, p.1) as an analogy for the contemporary political climate. The enemy, in both the mythopoeic and ideological sense, is an entity whose only intent is the destruction of American character.

The core of the American Revolution, according to the TPM, can be reduced to unfair policies levied by a detached government, a circumstance analogous to and indistinguishable from the dogmatism and prescription of neoliberalism. The response to such policies was overthrow; there was no negotiation, no possible redemption of the bloated, tyrannical

monarchy. Sen. Rand Paul (R-KY) directly links modern and historical conflicts, contending, “We will stand up against excessive government power wherever we see it. We cannot and will not allow any President to act as if he were a king” (Paul, 2013, p. 3) in reference to the Obama administration. By recasting modern conflicts in historical terms, the TPM justifies neoliberal policies as an outgrowth of organic political movements, a natural consequence of American character.

Rep. Curt Clawson (R-FL) even goes so far as to recast contemporary global conflicts in Revolutionary terms, drafting longstanding allies into a modern drama against tyranny:

[T]he Statue of Liberty – a gift from our French partners for independence – shines across the Hudson to the footprint of the Twin Towers. Last week, leaders of the world gathered in Paris – to shine that light of liberty as a TEAM. To our friends in the “City of Lights” I say: You were our allies in America’s war for Independence. Now it’s our turn to side with you in this global battle against terrorism. (Bondioli, 2015)

In addition to reinforcing the links between the modern day TPM and the mythic history of the American Revolution, the invocation of globalization serves an ideological purpose. Recasting global conflicts is crucial for the spread of neoliberalism (Harvey, 2005). Only in a world-wide interconnected marketplace is maximized capital acquisition possible. To justify a foreign conflict through a myth of return creates a specific justification for neoliberalism designed to resolve internal contradictions regarding the size of government versus government involvement. Harvey (2005) suggests the role of the neoliberal state is “to facilitate conditions for profit-able capital accumulation on the part of both domestic and foreign capital,” (p. 7) often at the cost of another nation’s sovereignty. As such, the TPM revisions contemporary political squabbles while justifying future conflicts all through recasting the alliances of the past.

The TPM also casts moral conflicts in both historical and contemporary terms. Eichler (2011), on the Teaparty.org website, argues for a return to our moral foundations, suggesting the Tea Party must act as a “light illuminating the path to the original intentions of our Founding Fathers. We must raise a choir of voices declaring America must stand on the values which made us great” (Eichler, 2011). The website articulates the intentions of the Founding Fathers, and the values that make America great, as a list of fifteen “non-negotiable core beliefs” which include “gun ownership is sacred” and “reducing business income taxes is mandatory.” These core beliefs, though certainly beyond the scope of the Founder’s intentions for the country, are wrapped in the mythic. Modern conflicts are juxtaposed with the Founding Fathers myth, casting contemporary political disagreements as historical dramas with which the audience is familiar. In those historic dramas, already replete with just assessments of the Founders, speakers establish positive associations and transference of moral certitude in the public mind from the founders to the TPM. Sen. Mike Lee (R-UT) argues the movement is morally righteous because of their connection to the past, as “in America, the test of any political movement is not what that movement is against, but what it is for. The founders made a point at Boston Harbor, but they made history in Philadelphia’s Independence Hall” (Lee, 2014). Ultimately, according to the



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mythic articulation of neoliberalism, association with the founders' principles is enough to justify adoption of contemporary policies without a need to explain the specifics of those principles.

Furthermore, the TPM appropriates and rearticulates the underlying moral vision of America and the American dream. The website for the Tea Party Patriots, a conservative political action committee, discusses a unique American dream, contending: Page | 62

...at its root the American Dream is about freedom. Freedom to work hard and the freedom to keep the fruits of your labor to use as you see fit without harming others and without hindering their freedom. Very simply, three guiding principles give rise to the freedom necessary to pursue and live the American Dream. (Core Principals, para. 3)

The website goes on to list “Personal Freedom, Economic Freedom, and a Debt-Free Future” as the critical tenets underlying the American Dream, pivoting effortlessly from a mythopoeic conception of the American Dream to a material, neoliberal articulation.

