THE TEA PARTY MOVEMENT:
THE PROBLEM OF POPULISM AS A DISCURSIVE POLITICAL PRACTICE

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Abstract

This critical essay is an attempt to understand populist discourse of the Tea Party movement and the lurking reactionary-nationalism in the background. Taking a discourse theoretic approach proposed by Laclau (2005), the essay attempts to show how the differential issues/discontents in the populist discourse of the Tea Party came to share equivalence through the articulation of equivalential social logic and the shared universal negative feature in the key signifiers and the antagonism to the government and the incumbents. The essay problematises the conceptualisation of populism as a form of political practice that speaks for the people and against the established power structures, and argues that populism must be critically analysed as a discursive political practice independent of ideology or content.

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Introduction

In the summer of 2009, on the one hand, the Tea Party movement burst on to the political space as a genuine groundswell phenomenon, whereas, on the other hand the movement had some of the hallmarks of a reactionary-nationalist movement. However, the Tea Party swayed the imagination of many people in the country with its populist political discourse that was grounded in a folksy political wisdom that perpetuates a mythical narrative of the American Revolution and the founding ideals of the nation, that Lepore has described as "a historical fundamentalism" (Armey and Kibbe 2010; Kate 2010; Lepore 2010). In a way, the reactionary politics of the Tea Party movement was a throw back to the early decades of the Republic and a narrative rooted in the founding legends and myths of American nationhood and national identity. The realm of the *political* is primarily a field of language, discourse and communication, and nowhere is that more true than in populist politics (Alinsky 1971; McGee 1980; Green 1987; Laclau 2005a; Lakoff 2008). In this essay I argue that despite the contingencies that give rise to a groundswell phenomenon, we must understand a populist mobilisation as a process, a discourse and a social construction that articulates the grounds for conjuring up a populist identity that demarcates its cultural-ideological boundaries and "antagonistic social frontier" (Laclau 2005a).

The Tea Party discourse in complex ways intertwined traditionalism, localism and racism with the political economy and the unemployment that was hurting the people in the wake of the financial crisis of 2009-10. In this essay, I suggest that we cannot understand a political phenomenon such as the Tea Party, which is both reactionary and organic, without drawing our attention to its populist discursive practices. Central to the discourse of the Tea Party movement was the construction of a populist identity – the tea partiers as a people. I will attempt to explain the social production of the populist identity and the populist demand to vote out the incumbents in the mid-term election by applying the discourse theoretic approach of Laclau (2005a) to the Tea Party movement. On a side note, as this essay focuses on the Tea Party's discursive practices in the months leading to the mid-term elections of 2010, it does not cover the period after the elections when the movement institutionalised itself as a Republican caucus in the Congress.

The purpose of this essay is to understand the "social logic" in the populist discourse of the Tea Party movement, in the months leading to the mid-term elections in 2010, and its implication for heterogeneous political space (Laclau and Mouffe 1985c/2001; Smith 1998; Laclau 2005a). Though Laclau (2005a) has largely theorised social logic of populism in the context of progressive radical politics and he might not have had reactionary populism in mind; nevertheless, any discursive construction of a people, a populist identity, poses a problem of universalism that has implications for "reactionary-nationalism" (Žižek 2006). Moreover, by drawing attention to the discourse of the Tea Party, this essay suggests that we must look at the populism of the Tea Party or for that matter populism of all shades as a form of discursive political practice free of the its content or ideology. In a way, the discursive construction of collective identity in a populist movement is all about constructing a people from a coalition of differential groups by articulating equivalential components in their conflicting claims/demands/concerns in a shared political space.

The social logic of populism draws its efficacy from the *articulation* of universalism among differential particular identities tied together in a chain of equivalence (Laclau 2005a). *Articulation* is an important concept in discursive approaches in social sciences that explores how meaning is produced in a chain of signification, establishing an equivalential relation among the elements in the process of discursive construction of identity (Critchley and Marchart 2004; Zerilli 2004).

