



A Breakdown of Tea Party Vernacular

It would be very easy to write a Tea Party speech. The bombastic perorations and rhetorical flourishes have tremendous appeal to the untutored ear. Take for instance the following sample:

We're here to take our country back! We want limited government! We don't want any more redistribution! The Tea Party is here to tell the government to stay out of our way! Why? Because we are Patriots! This is about patriotism...being true Americans! We need to say NO to socialism! The liberals want a government take-over of our X! [Fill in anything for X.]

We're all here to tell the liberals: "Keep your hands off my healthcare!" We've been taxed enough! Where are our jobs?! We need to get rid of Big Government! Read the Constitution! It's time to get the government off our backs! It's time to take our country back!

Picture each line eliciting a big cheer from the crowd. The words sound good, but do they really mean what some people think that they mean?

This is a typical sample of the bromides and platitudes heard at Tea Party rallies. The verbiage is typically peppered with vacuous invocations of wonderful-sounding things like "security", "prosperity", "honor", "freedom" and "liberty"—as if the mere utterance of such loaded words amounted to a sound argument.

When one says such things over and over and over again, it all starts to sound very enticing. It's fair to say that if one attended a right-wing event, and recited the above script, one would receive an enthusiastic round of applause.

What's going on here? Let's review each talking point, starting with the name used for the movement itself.

1) "Tea Party"

The Boston protest to which this moniker refers was a protest against the Tea Act of 1773 (written BY the British monarchy FOR the East India Company). In other words, the people in the colonies were protesting against corporate welfare that night in

Boston Harbor. The citizenry was railing against corporate tax-cuts (i.e. tax-cuts for the rich) which they recognized as an anti-democratic measure that would screw over the rank and file.

The original “Tea Party”, then, was a movement against the abuses of corporate power (and against the corporatism that facilitated such abuses). The populist rebellion was concerned, moreover, with the Coercive Acts enacted by the corporatists to keep the rank and file “in line”. These Acts essentially abolished the ability of the rabble to have representation in government—transferring the representative power to Big Business. The grievance was that the government was no longer representing the People, but acting as a shill for Big Business instead.

The CURRENT Tea Party is the EXACT OPPOSITE of the original Tea Party. Instead of being anti-Big Business, it is serving as a LOBBY FOR Big Business. Instead of reigning in corporate power, it is ABETTING corporate power. It is protesting against those who are protesting tax-cuts for the plutocracy. It is protesting against those who are protesting favors for Big Business. It is fighting against those who are fighting for the rank and file.

For these reasons, the present “Tea Party” is the antithesis of the Boston Tea Party of 1773. Essentially, it is a group of people who’ve been convinced that they should be angry with those who are trying to help them—while being persuaded to support those who are responsible for their woes.

The Koch brothers have engineered mass Stockholm Syndrome. The Tea Partiers are people who’ve been duped into eschewing the solutions to the country’s problems while rallying behind the forces that have led to our present calamity.

2) “Limited government”

This simply means: We want government to be limited to what we want it to be limited to. The phrase is question-begging. One may as well say: I want the government to do everything I want it to do, but none of the things I don’t want it to do. Statements about “limited government” are essentially meaningless.

3) “Redistribution”

The menace of “redistribution” seems to be a common invocation at Tea Party rallies. Yet it only seems to insinuate the danger of DOWNWARD redistribution: railing against the “threat” of redistribution of financial resources FROM corporate power TO public services.

Meanwhile, massive, systematic UPWARD distribution continues to transpire (disenfranchising the rabble while further concentrating wealth in the hands of the most affluent). As THIS happens, there seems to be no accusation of “redistribution” leveled. The irony is astounding.

Bizarrely, the Tea Partiers don’t seem to be concerned with the fact that dozens of hedge fund managers made more than a billion dollars each in 2008—the year of the financial collapse (while they paid only 15% capital gains tax)...while Goldman Sachs made record profits and dolled out gigantic bonuses to executives while the rest of the country suffered.

Strangely, the Tea Partiers are worried about the State using the ill-gotten money from the bloated coffers of mega-corporations to fund public services for the general populace. They are SO worried about this that they are utterly oblivious to those same mega-corporations continuing to hoard the lions share society’s funds...while public infrastructure continues to go under-funded.