As path forward

Finally, political myth is used by the TPM to portent future events. Among the most powerful functions of political myth, according to Bottici (2011), is the capacity to proscribe a path forward. Faced with democratic challenges to their political project, the TPM consults the past to confront the present. Sen. Mike Lee (2014) indicates “we need to do what Americans have always done – come together and press for positive change. Protesting against dysfunctional government is a great American tradition, going back to the original Tea Party in Boston, about 240 years ago” (p. 1). Though faced with insurmountable odds, the TPM can find strength in its exceptionalism. Former Congresswoman Michelle Bachmann (R-MN) argues in her State of the Union response, “America is the indispensable nation of the world. Just the creation of this nation itself was a miracle. Who can say that we won't see a miracle again?” (2011, p. 1). Articulating a path forward based in a mythic past naturalizes the political project, explaining outgrowths of neoliberalism as foundational aspects of the nation. Indeed, Wayne Allen Root links a solution steeped in individualism with the founders, arguing:

I'm here to take the shackles off the American people. I'm here representing economic and personal freedom. I'm here to shine a light on another way forward that takes power away from government and returns it where the Founding Fathers believed it belonged-with “we the people.” (Root, 2016)

Historical myth, in this context, offers a clear path forward and the lens through which the audience ought to view the TPM. History is appropriated to sanitize the political project of the present and recast the conflict as foundational rather than material.

Sen. Rand Paul (R-KY) further explains the contemporary crisis of neoliberalism in terms of the Founding Fathers, arguing:

We will begin to thrive again when we begin to believe in ourselves again, when we regain our respect for our founding documents, when we balance our budget, when we understand that capitalism and free markets and free individuals are what creates our nation's prosperity. (Paul, 2013, p. 4)

The path forward is one that couples historical rejection of tyranny with modern rejection of economic regulation. Foundational philosophical questions of democracy and natural rights are supplanted with a discussion of economic rights, with Rep. Curt Clawson (R-FL) contending in his State of the Union Response, "As we restore the voice of 'we the people' – we need to grow the private sector – and shrink the size and reach of our federal government" (Bondioli, 2015, p. 3). Concrete policy proposals and mythic justifications for action are effortlessly coupled with neoliberalism, presenting modern economic solutions as distinctly American. By articulating the salience of American identity for group members, and recasting current conflicts on a backdrop of historical conflict, the Tea Party is able to situate modern economic neoliberal tensions within a myth of return. Sen. Mike Lee (R-UT) suggests the revolution had been brewing all along, stating:

Now, as in 1773, Americans have had it with our out-of-touch national government. But if all we do is protest, our Boston Tea Party moment will occupy little more than a footnote in our history. Hopefully our leaders, reformers and citizens will join the journey from Boston to Philadelphia – from protest to progress. Together we can march forward and take the road that leads to the kind of government we do want. (Lee, 2014, para. 21)

The past is the path forward, the prior revolution a portent of things to come. In myth, neoliberalism finds a crucible, cast, and forge. In this context, myths "are expressions of a desire to act and not to accurately reconstruct the past. If they look at the past, they do so from the perspective of a 'politics of the past that is directly aimed at producing an action in the present'" (Bottici, 2011, p. 47). Harvey's (2005) democratic crisis between the public and neoliberal ideology is re-created and reformed as a conflict between freedom and tyranny, a historical battle that America has already fought and won.

