



The liberal field of journalism and the political – *The New York Times*, Fox News and the Tea Party

Journalism

1–17

© The Author(s) 2015

Reprints and permissions:

sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav

DOI: 10.1177/1464884915599949

jou.sagepub.com



Olivier Jutel

University of the South Pacific, Fiji

Abstract

This article looks at the challenge posed to the liberal field of journalism by Tea Party populism and Fox News' attempt to claim the cultural capital of journalism. The Tea Party have defied expectations of a political and rhetorical normalization, declaring liberalism and the New York Times as irredeemable enemies of the populist people. The Times' coverage of the Tea Party, analyzed in this article, assumes an importance beyond merely covering a political story as it articulates the present state of the field and its understanding of the political. What this author finds is a normative liberal universalist interpretation of the Tea Party movement between the pessimism of Lippmann or the redemptive humanism of Dewey. The populists are either treated as irrational pseudo-political actors or the credibility of the field is bestowed upon them as the redemptive embodiment of democracy. Neither approach is able to explain populism's immutable antagonism at an ontological level or the persistence of the Tea Party's fetishized notion of an America reconciled in private property.

Keywords

Populism, The Political, Liberal Journalism, Discourse Theory, Tea Party

Introduction

The right-wing populist amalgam known as the Tea Party movement has had a profound impact upon American politics and discourse since its emergence in 2009. Tea Party populism has been responsible for the mid-term electoral successes of the Republican

Corresponding author:

Olivier Jutel, Department of Journalism, University of the South Pacific, Laucala Bay Campus, Suva, Fiji.

Email: jutel_o@usp.ac.fj

party, legislative gridlock in Congress, the unbecoming spectacle of the 2012 presidential primaries and the government shutdown. The Tea Party have bedeviled American liberals in their immutable antagonism and imperviousness to President Barack Obama's conciliatory tones. This deep political dysfunction poses a fundamental threat to American liberalism and democratic governance. The centrality of this entanglement to the field of journalism (Bourdieu, 1998) is not simply a question of an important political story but rather the way in which the field has been drawn into this struggle. The 'elite-liberal media', long a populist target of derision on *Fox News*, are centrally implicated as an enemy of the mythical 'people' of populism. Perhaps more importantly in embodying 'the political' (Mouffe, 2005), the Tea Party undermine the normative public imagined by the liberal field of journalism. They defy a rational individualism, humanist notions of democracy, consensus politics or technocratic attempts to manage away antagonism. Therefore, the manner in which this story is reported assumes a significance beyond curating the historical record; it is a matter of defending the values of the field. In analysing the response to the populist challenge, I underline below where the values of the field fall short and how to begin to conceptualize a political notion of the field.

This article will draw upon the theoretical insights of Discourse Theory (Dahlberg and Phelan, 2011; Laclau, 2005; Laclau and Mouffe, 1985) to explain both populism and the liberal notion of the political underpinning the field of journalism. Discourse Theory, as a multi-disciplinary approach encompassing psychoanalysis, critical and political theory, offers a level of complexity to questions of political ontology that can be of great benefit to journalism studies. Discourse Theory holds that the political as antagonism is the essential precondition of politics with identity articulated through logics of difference and equivalence, and the friend/enemy dichotomy (Dahlberg and Phelan, 2011:19). Conversely, the field of journalism stands for a universalism and truth that is inclusive and constitutive of the liberal-democratic public. In both ontologies, universality is central; however where the field holds that all can have access to rationality and universal truths, populism claims exclusive access to the universal as privileged agents of history engaged in righteous struggle. Where the liberal political class attempt to find common ground, the Tea Party are invested in the spectral figure of Obama-as-enemy (Jutel, 2012) threatening the virtuous people.

In assessing the impact of this struggle upon the liberal field of journalism, I conduct a close analysis of *The New York Times*' coverage of the Tea Party movement. Texts are considered embodiments of the cultural capital and journalistic habitus of the field possessing certain ontological assumptions and normative notions of the polity. *The Times* exemplifies the cultural capital of the field as the American paper of record concerned with unifying the public through the pursuit of a universal truth. I find that the field fails to properly explain the political as a consequence of this desire for a liberal universalism. The treatment of the political in the texts of the *Times* is caught within a humanist/pathology framework where the movement is either validated as embodying authentic grass-roots struggle or is pathologized as an aberration. What pervades in the humanist treatment are portraits of everyday people who have become politicized by an austerity populism and morality. In these humanist portrayals, the cultural capital of the field is deployed to reinforce the authentic Tea Party imaginary which is central to its fetishistic mode of politics. These humanist profiles of the Tea Party are premised upon the shared

terrain of liberal-democracy; however, there is an inability to recognize the Tea Party's authentic illiberalism.

While a populist humanism predominates in the straight news formats of the *Times*, the opinion pages offer a pathology critique of the Tea Party. Humanism and pathology constitute a dichotomy in the sense that both are based within liberal notions of the political, between the poles of optimism and pessimism or between Dewey and Lippmann. The humanist view of the political draws on Dewey and the redemptive quality of the Tea Party's active participation in the production of 'social knowledge' (DeCesare, 2012: 107). Conversely, the pathology critique bears Lippmann's distrust of the public's democratic competence, treating them as pseudo-actors who threaten expert knowledge. Where humanism regards all political agency as redeemable, the pathology treatment reduces the Tea Party to an acting-out of base human impulses from fear, racism and corruption. The political thus becomes something to be technocratically managed away and is not suggestive of a broader crisis of liberal-democracy.