4) “Patriotism”

The use of this word in a right-wing context is Orwellian. For Tea Partiers, “patriotism” means hyper-nationalism, nativism, corporatism, fetishism of the second amendment, glorification of the private sector, Christian theocracy, notions of being a “true American” (whatever that means), and a host of other odd things. This amounts to justifying all that one asserts simply by christening oneself a true “Patriot”...and thereby deeming anyone with whom one disagrees ipso facto “unpatriotic”.

This mindset involves false pride, a kind of braggadocio and defiance, an obsession with guns, a theory that all scholarship is a nefarious conspiracy by intellectual elitists to screw over everyone else, a distorted conception of “democracy”, a demonization of public works, a weird view of American history, an awkward sense of identity, a vilification of “liberalism”, bizarre word-associations, and an obstinate insistence that progressive ideals are somehow “un-American” (whatever that means).

5) “Let’s take our country back.”

Here, “back” seems to mean “backward”.

This is a clarion call for doing something that is utterly undefined. It is a bizarre thing to proclaim without specifying: “Take the country back from whom, exactly?” If the answer is, “From the plutocrats”...then the Tea Party is self-defeating. For it is fighting tooth and nail to give our country TO the super-rich—beseeching everyone to put our government in the hands of corporate power.

Giving something away (or selling it to the highest bidder) is a strange way to take it back. Fighting for a government by, of, and for the corporations is a peculiar strategy to use if the rank and file seek to “take back” their country.

6) “Socialism”

Presumably, when this buzz-term is used, the Tea Partier is referring to basic public services (i.e. the State’s provision of public goods). To label the funding of public infrastructure and public works “socialism” is nothing short of bizarre. It’s as if anything that promotes the general welfare was mere pretense for some nefarious plot to install a Soviet-style regime.

Properly socialized infrastructure does not equal a centrally-controlled economic system (a.k.a. government planning of the entire economy)...as this menacing label would have people believe.

Tea Partiers may take note that we already have socialized healthcare; it’s called the V.A. system. Are we to suppose that the V.A. system is some evil incursion of “socialism” into our society? Are the police department and the fire department and social security “socialism”? Ask a Tea Partier to define “socialism”, “communism” and “Marxism”, and expect a panoply of amusing, incoherent responses comprised of loose word associations.

“Stalinism” and “Maoism”, two RIGHT-wing movements that bandied about the term “communism”, are thus conflated with the general, vague term “socialism”, which can refer to any number of things, depending on the context. Here’s the trick: Convince the untutored that any effort to involve the State in ANYTHING, no matter how democratic or legitimate the aim, is tantamount to what Stalin and Mao did. This rhetorical maneuver can be accomplished by subsuming both things under the menacing rubric, “socialism”. The result: public infrastructure and State oversight / regulation designed to help, protect and empower the rank and file are depicted as new forms of what Stalin and Mao did—horrific things that led to the deaths of 10’s of millions of innocent people.

This rhetorical bate-and-switch is accomplished the same way that “Marxist” regimes paid lip-service to Marxian ideals while engaging in the antithesis thereof. It is for this reason that cult movements like North Korea’s Juche and Pol Pot’s Red Cambodians (as well as Stalinism and Maoism) aren’t recognized by so many people for the right-wing movements that they are. Such horrible regimes operate under the aegis of this amorphous thing called “communism”, which ostensibly involves this ephemeral thing called “socialism”, which can be readily associated—via semantic maneuvers—with ANY socialized infrastructure. Thus: What Scandinavian nations do now can be linked to what Pol Pot and Kim Il Sung did. Presto!

7) “A government take-over of...”

This is an odd reference to the State seeking to protect workers and consumers from exploitation by corporate power. It is also a distorted way of describing efforts by the State to curb corporate abuses. Are we to suppose that child labor laws are a “government take-over” of our children?

According to this logic, the municipal services for one’s community are a “government-takeover” of one’s community; the sanitation department is a “government take-over” of our garbage; the municipal water department is a “government take-over” of our water; the fire department is a “government take-over” of our safety; and the police department is a “government take-over” of our justice. Is the V.A. a “government take-over” of our veterans’ healthcare?

Meanwhile, the impression is that any action by the State to regulate the investment banks, to enact consumer protections, to enforce oversight and transparency in the financial industry, to demand accountability and checks on corporate power, is tantamount to some kind of “tyranny” over “The People”. Anything having to do with the State’s role in facilitating the general welfare is demonized—thereby precluding any recognition that the State has any legitimate role in domestic affairs. Public services are depicted as “government intrusions” and this big, bad leviathan called “the government” attempting to “control our lives”, intervening in our private affairs, and infringing on our personal prerogatives. In this distorted caricature, the government is by its very nature the enemy of “liberty”.