Discussion: Problematizing "We the People"

The TPM's use of the Founding Fathers myth serves a distinct purpose in their recruitment and political efforts. By appropriating a powerful, shared narrative of American history, the TPM turns a noteworthy political myth into an argument for the expansion of neoliberalism. As argued above, the Founding Fathers myth is used to unify political supporters, to recast modern conflicts, and to suggest a political path forward. In this concluding part of the essay, the impact of coupling political myth and neoliberalism will be discussed. This section will cover three arguments: the significance of the ubiquity of the Founding Fathers in American education, the use of myth to establish moral and argumentative high ground, and finally the use of myth as a possibly flawed means of unification.

First, the coupling of the Founding Fathers and neoliberalism accesses the public's



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surface level historical knowledge of the nation's founding, and in doing so reveals the implicit power of articulating myth alongside contemporary goals. The core tenets of the Founding Father myth occupy a central role in the American education system, and are routinely reinforced through popular media and social practices of remembrance. The relative ubiquity of figures such as George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and John Adams in elementary and high school text books creates a body politic whom is quick to understand allusions and narratives, but slow to question the nature of such stories. Interestingly, criticism of Washington, Jefferson, and Adams is conspicuously absent from many discussions of the founders. Often, scholarly contribution that sullies the character of a given founder is framed as controversial, being removed from curriculum or hotly contested by school boards on a yearly basis (Erekson, 2012). In an unchallenged historical narrative, one may find fertile ground for a political myth (Bottici, 2011). The body politic is historically literate enough to respond to a positive retelling of the country's founding, but not so informed as to question the claims made by the mythmaker. As such, articulation of ideology in the context of the myth (or the myth in the context of an ideology) crafts a message that has the appearance of naturalization. To wit, in January 2011, former Congresswoman Bachmann indicated in prepared comments the Founding Fathers of the country "worked tirelessly until slavery was no more in the United States" in response to questions about the historical frames the TPM routinely engaged. When confronted about the inaccuracy of the statement in a later interview, Bachmann responded, "if you look at one of our Founding Fathers, John Quincy Adams, that's absolutely true [...]. He tirelessly worked throughout his life to make sure that we did in fact one day eradicate slavery" (Nichols, 2011). Bachmann attempted to recast history to justify unrelated parts of her argument. The historical accuracy, even when pressed, was immaterial to the broader contention made: to have a valid claim to the Founder's vision of the country supersedes historical fact.

The middling historical literacy of many citizens creates space for political myth, as myths recasts known information to serve the purpose of a broader ideology. Crowley (2012) argues, "myth generalizes history in such a way that the moral derived from the event becomes more important than the incidents recounted" (p. 98), thus decoupling the historical record and the justification of a given project. By pairing historical myth and ideology, rhetors craft an argument that forecloses on possible responses. Flood (1996) suggests the historical accuracy of a given myth is significant, but accuracy is difficult to mobilize as an argument. The use of historical myth creates a palatable solution, a resolution of Levi-Strauss's (1972) "logical problem" (p. 193) without the complication of accuracy. Using the Founding Fathers to justify a neoliberal project divorces the complexity of history from claims to "small government" which reinforce and sanitize a neoliberal hegemonic project to mobilize support and preclude objections based on historical evidence.

Second, the use of the Founding Fathers myth has an argumentative function to cast neoliberal principals as unassailable patriotic values. As discussed above, the TPM can use the Founding Fathers to define the boundaries of public sphere discourse to foreclose particular lines of argumentation. Indeed, Esch (2010) argues "language that carries mythical connotations gives

meaning to statements that goes beyond what is actually said. Such mythical connotations often preclude certain response” (p. 363). Wingo (2003) suggests the valorization of historical figures serves multifold purposes in liberal democratic discourse. In addition to unifying the population around a moral purpose, centering the debate on foundational principals sanitizes a position by affording it the maximum amount of credibility. Indeed, adopting the myth of the Founding Fathers is a powerful rhetorical device that gives the TPM the moral high ground as a revolutionary group. In this adoption, the moniker “radical” becomes less an indictment, and more a confirmation of the righteous mission of the organization. After all, the domestic terrorists who propagated the original Boston Tea Party were but forerunners to the broader revolution in the colonies. Rather than enemies of the state, these political visionaries were simply ahead of their time. Ultimately, disagreement with fundamental tenets of the TPM can be construed as disagreement with the founders of the country, fashioning proponents of the myth with the argumentative high ground. Through myth, the TPM is able to interweave venerable national principals into each of their positions. The implicit and assumed patriotism of their positions allows TPM supporters to sidestep any challenge to their ideology as distinctly un-American, and therefore not warranting a response.