Within the pathology narrative, the Tea Party's vociferous resistance to Obama is predominately understood as a retrograde politics of racism and inter-generational anxiety, accompanied by a multi-cultural triumphalism which sees the Tea Party as the last gasp of the Southern Strategy in the face of irreversible demographic shifts. Race plays a critical role in Tea Party ontology, but this cannot be explained by traditional markers of race, rather by a neo-liberal – Randian-style – racism that identifies the urban working class, immigrants, intellectuals, liberals and welfare recipients as parasites upon the productive. The Koch brothers have also served as a useful liberal foil. While their funding of libertarian causes through think-tanks and advocacy groups is undoubtedly important, this reinforces the standard liberal critique of the political as avarice. It is easier to assume that Tea Partiers are misled by robber barons than it is to accept that movement adherents *really do believe* with passionate intensity. There is no attempt to answer the Thomas Frank questions of why they believe and what this radical inversion of American populism portends.

Following their 2010 electoral success, the Tea Party defied expectations of a political normalization as good-faith opponents capable of forging a workable consensus. The *Times* offered then a forceful re-iteration of the field's notions of tolerance and civility, particularly in response to the Tucson shootings and the brinkmanship pursued by congressional Republicans in debt-ceiling negotiations. Just as the Tea Party are having their greatest impact upon the polity, they are designated *beyond the pale*. This defence represents an overcompensation for the *Times*' inability to properly explain the nature and origins of the Tea Party's militant belief. What pervades is a snarky liberalism that assumes a certain cultural superiority, revelling in mocking the Tea Party's lack of sophistication, and enables the field to disavow its own inadequacies. What is critically important for the journalistic field and liberal-democracy more broadly is not merely the failure to defend itself, but ceding of notions of universality to the populists. Lacking the political and conceptual terms to deal with populism, *The New York Times* bestows liberal credibility upon the Tea Party.

Populism and the political

Discourse theory and the ontological principle of 'the political' (Mouffe, 2005) offer journalism studies important insights into populism and social movements. Champions

of the field may reject that they lack the theoretical tools to explain populism; the field and the values of the 'high modern paradigm' (Hallin, 1992) of journalism emerged alongside the mass public movements of the 20th century. Consequently, a liberal paternalistic concern for educating the masses – protecting the 'bewildered herd' from itself (Lippmann, 1993: 145) – has been hardwired into the field. Thus, the field has held to normative liberal notions of the political as party politics, 'the scramble for office and the politics of patronage' (Schmitt, 1996: 32). However, with the crisis of public institutions from unions and political parties in the era of neo-liberal post-politics, new forms of populism defy technocratic liberal pedagogy. Discourse theory here offers a concept of political ontology opposed to liberal power-politics. The political in discourse theory is understood as the 'antagonism that is internal to human relations' (Mouffe, 2000: 101) while politics is the attempt to formalize and manage away this antagonism.

Discourse theory holds that antagonism is not simply a breakdown of communication, but it is the fundamental discursive act of identity in constituting political movement. In contrast to Habermas' liberal model of communicative action, language is not 'the medium of reconciliation and mediation' but 'a violent medium of immediate and raw confrontation' (Žižek, 2008b: 60). The populist act of articulating 'the people' creates discursive chains of difference/equivalence (Laclau, 2005: 78) that radically divide the social space between the people and their enemy. The political defies rational consensus as the people's opponent is an enemy to be eliminated, rather than an adversary within the shared terrain of liberal-democracy. In the case of the Tea Party, various strands of the conservative movement (i.e. evangelicals, libertarians, palaeo-conservatives, the patriot/militia movement) form hegemonic links of equivalence around Obama-as-enemy. For the populist, the enemy is what stands between them and 'the fully reconciled society' (Laclau, 2005: 119) and their realization as the universal class. While the illiberalism of populism is self-evident, the claim to universality while disavowing liberal self-reflexive practices should be of principle concern to the field.

The notion of the political, as articulated in discourse theory, clearly delineates the ontological differences between populism and the liberal field of journalism. While these theoretical distinctions may at times be difficult to turn into journalistic insights, Žižek's departure from Laclau provides a way to think about the *ontic* in populism, according with journalism's search for facts and context. For Laclau (2005), populism is 'political reason *tout court*' (p. 229). 'The People' is an indeterminate subject position born of the heterogeneity of the social space with no privileged antagonism or social actors, in contrast to classical Marxism. The efficacy of populism derives from the 'radical investment' (Laclau, 2005: 71) in the signifier, 'the people' or 'Tea Party', which functions as a placeholder for myriad desires and projections. Laclau characterizes the process as contingent with political movements forming and dissolving only so long as the signifier has utility/symbolic efficiency.

Žižek (2008a) identifies in the category of 'the people' a fundamentally fetishistic logic at work, which precludes the contingency and fluidity of Laclau's politics of heterogeneity. Populism cannot overcome its enemy as its presence is essential to experiencing a fetishist *jouissance* or 'obscene enjoyment' (Žižek, 2008a: 90) in transgressing civil norms. As the privileged universal people of populism, the Tea Party can engage in reckless rhetoric, dehumanize their opponents, claim the mantle of Martin Luther King

Jr even as they designate Obama as 'other' and bring government to a stand-still. The Tea Party fetishists cannot simply be rationally persuaded to abandon their identity once satisfied in their fetishes: 'they experience no need to be rid of them' (Žižek, 2008a: 68). Sustaining the illusion of an America reconciled in private property, the Second Amendment and evangelical Christianity, necessitates the existence of Obama or liberals as the foreign, socialist, Islamic threat to the republic and capitalism (Jutel, 2012).

Žižek distinguishes populism from authentic emancipatory politics by reference to political economy, however not in a teleological Marxist sense. For Žižek (2008a), an emancipatory event would materialize the Lacanian 'Real', an excess which defies symbolic representation 'as the impossible hard core which we cannot confront directly ... [yet] always returns to its place' (p. 127). Political economy is the displaced Real that defines both the Tea Party's fetishistic politics and Laclau's politics of heterogeneity. The Tea Party maintain their fetish of free markets and private property by treating existing neo-liberalism as the corruption of capitalism by a contradictory network of enemies from Obama, Wall Street, liberals, academics, corporations, environmentalists, immigrants and globalists. Thus, the Tea Party reanimate a 'populist republicanism' (Goebel, 1997) running through different iterations of American populism, from the Populist Party to the right-wing backlash, namely, a productivism that sees capitalism as a moral order embodied in the small businessman or small-holder.