Empowerment of the citizenry can thereby be depicted as some devious scheme to seize control over the citizenry. Opposites are thus passed off as the same thing via misleading rhetorical maneuvers—and the uneducated are duped into swallowing the ersatz logic of Neoliberal ideology hook, line, and sinker.

8) “Keep your hands off my healthcare!”

(This is a rallying cry that was scripted by the Koch brothers—primarily via their organization, “Americans For Prosperity”.AFP is the vehicle used for channeling money from corporations and the super-rich to ersatz-grass-roots events designed to convince people that they should support corporate-friendly policies.AFP also serves as a mechanism by which such events are orchestrated and right-wing propaganda is disseminated.)

Imagine someone saying to the fire department, “Keep your hands off my safety.”Imagine saying to the police department, “Keep your hands off my law enforcement.”Imagine demanding that the public school system to keep its hands off of your children’s education.Imagine insisting that the EPA keep its hands off of the environment...or that the FDA keep its hands off of the nation’s food.

Essentially, “Keep your hands off my healthcare” means “keep the for-profit, sickness-treatment industry the way it is”...which means: Make sure Big Business is allowed to persist in taking advantage of the vulnerable and marginalizing the poor—in order to maximize corporate profits.

The request entails that one turns down any opportunity for the State to provide universally accessible, high-quality healthcare for the citizenry...so that corporate power can continue as is: providing mediocre (if any) care to the rank and file for exorbitant prices.Even the most modest healthcare reform measures (often dubbed “Obama-care”—presumably as a derogatory epithet) are depicted as parts of some diabolical master plan—a maniacal ploy, we’re told, to take decisions away from medical doctors and have nameless, faceless bureaucrats force the citizenry to make whatever decisions about their personal affairs that the nameless, faceless bureaucrats see fit.

This menacing “socialist plot”, we’re led to believe, is designed to control everyone’s lives.If we continue to curb insurance company abuses, it’s only one more step to full-blown Stalinism.Only the private sector can offer health to ALL people at an affordable price.If you don’t believe that, you must be a communist.

The grievance is predicated on glaring misconceptions about liberty and socialized infrastructure.The defective logic is analogous to that of “school choice,” the misguided effort to introduce a naive view of capitalist markets into the education system.When the private sector is glorified and so-called “free enterprise” is fetishized, such deranged views are allowed to metastasize.



9)“Taxed enough!”

This is a peculiar snippet of invective. It insinuates that the tax-cuts for the 98% of the general population (those earning under \$250,000 per year) under Obama are a moot point if the top 2% aren't given huge tax-breaks as well. In other words, the super-rich need to be given a break too...lest we ALL suffer. This contention is, of course, utterly ridiculous.

The claim: Any capital gains tax or tax on dividends is somehow hurting the rank and file...and deterring American enterprise. This is based on supply-side economics—an ideology that has been dis-proven time and time and time again. Yet it is a seductive narrative that sounds perfectly reasonable to the untutored ear.

In the original Tea Party, protesters were railing against corporate tax cuts. With the present Tea Party, protesters are DEMANDING corporate tax cuts. This new, mutant version of the movement would more accurately be named, “The B.E.I.C. Party”. However, the British East India Company no longer exists, so perhaps we could simply just call it “The Koch Party”...or just “The Pro-Plutocracy Party”.

10)“Where are our jobs?!”

This question insinuates that the blame for unemployment lay with the Obama administration and the Democratic Party, not the G.W. Bush administration and the G.O.P. The answer to the question, of course, is: They were lost due to the right-wing economic policies that were enacted during the past three decades. The unemployment you're now experiencing is the fallout from the implementation of the very Neoliberal ideology you're now CHEERING. Meanwhile, the stimulus under Obama WORKED...and the only reason it hasn't been working better is that it wasn't BIG ENOUGH.

To place blame on the LEFT wing rather than the RIGHT is to attribute the economic disaster to those who are remedying it while seeking solution from those who created it and will only continue the policies that caused it.

11)“Big government”

This is a loaded catch-phrase that, ultimately, means nothing. It treats the measure of legitimacy of a State as a purely quantitative matter, rather than as a qualitative matter. Therefore, the epithet is very misleading.