Additionally, moving beyond political demagogy, most scholars largely agree that populism is about speaking for "the people" and against the prevailing structures of power – elites, ideas and values (Goodwyn 1978; Boyte and Riessman 1986; Coles 2006). Moreover, as some have argued that in any understanding of the politics of speaking for the "people" we must resist the temptation to see populism through the prism of mob pathology (Conovan 1999). This is important for the argument I am making here, especially when we cannot ignore that, there was a crazy fringe in the Tea Party phenomenon in 2010, which might suggest that the reactionary-nationalism was a pathological aberration (Drum 2010; Liebovich 2010; Mencimer 2010). Bracketing mob pathology is also important when we compare the seemingly "anarchic outbursts of the 'people'" in populism with the widely accepted political efficacy of the "rationality and solidity of class politics" (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, 150).

I will come back to the social logic of populist discourse, its criticism and the case of the Tea Party, which is the centrepiece of this essay, later. However, before that let us take a step back and discuss a selection of literature on the problem of populism, chosen according to significance and relevance in the context of American politics, which will also help appreciate the discursive turn proposed by Laclau.

Populism: Between Rhetoric and a Political Project

Populist politics has often upset the predictability of institutional democracy and electoral party politics. The lack of precise conceptual meaning of populism has confounded scholarship in the field (Ionescu and Gellner 1986; Coles 2006). Laclau (2005a, 3) writes, "Populism, as a category of political analysis, confronts us with rather idiosyncratic problems." The history and the theoretical meaning of populist politics associated with organic grassroots movements that champions "the people" is not as precise as other forms of political practice, such as socialist politics of class struggle, politics of client-patron relationship, and neo-liberal democracy of competing self-interests in the public space. Nevertheless, most scholars who study populist politics often focus on the "transformative potential" of populism in the context of grassroots democracy and social movements (Coles 2006). We have learnt from the past studies done on the populist movements that most organic and grassroots movements, beyond rhetoric and persuasion, are impregnated with the seed of a political project, which leads to production of a "social knowledge" that influences politics for many years (Goodwyn 1978, Boyte and Riessman 1986). What seems to be central to all grassroots populist movements is that they go beyond rhetorical claims, produce lasting social knowledge, make new cultures and construct social identities that influence public policies down the decades. For example, the Farmers' Movement in the nineteenth century and the working class movements across the country in the first part of the last century that influenced the welfare state progressive policies such as the New Deal (Goodwyn 1978).

Boyte and Reismman (1986) have argued that in the progressive tradition, populism has been about empowering "popular agency" and "social agents" in political discourse and building social movement with a broader social base, especially in comparison to the politics of class or group interest. Seemingly, from a progressive perspective, populism seems to be about speaking for the people and against the rich and powerful – the traditional class struggle, so to speak. For example, Arjun Appaduari (2004), in his study of the social organising in the slums of Mumbai (India) explained that populism is a manifestation of popular agency pitted against the power of the elites. Appadurai argued that populism embodies the "capacity to aspire" among the underprivileged in their struggle for their rights and entrenched interests of the elites. However, even though the dominant praxis of populism comes from progressives, but there is evidence that conservative variety has also thrived alongside, which ironically often speaks against the interest of the poor and serves the hold on power by the elites. This has prompted some commentators to suggest that populism of the right produced what in the press was dubbed as the "culture wars," which succeeded in getting many people in Middle America to "vote against their self-interest" (Frank 2004).