In approaching populist ontology through discourse theory, it becomes clear how the universalism of the field of journalism and populism is irreconcilable. Yet, aside from this more abstract academic point, there are also ontic insights of historical and national context with which journalism can approach Tea Party populism. The tools of journalism could be deployed in addressing the historical context of the Tea Party iconography and why they elicit fetishistic investment. In this sense, journalism might be able to rationalize the irrational of populism without either giving it democratic legitimacy or pathologizing it as a passing fit. Finally, discourse theory should pique the interest of journalism researchers and practitioners in formulating a political articulation of liberalism and the field of journalism. While the task is too large for this article, Mouffe's notion of media and journalism as 'an agonistic public space' (Carpentier and Cammaerts, 2006: 6) may be of some utility here.

The liberal field of journalism

Bourdieu's (1996, 1998) field theory is critical to understanding the emergence of journalism as a discipline which embodies liberal political ontology at its most idealistic. Field theory offers a sociology of journalism that does not reduce the discipline to economic functionalism, as do many critical political economy of the media accounts. At the level of textual analysis, there is an understanding of the social conditions of production, journalistic practice and its underpinning autonomous values. A cultural field depends upon the creation of professional habitus and cultural capital that are differentiated from the broader field of power, the 'dominant principle of domination' (Bourdieu, 1996: 265). The field of journalism possesses a potent notion of universality and cultural capital based on realizing the public or 'the people'. The cultural capital of the field is an important form of social symbolic power for constructing political identity. This symbolic power allows

the media a concentration of resources in being able ‘to describe the social itself ... [and] the inequalities in the social world’ (Couldry, 2003: 39). Following Laclau, this is the power to declare the *plebs* as *populous* – the political act of universalization. Phelan (2011) demonstrates how in both field and discourse theory universality plays the same ontological role, whether in creating the field as an autonomous pursuit resisting the field of power or as the horizon of politics making political identity possible. In the face of the populist challenge, the field of journalism should be concerned with an antagonistic defence of its universal values of rationalism, reflexivity and truth-telling.

The modern field of liberal journalism has sought to develop a particular public and polity in response to the radical indeterminacy of popular uprisings, labour militancy and the spectre of fascism in the early 20th century. The journalist functions as the dispassionate technocrat of the liberal-democratic public sphere that through ‘objective’ methods renders facts intelligible to a public that is ‘assumed to be engaged in a rational process of seeking information’ (Baym, 2010: 32). The public is conceived in liberal terms not merely in its rational pursuit of enlightenment but in its consensual and inclusive nature. Muhlmann (2008) writes that modern journalism’s self-validation as an autonomous field lies in its claim ‘to bring people together ... [by] ... giving readers the ‘truth’ ... something that is acceptable to all, beyond differences of opinion’ (p. 6). Thus, the values and practices of the field represent a claim to universality and political truth that is, ontologically speaking, unantagonistic. The journalistic habitus therefore sees itself occupying a position ‘above the fray’ as a social arbiter curating the historical record.

Like all social fields, journalism is split between poles of valorization – the cultural capital of unifying the liberal public and an economic capital defined by marketshare and ratings. The success of *Fox News* is not simply attributable to cornering the conservative news market but appropriating the values of the field while collapsing the poles of valorization. This is how we can understand the ludicrous pretensions to the cultural capital of the field in *Fox*’s slogans ‘We Report, You Decide’ and ‘Fair & Balanced’ while browbeating its competitors with its status as ‘#1’ in news. This inter-field struggle is central to the story of the Tea Party, not simply because of a populist congruence, but in the manner that *Fox* circulated and centralized Tea Party iconography.¹ *Fox*’s celebration of ‘the people’ represents the ultimate convergence of the field’s economic and cultural poles. Protestors consume *Fox* as active participants in the production of a hegemonic epistemology, simultaneously performing ‘free labour’ (Terranova, 2004) by producing the spectacle of protest that *Fox* covers in its broadcasts.

By contrast, *The Times* continues to function as the standard bearer, or last bastion, of the high modern paradigm of journalism. In writing for a liberal unified public, it attempts to strike a measured tone, imagining itself above the fray even while competitors in the field engage in a political battle to undermine all that the *Times* stands for. The *Times* in particular lays claim to a certain monopoly of this cultural capital given its centrality to American liberalism as *the* paper of record. The field’s autonomy and the legacy of journalism are worth preserving as they

defend the conditions of production necessary for the progress of the universal, while working to generalize the conditions of access to that universality. (Bourdieu, 1998: 66)

Fox News' and the Tea Party's assault on the *Times* represents the foreclosure of the universal and the loss of the signifiers of liberal-democracy to a populist exceptionalism.

The New York Times and the Tea Party

To analyse the *Times*' treatment of the Tea Party, I conducted a survey of *The New York Times* articles from April 2009 to the end of 2011.² The analysis is not conducted at the level of language and grammar typical of critical discourse analysis rather following from discourse and field theory; texts are analysed for their political logics, ontological assumptions and the normative polity constructed in them. The *Times* does not produce a singular political logic, rather it frames the range of liberal ontological assumptions in the different genres of the broadsheet and embodied in the ensemble of journalists and commentators. While the likes of Rich, Bai, Blow and Zernike all stake out different ideological positions, each does so in an attempt to embody the ideal of a liberal journalistic habitus. Straight news or feature reporting constitutes the bulk of coverage and is also the form of journalism most highly linked to the cultural capital of the field. It is in these stories where the *Times* claims to be objectively representing the social world, as opposed to opinion pieces that are intended to 'push the envelope', framing the range of acceptable opinions.