Finally, the Founding Fathers myth serves practically as a tool of unification and sanitization. As discussed above (Burghart & Zeskind, 2010; Skocpol & Williamson 2012; Abramowitz, 2011) the Tea Party and its sympathizers are comprised primarily of political outliers who feel alienated or discontent by current policy, and often hold politically unpopular or socially unacceptable attitudes. Unifying under the banner of neoliberalism is, according to Harvey (2005), a losing proposition; the very individuals who support the TPM’s neoliberal project are those who stand to lose the most from its realization. As such, the TPM’s use of the Founding Fathers serves as a safe and appealing identity tactic to foster support from disparate social groups. Rather than adopt specific political platforms, or frame campaigns exclusively in terms of issues, the TPM establishment has unique incentive to frame their positions as universal.

Social solidarity is significant to the neoliberal hegemonic project, as solidarity is a mechanism to naturalize assumptions. Harvey (2005) argues “common-sense understandings among the populace at large has varied greatly depending on the strength of belief in the power of social solidarities and the importance of traditions of collective social responsibility” (p. 116). Social solidarity, and working towards a common goal, can be facilitated through activation of nationalist identities. Roy and Rowland (2003) suggest nationalist strategies of unification which focus on commonly shared cultural myths are powerful in their ability to sanitize violent and xenophobic positions around an us-them dichotomy based in historic myth. Prior to Trump’s ascension to the presidency, if the TPM were to appeal outright to xenophobia, there may be an increase in their membership at the expense of social acceptance. Comparatively, if the candidates running with TPM support stray too close to the ideological center, they have to answer to angry constituents and organizational mouthpieces. The Founding Father myth simplifies this balancing act by being socially palatable, none too rigorous, and fitting the neoliberal project without detailing economic or political realities that would implicate the



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groups advocating for those consequences.

Concluding Thoughts

A number of scholars (e. g. Abramowitz, 2011; Zernike, 2010) argue the TPM present a problem for American politics. It is not simply, as Skocpol and Williamson (2012) note, an issue with civility. Certainly, the TPM represents a rougher conservatism, more baldly neoliberal, and more overtly xenophobic. The relative success of the movement also demonstrates that broader, structural features of American politics are vulnerable to reactionary movements, a vulnerability that may have come to a head in the election of Donald Trump. To be sure, the use of historical myth in nationalist, identity based political movements presents a unique challenge to be addressed by future scholarship. Beasley (2001) argues strategies used to create ideological consensus risk alienating dissenting groups and further concretizing group differences. Beasley suggests strategies that appeal to the historic and moral character of America could “inhibit the possibility of good-faith discussions of diversity among the American people. By establishing the passionate identification with distinction as an un-American trait, rhetoric may keep individuals from being able to talk about their own differences” (Beasley, 2001, p. 181). In the context of the TPM, the possibility of such discussion being stifled is magnified by the xenophobic tendencies of both its supporters and the naturalization of neoliberal ideology in the public sphere.

The sanitization of a neoliberal political project through the use of political myth presents an opportunity for scholars to test the limits of particular rhetorical strategies to resolve underlying contradictions within a given ideology. Harvey (2005) suggests neoliberalism to be unwieldy, and at risk of collapsing in on itself, if only the full weight of its contradictions were realized. In light of the overarching power of political myth, however, it is possible the ideological systems that employ it may continue to gain support and power.



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