

H-Net Reviews

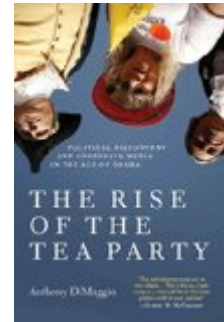
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Anthony DiMaggio. *The Rise of the Tea Party: Political Discontent and Corporate Media in the Age of Obama*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2011. 287 pp. \$18.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-58367-247-1; \$85.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-58367-248-8.

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Tempest in a Teapot

The Tea Party is not a social movement. This is the resounding theme of Anthony DiMaggio's book, *The Rise of the Tea Party*. In the tradition of Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky (by way of Walter Lippmann), DiMaggio confronts the Tea Party's ersatz populism as an instance of "manufactured dissent"—an "astroturfed" rather than authentic grassroots movement having been magnified by inordinate media coverage, and dominated by Republican Party insiders and "pro-business" interests. Masquerading as a genuine popular referendum on the "broken" political system in Washington DC, "the power of the Tea Party to influence the public mind, then," DiMaggio asserts, "is a product of corporate America and Republican institutional forces" (p. 9). Through an "extensive on-the-ground and national analysis" of six national and 150 local groups, plus the congressional Tea Party caucus; an examination of media content; and a multivariate regression analysis of nine independent, hegemonic filters (defined as constitutive of public political opinion), DiMaggio reveals that the Tea Party is dominated by corporate and Republican influence at the national level, and characterized by a lack of interest and organization at the lower—that, in fact, "the Tea Party was always a direct outgrowth of Republican, pro-business politics" (p. 37).

DiMaggio attributes the fact that such an argument would seem counterintuitive to mainstream media coverage of the Tea Party through 2010, which, when not openly cheerleading the "movement" (Fox News Chan-

nel and *Wall Street Journal*), "frame[s] the Tea Party very positively across the board" (p. 111). That is to say, drawing on a LexisNexis search, DiMaggio finds that mass media outlets (the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, Fox, CNN, MSNBC, NBC, ABC, and CBS) overwhelmingly tend to characterize the Tea Party as a "movement," as opposed to "astroturf." Demonstrating that even progressive, noncorporate media outlets (the *Nation*, *CounterPunch*, Common Dreams, and Daily Kos) accede to mainstream trends, DiMaggio indicates that, while expressing "dissident views found outside the bipartisan spectrum of opinions ... most of these news outlets assumed that the Tea Party was a legitimate social movement working against the political-economic system" (p. 121). Drawing on Lippmann's premise that mass media can set the agenda for what politicians and business officials discuss and on Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model, which suggests that mainstream coverage tends to valorize pro-business protest groups, DiMaggio depicts a media environment in which legitimate popular discontent with Washington and with Wall Street have ironically been channeled into a reaffirmation of this very same system. For DiMaggio, the stakes are nothing less than the continued hegemony of market fundamentalism and consumerist ideology in American politics and culture.

Although the Tea Party was once a glimmer in the eye of CNBC's Chicago Mercantile Exchange correspondent Rick Santelli and the Seattle-based conservative blog-

ger Keli Carender, national Republicans quickly adopted the tropes of antitax, antiestablishment Tea Party barnstorming. They hoped to “rebrand” their party’s sullied image in the wake of the Bush administration and the 2008 election. Where an organic, decentralized movement might be characterized by inconsistencies of message (as is often alleged of Occupy Wall Street, for example), or lack of representation at the national level, DiMaggio notes a uniformity of rhetoric across local Tea Party events and groups. This lock-stepped chorus bristled with hackneyed partisan themes—the fiscal irresponsibility of Democratic policies; the “socialist” agenda of the Obama administration—suggesting to DiMaggio that “the ideology driving the Tea Party is a direct manifestation of the conservative political apparatus, originating from Republican Party members and trickling down to right-wing media, and finally to the public itself” (pp. 51-52). By way of elaborating this derivation, DiMaggio devotes a good chunk of his first chapter to detailing the kinship of Tea Party elites (Dick Armey, Michelle Bachman, and Sarah Palin) with pro-business policies, and by superimposing Tea Party doctrine onto the Republican Party establishment. The emerging picture is that of a limited, but discernible shift in a party that has been inching rightward for quite some time.