Liberal humanism

The principal reporter on the Tea Party beat, from its emergence in 2009 to the elections of November 2010, was Kate Zernike, whose byline was associated with over 50 articles. The key 'scoop' in Zernike's (2010d) corpus is a profile of Keli Carender, who the author claims is the original source of the movement. The ontological assumptions at work are that people may function as an objective source of truth as opposed to simply embodying discourses and ideology. The Deweyan 'truth' that this humanism presumes is that an exploration of the lifeworld that shapes Tea Party knowledge might lead to an understanding of our common stake in democracy. However, the closer we get to this populist lifeworld the more we encounter fetishism and antagonism. Zernike offers an in-depth personal portrait of Carender, her idiosyncrasies and her personal story of putting together a protest early in 2009 as the exemplification of the Tea Party's grassroots mobilization. The article begins:

Seattle – Keli Carender has a pierced nose, performs improve on weekends and lives here in a neighborhood with more Mexican grocers than coffeehouses. You might mistake her for the kind of young person whose vote powered President Obama to the White House. You probably would not think of her as the Tea Party type. (Zernike, 2010d)

The article is a portrayal of democratic empowerment and, in a recurrent theme in much of the in-depth feature reporting, draws a parallel between Obama's 2008 campaign and the Tea Party's organizing. In this formulation, the political frontier between Obama and the Tea Party is proof of the vitality of liberal-democracy, despite the Tea Party's anti-democratic anti-liberal politics.

Zernike writes of Carender's 'frustration' with government spending and her realization that 'I can do something different ... find a new avenue to get my voice out'. This portrait of citizen power is said to offer 'a lens into how the movement has grown, taking people who were not politically active ... and turning them into a force that is rattling both parties'. The characterization of Carender is determined to go beyond the common reduction of Tea Partiers as angry older White Americans anxious about Obama. And while this reduction tells us little about the novelty of the Tea Party, the characterization of the movement as simply the embodiment of liberal-democratic people power is equally unsatisfactory.

Throughout Zernike's articles emerges a consistent narrative of the awakening and politicization of everyday people. When her book on the Tea Party was published, she was reported saying the movement embodied normative notions of liberal-democracy: 'I was struck that they figured out that the way you get involved in politics ... have an impact in American politics is to start at the bottom and work your way up' (Zernike, 2010b). It is no wonder then that the fiercely conservative *Wall Street Journal* opinion pages lavished praise on Zernike's book: 'The book itself is a pleasant surprise. Kate Zernike has produced a largely fair and measured account of the populist rebellion against Barack Obama's aggressively liberal presidency' (Taranto, 2011). Zernike thus ascribes no specific significance to the uniquely antagonistic nature of Tea Party discourse in accounting for its prominence and offers no value judgement of the radical rhetoric of militancy and sacrifice. Her reports are replete with vignettes of 'stay at home moms' (Zernike, 2010a) such as Anastasia Przybylski or Diane Reimer who quit her job to become a Tea Party organizer: 'Ms. Reimer often wells up talking about her work. "I'm respected," she said, her voice breaking. "I don't know why. I don't know what is so special. But I'm willing to do it"' (Zernike, 2010e). These profiles of the Tea Party people depict an inclusive movement embodying the redemptive core of American liberal-democracy. What is problematic is that while the Tea Party does consist of volunteers, who *really do believe*, this does not make it the embodiment of liberal-democratic people power as surely fascism also has authentic grassroots.

The lauding of the Tea Party's authenticity is emblematic of the neo-liberal depoliticization of economy and demonstrates the extent to which political economy is the Real elided in the Obama/Tea Party frontier. This liberal humanism obscures what is most novel in the movement: austerity populism and the fetishization of capitalism in the face of capitalist crisis. The inability to recognize this inversion of the traditions of American popular struggle leads to absurd formulations of class. In one article profiling the economic precarity of some Tea Party activists, Zernike (2010b) writes that 'the Great Depression too, mobilized many middle class people who had fallen on hard times'. This statement is indicative of the liberal-humanist notion of the political and populism, as it relates to the Great Depression and the New Deal. There is no attempt to conceptualize the mobilization of fascism in times of crisis. The Depression saw the Ku Klux Klan emerge as one of the largest movements in US history with over 2 million members in the 1920s and 1930s (Kazin, 1995: 104). In the liberal-humanist teleology, all populist social movements lead towards a strengthening of liberal-democracy. In Zernike's analogy of the Great Depression, she assumes that the Tea Party are those affected by the recession and share the lineage of the 'middle class' who forged the New Deal, a

statement which effectively writes working class struggle out of American history. Following a *New York Times*/CBS poll which found that the Tea Party were in fact slightly over-represented by the middle class,³ defined as a class position as opposed to the productivist middle fetishized in Tea Party iconography, Zernike (2010c) is perplexed:

It makes sense that people would take to the streets to protest government spending and enormous deficits during the Great Recession, when they are feeling economic pain most acutely. But the Tea Party supporters now taking to the streets aren't the ones feeling the pain.

What is striking in this confusion over the language of class is the fundamental assumption that those affected by the recession should be mobilized around austerity politics, as opposed to stimulus and public works programmes. Zernike's work demonstrates an egregious misreading of history, born of neo-liberal post-politics, and a failure to consider liberal-democracy in a qualitative sense. The *Times*' failure to meet these two tangible measures of the field's cultural capital speaks to a broader crisis within the field.