In reality, we can have democratic States large and small; despotic States large and small. We can have efficient States large and small; inefficient States large and small. It's not that size is irrelevant, it's that small-ness is not an end in itself, nor is "big" inherently bad.

A good government does everything it should do, and does it thoroughly...while abstaining from doing anything that would undermine the principles of a liberal democracy. That is: It does enough, but not too much. NOT enough is just as anti-democratic as TOO much. How does "big" vs. "small" ascertain this standard? The point is to assess quality, not merely quantity. Small doesn't equal good; big doesn't equal bad.

12) "the Constitution"

No scholar is quite sure what Tea Partiers are referring to when they use this term. Presumably, they have in mind some sacred document that supports their claims.

13) "Get the government off our backs / out of our way"

This is a peculiar request coming from people who live in a democracy, which depends on the State for so many valuable things—things on which a fair, free society depends. A State that cares about the well-being of its citizenry most certainly will not simply leave everyone alone, out in the cold, to fend for themselves. State involvement doesn't mean State despotism. Empowerment of the people doesn't mean control over the people. Provision of basic public services and public infrastructure is about empowering the general populace, not some nefarious attempt to CONTROL EVERYONE'S LIVES.

As for any request to keep the government "out of our way", one must specify exactly what this means. We kept the government out of the way of the investment banks, and look what happened. The corporations want the government to REMAIN out of their way for obvious reasons. But do YOU still want the government to stay out of the way? Out of the way of WHAT, exactly? To what end? WHO's way are you talking about? (A pronoun doesn't answer this question.)

The sample speech omitted other typical talking points—those about immigration and "protecting our borders", guns and invocations of the second amendment, god and our "Christian" nation, etc. Nativism, racism, gun fetishism, militancy, historical

revisionism, queer interpretations of the U.S. Constitution, religious fundamentalism, calls for theocracy, and other salient features of the right-wing ideology can also be addressed.

Essentially, the name of an anti-corporate power rebellion in 1773 that was protesting the anti-democratic nature of corporatism has been appropriated to name a PRO-corporate power rebellion that champions corporatism. This inverted Tea Party “Tea Party” appeals to those who haven’t the faintest clue what they’re yelling about. The belligerence, the bombast, the hectoring, and the pathological dogmatism of this cult movement can be diagnosed for what they are simply by deconstructing the rhetorical shenanigans on which the movement thrives.

By interpreting these 13 talking points in light of the implications, we can then go back to the screed mentioned above, and uncover its real meaning. Imagine, then, replacing each line in that sample speech with the actual meaning of the statements it contains. Essentially, the text would be transformed into a request for something odd—something that doesn’t even remotely resemble a democratic society. The words are fun to say...until one thinks about what is actually being said.

Here’s what’s left over after the misleading verbiage is omitted:

“We’re here! We want! We don’t want any more! The Party is here to tell the government! Why? Because we are! This is about...being! We need to say NO! The liberals want our X! [Fill in anything for X.] We’re all here to tell the liberals! We’ve been! We need to get rid of! Read! It’s time! It’s time to take our country backward!”

*NOTE: For further breakdown of Neoliberal Newspeak, refer to the essays in the Economics section of the website.

EPILOGUE: POLITICAL RHETORIC 101:

Within the mind of the typical Republican politician, we’d often encounter the following monologue:

“Wait! Wait! Am I about to say something to which an ill-educated, white, evangelical, socially conservative, provincial, gun-owning, progress-despising, pro-Tea Party, GOP primary voter in rural America might object? Am I about to do anything that would irk greedy, wealthy people with a pathological sense of entitlement? Am I about to support a proposition that might thwart the agenda of a powerful corporate lobbyist who’s siphoning tons of money to my campaign? Hold on a gosh-darn minute; I need to tread carefully here, lest I step on the wrong toes.”



have corporate power to cater to, religious people to pander to, and affluent constituents to appease. Alas, the right-wing catechism must be recited as scripted, or I will be excommunicated from the cult.”

Indeed, reality-denial has been made an art form by the right wing. Anarcho-capitalism is caricatured as the common man’s Valhalla—even as it is the plutocrat’s Shangri La. Reactionary stagecraft has become a vital skill in promulgating right-wing dogmas. The recipe is simple: Tout myths like trickle-down economics to a credulous audience, exploit people’s ignorance, and, PRESTO: A thoroughly-duped rabble. Meanwhile, the political operator ends up with well-pleased corporate paymasters. In other words, he has mobilized a dependable constituency so as to further his career.