The meat of DiMaggio’s ethnographic analysis of local Tea Party meetings appears in chapter 2, co-written with the journalist and historian Paul Street. The pair also teamed up in the new book *Crashing the Tea Party: Mass Media and the Campaign to Remake American Politics* (2011). Together, they attended and observed Tea Party meetings and events held in five cities in the Chicago metropolitan area—the geographical region with the most active Tea Party presence in the country, as well as the most congressional Tea Party victories in the 2010 midterms. Despite these features, DiMaggio and Street observed that weak coordination and poor attendance bedeviled Tea Party activities in the Chicago area. Those who did show up seemed largely ignorant about political policies—not to mention the logistical spadework and personal commitment required of social action. Far from being diverse or mainstream, DiMaggio and Street note, the Tea Party message seems to appeal almost exclusively to white men, ages forty to fifty. Indeed, the authors emphasize that this demographic was overrepresented even in communities whose populations are predominantly black or Hispanic.

Together, these twin analyses—the Tea Party as a hierarchically organized group representing elite interests whose local membership is sparse and at best apathetic—

sharpen DiMaggio’s core criticism of the Tea Party as a manufactured social movement. He suggests that the Tea Party fails on the criterion of collective identity as fundamental to social movements, established by the scholars Donatella Della Porta and Mario Diani. In their comprehensive introductory work *Social Movements*, Della Porta and Diani maintain that formation of collective identity is a thoroughly social process by which actors “recognize themselves—and are recognized by other actors—as part of broader groupings, and develop emotional attachments to them.”[1] Against this rubric, DiMaggio finds the Tea Party’s professed Randian ethic of ardent individualism diametrically opposed to conventional definitions of a social movement. For DiMaggio, this ethic manifests itself in the evident apathy and disorganization of local Tea Party groups, in which activism is reduced to online expressions and intermittent, poorly attended public events (which are often themselves convenient platforms for national Tea Party politicians). DiMaggio persuasively demonstrates the insufficiencies of a collective Tea Party identity; however, one wonders how the (admittedly few) Tea Party “activists” and supporters might be engaged or sustained by an alternative national (perhaps mythical) American identity, as historical subjects acting out the legacy of the Founding Fathers. Though this form of identity may not be effective at organizing social activism in the present case, it may open up directions for understanding political action.

Congressional candidates campaigning under the Tea Party banner were particularly successful during the 2010 midterm elections and, as DiMaggio demonstrates in his final chapter, in manipulating public opinion against healthcare reform. Symptomatic of a larger “schizophrenic pattern in public opinion,” DiMaggio asserts, a current of opposition to “corrupt” or “big government” has soured public opinion on healthcare and other instruments of social welfare generally, even as members of the public might embrace such programs in particular. DiMaggio contends that in the context of “Obamacare” however, the Tea Party-Republican messaging apparatus—bleeding from the “echo chamber” of conservative media into the mainstream—was extremely effective at setting the agenda of what turned out to be not so much public deliberation as directed ignorance. Drawing extensively on detailed polling data from the Program on International Policy Attitudes and the Pew Research Center, DiMaggio concludes that a correlation between this messaging and public opinion polls exists; he notes that “the national political debate over healthcare did *not* take place independently of [media] coverage” (p. 194,

emphasis in original). Still, a more detailed account of how and where this framing turned up in specific news outlets may have helped his cause.

As part of an emerging cohort of Tea Party books—Theda Skocpol and Vanessa Williamson’s *The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism* (2012); Kate Zernike’s *Boiling Mad: Inside Tea Party America* (2010); and Jill Lepore’s *The Whites of Their Eyes: The Tea Party’s Revolution and the Battle over American History* (2010)—*The Rise of the Tea Party* adds a careful and thorough analysis of the impact on public policy created by an elite-manufactured discourse of dissent. Where it seems rather conventional for critics to bridle at the evident hard-right radicalism and anger intoned by Tea Party rhetoric, DiMaggio makes a more nuanced point, re-

vealing this populism as the contrivance of publicity-minded Republican operatives, and ultimately supportive of a pro-business agenda. With the 2012 election season approaching, and with corporate interests playing a conspicuous role in the political process through Citizens United and corporate-owned media, *The Rise of the Tea Party* should serve as an important commentary and guide to the intersecting developments of media narrow-casting, well-marketed ideology, and political polarization, all within a moment of palpable political-economic crisis.

Note

[1]. Donatella Della Porta and Mario Diani, *Social Movements: An Introduction*, 2nd. ed. (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 91.

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