Zernike's liberal humanism is the dominant treatment of the movement in the *Times*' straight coverage. Chief political correspondent Matt Bai brings this discourse to its apogee in a feature article titled 'D.I.Y. Populism Left and Right' (2010). Appearing on the front page of the Sunday *Week in Review* section, days before the 2010 election, it profiles Tea Party leader, David Kirkham. Bai's piece begins with a gesture of self-ridicule, reaffirming the liberal/populist culture war, characterizing himself as an in-authentic liberal:

Generally speaking, Tea Party enthusiasts don't think much of East Coast media types, and it was hard not to consider this fact as David Kirkham slammed his roadster into fifth gear, topping out at more than 100 miles per hour as we hurtled toward another curve ... As Mr. Kirkham expertly maneuvered this car he had designed and built in his factory, I began to understand that there was a point to his having invited me along for the ride, and it wasn't to give me a heart attack. The message he seemed to be sending was, *We are not who you think we are. We are serious people with serious abilities* [sic].

The article parallels Kirkham's productivist entrepreneurial spirit both as an industrialist and an influential Tea Party leader in Utah. Kirkham's ruggedness and 'D.I.Y.' spirit are said to embody a 'political awakening that says a lot about grassroots activism in the new century'. The article continues with Kirkham's 'journey' to activism, which exemplifies the creative and empowering character of today's new politics. Kirkham's love of roadsters and 'irrepressible confidence' are said to have led him to Poland in the 1990s where he bought a factory and helped rebuild the shattered lives of people emerging from communism. It is this experience that allows him to extrapolate that Obama is 'a socialist ... there's no doubt he's a statist', a statement unchallenged by Bai.

Bai effectively reheats the end-of-history discourse that accompanied the neo-liberal raiding of the former eastern bloc and unconsciously constructs Kirkham as the John Galt frontiersman central to the Tea Party's capitalist fetish. The article portrays a particular Tea Party notion of global capitalism in which America is the Mecca of a virtuous capitalist moral order. The particular product in question, high-end replica roadsters, is a commodity that embodies magical or fetishistic qualities, existing at the heart of

Americana. There is no attempt to consider what capitalism really looks like or what cultural permutations exist within the Tea Party's articulation of capitalism. Not only is the Randian rebellion in the midst of capitalist crisis not examined, it is normalized by *The New York Times* deploying its cultural capital in rendering the portrait of the authentic people of the Tea Party.

Neo-liberal racism

Much of the opinion pages that supplement the straight reporting of the Tea Party treat the movement as political pathology and the acting-out of low-minded human impulses, from racism, fear and corruption. The most common argument explaining the Tea Party's malaise is the fear of southern White Republicans to the nation's shifting demographic balance. Columnist Charles Blow deconstructs the Tea Party lament 'We want our country back!' as the last gasp of the Southern Strategy in the face of an irreversible multi-culturalism. Blow (2010b) writes that the multi-cultural coalition that passed healthcare reform is 'enough to make a good old boy go crazy'. Blow suggests that the remnants of Southern White intolerance will soon pass as a necessity of changing demographics: 'The Tea Party, my friends, is not the future. You may want "your country back," but you can't have it'.

There is no question that the Tea Party represent the political forces that have historically opposed progress for African Americans, and there have been no shortage of racist signs and slogans at Tea Party rallies. What the multi-cultural triumphalism of Blow and others fails to recognize is the way in which Tea Party discourse represents a neo-liberal 'modifying [of] the process of racialization' (Roberts and Mahtani, 2010: 248). It is important to treat the racism of the Tea Party not as a passing fit of incivility but a reflection of a sustained populist logic that will not simply expire with the older generation. Within this neo-liberal, Randian racism 'blackness', or the other, is 'coupled with anti-market behaviours' (p. 249). The dehumanized enemy is not marked by 'race' but by the fetishist imaginary which sees a network of parasites, from socialists, government, academics to the poor, leeching the productive class in the attempt to destroy capitalism. Where this neo-liberal racism is effective is in articulating a universalist antagonistic discourse which couples liberal paternalism with the ghetto, as a geographical and cultural 'outside'. In this way, African American Tea Partiers, from Cain to Carson, are held up as examples of the emancipatory, universal promise of the Tea Party's America. The question of whether this is cynical tokenism or worse is not as important as the efficacy of antagonistic universalist discourse which permits odious 'welfare-bashing' while claiming the mantle of the civil rights movement.

The key moment that crystallizes the Tea Party's contradictory treatment of race, provoking liberals to no end, was Glenn Beck's appropriation of Martin Luther King's 1963 March on Washington, for a Tea Party rally. Proceeding from what has been described by Cornel West as the 'Santa Clausification' (Shropshire, 2010) of King, the civil rights movement has been constructed by the right as merely the bourgeois demand for equality of condition before the law. Blow and fellow columnist Bob Herbert are merciless in their assessment of Beck as 'an ignorant, divisive and pathetic figure', who 'makes you want to take a shower' (Herbert, 2010) and whose 'self-aggrandizing threatens to defile'

(Blow, 2010a) the legacy of the civil rights movement. The particular violence that Beck and the Tea Party do to King's legacy is not simply instilling a ludicrous culture of conservative victimization, but it is in limiting the definition of the civil rights struggle to anti-government activism and consumer boycotts that force the market (as the universal) to correct. Blow and Herbert can only comprehend Beck as an opportunist, but cannot perceive how he wildly exploits a liberal inability to formulate a *political* and antagonistic notion of equality, that goes beyond formalism, inclusion or political correctness. What makes the Tea Party's neo-liberal racism effective is the claim to being the persecuted universal class, which aligns with their antagonistic division of the social space and offers the emancipatory rhetoric of emancipation.

The Koch brothers

The breakthrough moment in the pathology critique of the Tea Party explaining the sustained rage of the movement was identifying the Koch brothers as key funders. Following Jane Mayer's *New Yorker* profile of the Koch brothers⁴, the Tea Party are widely understood as 'astro-turf' or the manipulation of misguided souls who give 'populist cover to the billionaires and corporate interests' (Rich, 2010b). Frank Rich begins one opinion piece by deriding the treatment of the movement as authentic, without mentioning his own paper's role, in stating that 'there's just one element missing from these snapshots of America's ostensibly spontaneous and leaderless populist uprising: the sugar daddies who are bank-rolling it' (Rich, 2010a). Rich traces the lineage of the Koch Brothers – their father was a key member of the John Birch Society – to cast them as troglodytes standing against progress. The pathology of the movement becomes explicable through the rapaciousness of the Koch brothers as a corrupting influence upon the body-politic as their 'radical agendas ... go well beyond, and sometimes counter to the interests of those who serve as spear-carriers in the political pageants hawked on Fox'. For Rich, the Tea Partiers are simply the duped pawns of the Koch Brothers who 'must be laughing all the way to the bank knowing that working Americans are aiding and abetting their selfish interests'. In this sense, the Tea Party are pseudo-agents or the bewildered herd that might be neutralized by some manner of liberal technocratic intervention, perhaps campaign finance reform.

While the role of the Koch brothers in providing a well-resourced infrastructure of think-tanks and lobbying groups is critical in explaining an institutional credibility bestowed upon the movement, it does not explain the ontological question of why Tea Partiers *really believe* with passionate intensity. They are not simply brainwashed and exploited by the Koch brothers. Rather, they gain from their resistance a fetishized identity that shields them from the trauma of capitalist crisis and offers a redemptive millenarian narrative of sacrifice and struggle against an enemy. That is why there is no necessary humanist awakening or unmasking of the illusory notion of the fetish; it is easier to cling to one's fetish than to accept a disorientation of the symbolic order. While the Tea Party's fundamentalist pursuit of deregulation and austerity clearly serves the interests of the Koch brothers, against the economic self-interest of most of the movement, it also secures the fetishized and embattled identity of the Tea Party. The political exceeds this humanist/pathology dichotomy, as it both precludes liberal-democratic dialogue and its reduction to a corruption of liberal-democracy through fear and avarice.

Beyond the pale

What marked a critical turning point in the treatment of the Tea Party, following its 2010 electoral success, was the shooting of Democratic congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords. The allowances that had been made for it by the liberal-humanist treatment, as a divergent idiosyncratic movement, were revoked as it became necessary for the *Times*, given its position in the field, to call for the restoration of civil discourse. The solemnity of this exercise and the *Times*' authority to do it required a re-articulation of the ideal of the field, as above the fray, with the *Times*' chastising cable news, the blogosphere and politicians on all sides. Matt Bai (2011) writes of a 'rhetorical recklessness that permeates our political moment' as being driven by an irresponsible mediatized politics on both the left and right 'that so loudly and readily reinforces the dark visions of political extremists, often for profit or political gain'. Bai draws an equivalence between Sarah Palin's infamous cross-hairs map and the comments of a left-wing blogger on the *Daily Kos* to condemn all sides as complicit in the debasing of a shared liberal political culture. He castigates both left and right stating that this recklessness began before the Tea Party, on the left, with 9/11 Truthers⁵ and the opponents of President Bush. In the desire to see the Tea Party as the same 'D.I.Y.' politics as the coalition that propelled Obama⁶ to the White House, the *Times* either celebrates all sides or castigates all sides. As the *Times* struggles in its coverage to articulate a qualitative or political notion of liberalism, it reverts to a false equivalence which defends nothing except the field's sense of staying above the fray.

From this concern over normative notions of civility and rational discourse in the public sphere, the pathology treatment of the Tea Party extends to mark the movement as *beyond the pale*. Following the Giffords shooting, there were misplaced expectations that Republicans and the Tea Party might govern in a more conciliatory manner. With regard to debt-ceiling negotiations, Paul Krugman (2011) was severe in his reprimand of the Tea Party calling them 'hostage-takers', 'extortionists' and 'black-mailers'. Not to be outdone, Joe Nocera (2011) in his column titled 'Tea Party's War on America', labelled the Tea Party 'terrorists' in 'suicide vests' who 'have waged jihad on the American people'. Maureen Dowd (2011a) in trademark verbose fashion leaves no metaphor behind in characterizing a certain Tea Party derangement:

Like gargoyles on the Capitol, the adamantine nihilists are determined to blow up the country's prestige ... the Tea Party [is driving] a Thunderbird off the cliff with the president and the speaker of the House strapped in the back ... The maniacal Tea Party freshman are trying to burn down the House they were elected to serve in.

In a second column just 4 days later entitled 'Washington Chainsaw Massacre' (Dowd, 2011b), the debt-ceiling negotiations were likened to a 'slasher flick' with 'the president – and the federal government – being chased through dim corridors by a maniacal gang with big knives held high'. Dowd continues with a remarkable rhetorical flourish:

They were like cannibals eating their own party leaders alive. They were like vampires ... like zombies ... like metallic beasts in 'Alien' flashing mouths of teeth inside other mouths of teeth, bursting out of Boehner's stomach every time he came to a bouquet of microphones.

Dowd's rhetorical excess embodies a critical inability of the liberal field to explain the Tea Party and a genuine horror of how cherished institutions of liberal-democratic government are being debased. At precisely the point where the Tea Party are designated *beyond the pale* for their defiance of liberal notions of political compromise, the *Times* resorts to a snarkiness that shields liberals from their inability to understand this problem in real political terms.

Conclusion

It is clear from this analysis that the modern liberal field of journalism is faced with defining ontological questions. In the pursuit of universal truths and an understanding which binds the liberal-democratic polity, the field encounters antagonism, fetishism and the political. The field has traditionally understood the political as a threat to be overcome by expert knowledge; however, the failure to properly explain or defend itself from the Tea Party represents a threat to this knowledge and cultural capital. Where journalism has staked a claim for rationalism, enlightenment, truth-telling and self-reflexivity, populism has sought to close the social world while declaring its fetishized people the universal class. In response, practitioners and researchers in the field should not abandon the universal but, as Bourdieu would put it, look to journalism to defend and generalize access to universality. It is my hope that the insights gained from discourse theory and its notion of the political may be applicable in reimagining journalism's relationship to normative liberal-democratic principles.

Explaining the Tea Party is not simply about getting a political story 'right', it is about delineating the irrational in social life and politics without granting it democratic legitimacy. There are concrete historical, cultural and economic factors which account for the persistence of the Tea Party's fetishized productivist notion of capitalism which should not be beyond the grasp of journalists. However, in examining the *Times*' treatment of the Tea Party, we encounter the field's own irrational investment in a redemptive humanism. Zernike's reporting embodies a liberal-humanist teleology whereby political mobilizations innately strengthen liberal-democracy. This reaffirming narrative is depoliticizing, managing to portray the New Deal as forged by the middle class presumably mobilized in favour of austerity. *Times* journalists are at pains to conflate the Tea Party movement with the same energies that propelled Obama to the White House, an analogy that elides the Tea Party's antagonistic mode of politics. Bai engages in this conflation and humanism even up to unwittingly reinforcing the Randian mythology that he should be deconstructing and contextualizing. Within the entirety of the *Times*' coverage, there is a failure to consider the Tea Party's neo-liberal inversion of populism or to challenge its fetishized notion of capitalism.

The *Times*' treatment of the political is contained within a humanist/pathology dichotomy, with both understanding the political as remedied by the pre-existing tools of the field. In the humanist treatment, the expert knowledge of the journalist is deployed to enhance communication within the polity. Conversely, the pathology critique sees the unwelcome intrusion of the political as derived from corruption or base human emotions that require technocratic fixes. As the duped spear-carriers for *Fox*

News and the oil industry, the Tea Party are merely symptomatic of a power-politics greed that might be corrected by campaign finance reform or a Fairness Doctrine for cable news. Even if one concedes that the probability of such reform is unlikely, the ontological assumptions of the field remain intact and key questions about Tea Party belief remain unexamined.

Where there is pointed criticism of the Tea Party's irrationalism, this centres on race, inter-generational anxieties and retrograde politics. This critique affirms the field as it defends the legacy of civil rights, celebrates Obama's presidency as a triumph of liberal inclusion and casts the Tea Party as remnants of history. What it does not recognize is how the claim to the civil rights legacy is part of sustained universalist political logic that will not simply expire as a necessity of changing demographics. Tea Partiers can imagine themselves as the persecuted following in the footsteps of King while engaging in unrestrained dehumanizing attacks on their enemies. The Tea Party have constructed a neo-liberal racism which is the inversion of liberal multi-culturalism, substituting explicit reference to race with phantasmic images of welfare recipients, academics, the government and social democratic 'tyranny'.

The electoral success of Tea Party Republicans marked a distinct shift in coverage as there emerged an expectation in the field for political normalization of the movement. The Giffords shooting saw the forceful re-iteration of the media field's concern for civility, toleration and restraint in politics; those elements of Tea Party discourse that exceeded normative liberal bounds were increasingly deemed by the *Times* as *beyond the pale*. Similarly, the Republican/Tea Party congress defied any notion of the loyal opposition in pursuing a political brinksmanship that reduced the government's credit rating and caused a government shutdown. Here, the Tea Party are characterized in the *Times* as a genuine threat to liberal-democracy, responsible for the dysfunction of government and a political climate that is both uncivil and charged with the threat of violence. However, it is precisely at this moment when the Tea Party are at its most powerful, riding roughshod over the rest of the country, its own party leaders and even important backers such as the Chamber of Commerce, that the *Times* is at a loss to explain the phenomenon. The denunciations of the Tea Party in the *Times* reach a crescendo of liberal derision representing *The New York Times*' attempts to defend the field's notion of liberal-democracy from irresponsible politicians and media such as *Fox*. However, as the tone of coverage becomes more snarky, the defence of the field, rather than becoming political, functions as a form of disavowal protecting the field from its ontological crisis.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Notes

1. *Fox News* was central to promoting and coordinating Tea Party events, and *Fox News* host Glenn Beck, and contributor Sarah Palin, shifted seamlessly between the fields of politics and the media in leading the movement (see Jutel, 2013).

2. Articles were selected from the *NYT Topic* pages on the Tea Party from between February 2009 and end 2011. The 240 articles analysed were selected from on the basis of national importance (as opposed to political races for state government) and focus on the movement in contrast to standard ‘horse-race’ political journalism. Articles were coded as straight news, opinion or feature. Neither format was privileged over another but were analysed accordingly.
3. On the key issue of economic self-interest and the Bush tax cut for those earning over US\$250,000 a year, 13 percent of Tea Party supporters’ incomes exceed this threshold compared to 12 percent for non-Tea Party supporters (*The New York Times* (NYT) and CBS News (CBS), 2010).
4. While Mayer is credited with this scoop Mark Ames & Yasha Levine reported on the Koch Brothers astro-turf infrastructure 18 months before Mayer.
5. Attributing 9/11 truth to the left as opposed to Ron Paul/Alex Jones libertarians has been a recurrent straw man invoked by liberals in response to the Tea Party and the political, including John Stewart in his ‘Rally to Restore Sanity’.
6. What this false equivalence critically elides is the explicit unantagonistic discourse of Obama’s campaign and the clear antagonistic dichotomy of the Tea Party’s cry to ‘take America back’ (see Jutel, 2012).

References

- Ames M and Levine Y (2009) Exposing the right wing PR machine. *The Exiled*, 27 February. Available at: <http://exiledonline.com/exposing-the-familiar-rightwing-pr-machine-is-cnbc-santelli-sucking-koch/>
- Bai M (2010) D.I.Y. populism left and right. *The New York Times*, 30 October. Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/31/weekinreview/31bai.html?pagewanted=all>
- Bai M (2011) A turning point in the discourse, but in which direction? *The New York Times*, 8 January. Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/09/us/politics/09bai.html>
- Baym G (2010) *From Cronkite to Colbert: The Evolution of Broadcast News*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers.
- Blow C (2010a) I had a nightmare. *The New York Times*, 27 August. Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/28/opinion/28blow.html>
- Blow C (2010b) Whose country is it? *The New York Times*, 26 March. Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/27/opinion/27blow.html>
- Bourdieu P (1996) *The Rules of Art* (trans. S Emanuel). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Bourdieu P (1998) *On Television and Journalism*. London: Pluto Press.
- Carpentier N and Cammaerts B (2006) Hegemony, democracy, agonism and journalism. *Journalism Studies* 7(6): 964–975.
- Couldry N (2003) *Media Rituals*. London: Routledge.
- Dahlberg L and Phelan S (2011) An introduction. In: Dahlberg L and Phelan S (eds) *Discourse Theory and Critical Media Politics*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 1–40.
- DeCesare T (2012) The Lippmann-Dewey ‘debate’ revisited. *Philosophical Studies in Education* 43(1): 106–116.
- Dowd M (2011a) Tempest in a Tea Party. *The New York Times*, 30 July. Available at: www.nytimes.com/2011/07/31/opinion/sunday/dowd-tempest-in-a-tea-party.html
- Dowd M (2011b) Washington Chainsaw Massacre. *The New York Times*, 1 August. Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/03/opinion/washington-chain-saw-massacre.html>
- Goebel T (1997) The political economy of American populism from Jackson to the new deal. *Studies in American Political Development* 11: 109–148.

- Hallin D (1992) The passing of the 'high modernism' of American journalism. *Journal of Communication* 42: 14–25.
- Herbert B (2010) America is better than this. *The New York Times*, 27 August. Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/28/opinion/28herbert.html>
- Jutel O (2012) Barack Obama, the new spirit of capitalism and the populist resistance. *International Journal of Žižek Studies* 6(3): 1–19.
- Jutel O (2013) American populism and the new political economy of the media field. *Political Economy of Communication* 1(1): 26–42.
- Kazin M (1995) *The Populist Persuasion*. New York: Basic Books.
- Krugman P (2011) America held hostage. *The New York Times*, 16 May. Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/16/opinion/16krugman.html>
- Laclau E (2005) *On Populist Reason*. London: Verso.
- Laclau E and Mouffe C (1985) *Hegemony & Socialist Strategy*. London: Verso.
- Lippmann W (1993) *The Phantom Public*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction.
- Mouffe C (2000) *The Democratic Paradox*. London: Verso.
- Mouffe C (2005) *On the Political*. London: Routledge.
- Muhlmann G (2008) *A Political History of Journalism*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Nocera J (2011) Tea Party's war on America. *The New York Times*, 1 August. Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/02/opinion/the-tea-partys-war-on-america.html>
- Phelan S (2011) The media as neoliberalized sediment: Articulating Laclau's discourse theory with Bourdieu's field theory. In: Dahlberg L and Phelan S (eds) *Discourse Theory and Critical Media Politics*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 128–153.
- Rich F (2010a) The Billionaires bankrolling the Tea Party. *The New York Times*, 28 August. Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/29/opinion/29rich.html>
- Rich F (2010b) The very useful idiocy of Christine O'Donnell. *The New York Times*, 2 October. Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/03/opinion/03rich.html>
- Roberts D and Mahtani M (2010) Neoliberalizing race, racing neoliberalism. *Antipode* 42(2): 248–257.
- Schmitt C (1996) *The Concept of the Political*. Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press.
- Shropshire T (2010) Stop the 'Santa Claus-ification' of Martin Luther King, pleads Dr: Cornel West. *Rolling Out*, 18 January. Available at: <http://rollingout.com/entertainment/stop-the-santa-claus-ification-of-martin-luther-king-pleads-dr-cornel-west/>
- Taranto J (2011) Leave Kate Zernike alone. *Wall Street Journal*, 18 January. Available at: <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703954004576090001906342430.html>
- Terranova T (2004) *Network Culture: Politics for the Information Age*. London: Pluto Press.
- The New York Times* (NYT) and CBS News (CBS) (2010) National survey of Tea Party supporters, 5–12 April. <http://documents.nytimes.com/new-york-times-cbs-news-poll-national-survey-of-tea-party-supporters>
- Zernike K (2010a) In power push movement sees base in GOP. *The New York Times*, 14 January. Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/15/us/politics/15party.html?pagewanted=all>
- Zernike K (2010b) Tea Party is 'boiling mad' – Author Kate Zernike. *TYT Network*, 21 September. Available at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HsDtF_yyoOM
- Zernike K (2010c) Tea Party supporters doing fine but angry none the less. *The New York Times*, 18 April. Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/18/weekinreview/18zernike.html?pagewanted=all>
- Zernike K (2010d) Unlikely activist who got to the Tea Party early. *The New York Times*, 27 February. Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/28/us/politics/28keli.html>

- Zernike K (2010e) With no jobs plenty of time for Tea Party. *The New York Times*, 28 March. Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/28/us/politics/28teaparty.html?pagewanted=all>
- Žižek S (2008a) *In Defense of Lost Causes*. London: Verso.
- Žižek S (2008b) *Violence*. London: Profile Books.

Author biography

Olivier Jutel is the broadcast journalism lecturer in the School of Language Arts and Media at the University of the South Pacific. A former broadcast journalist in New Zealand his published work has dealt with Barack Obama and the Tea Party, neo-liberalism, populism, critical theory, media-tization and political economy of the media.