Michael Kazin (1988), in his historical study of populism in America, has argued that populism is primarily a strategy of persuasion, a political rhetoric, rather than a political project and hence is not an only a tactical move in the politics of the left, but has been deployed with surprising efficacy by the right. Kazin argues that populist rhetoric in the conservative political discourse started to appear in the 1940s. In the recent decades, conservative groups, such as the American Enterprise Institute have strategically worked to provide a seemingly alternative hermeneutics in the conservative discourse. The main thrust of conservative think tanks has been that the progressive agenda of the Democrats has enhanced the colonising and destructive power of the government over the "mediating structures of daily life," such as the family and the church in daily life of autonomous local communities in the heartland of America (Berger, Neuhaus and Novak 1977). Since the 1970s, we have seen that the equivalential component in the Republican populist discourse has been that the liberal coastal elites have undermined the social values of the people in the American heartland. The Republican populism came to occupy the populist political space, in the nation's polity, from which the Democrats were withdrawing in the late 1970s (Kazin 1988). The withdrawal of the progressives from the populist political space, allowed the resurgent conservative movement to consolidate its dominance in populist space. For example, the evangelical family values movement of the 1970s and 1980s that was the bulwark of the GOP southern strategy produced a conservative majority in the south and social knowledge that made the country lean more towards a conservative direction (Horwitz 2000; Frank 2004). In a way, the conservative populism has contributed in undermining the notion of class in social analysis and has instead preferred a throwback to privileging anti-modernist social identities based on race, ethnicity and religion.

We have seen that in the last three decades, the political right has not only used populist rhetoric, but have deployed populism in their discursive political practice with remarkable political efficacy. For example, we saw how Reagan articulated his populist appeal in the folksy common sense with the slogan "government is not the solution of our problem, but government is the problem," which contributed

in his rise to power in the 1980s. Then in 1992, Ross Perot's populism helped wean away votes from the Republicans, which helped Bill Clinton win the elections (Laurence 2003). Reminiscent of Reagan, in 2008, Barack Obama's populist message of "change" triumphed over the democratic establishment and attracted support from the majority of Independents and even a few Republicans, building on the anger and antagonism towards eight-years of the Republican control of government (Kenski, Hardy and Jamieson 2010). Then in the 2010 mid-term election, we saw once again, that the Tea Party used the populist signifier of "change" to attack the incumbents in Washington, which attracted support from the Republicans, many Independents and a few Democrats who were disillusioned with the Obama presidency.

On the surface, as Kazin (1988) has argued, mentioned above, it seems that for a politician populism is primarily an electoral strategy to persuade the independents and not a governing principle or a political project. Perhaps that is why populism often ends in disillusionment and produces blowback, like the one we saw for the Democrats in the 2010 mid-term elections following the euphoria of 2008 – because in governing, unlike campaigning, it is not possible to please all the differential groups. While governing politicians have to make choices. For example, the consensus articulated in Barack Obama's speech (2004) – "There is not liberal America or conservative America; there is United States of America. There is no Black America, White America, Latino America or Asian America; there is United States of America" – was temporary and unravelled soon after he became the president. President Barack Obama was forced to make a choice between his political base and the power elites in his party. Arguably, according to many of his supporters on the left, he chose the latter.

Nevertheless, it is not an either/or case between populism as a political rhetoric and a political project. More than a rhetorical strategy of persuasion in which it seems that populism thrives on pandering and platitude, at a much deeper level populism as a discursive political practice is about constructing a populist identity – a people. However, the paradox of democracy, as we saw in the case of Obama's populism in 2008, is that any consensus among the differential concerns of socially heterogamous groups is often the outcome of a populism that highlights a temporary alignment among interests/concerns/claims/demands. The ground for equivalence is a shared antagonism towards a centre of political power, which emerges as an "antagonistic social frontier" (Laclau 2005a). Later we will come back to how the construction of an antagonist social frontier was central to the discursive practice of the Tea Party, but before that let us recover how hegemonic articulation of equivalence among differential concerns produces temporary alignment and constructs a people, and the problem it raises in the context of lurking reactionary-nationalism.

Social Logic in Populist Discursive Practice

Drawing from Ernesto Laclau (2005a), as mentioned earlier, I suggest that we need to take a discourse theoretic approach to understand populism. What this means is that we need to go beyond populism's content and take a closer look at the social process in the construction of a populist identity as a discursive political practice of articulating equivalence among differential concerns. Laclau explains, "… a movement is not populist because in its politics or ideology it presents actual

contents identifiable as populist, but because it shows a particular *logic of articulation* of those contents – whatever those contents are" (Laclau 2005b).

Laclau and Mouffe (2001) in their study of populism, which came out of their study of popular democratic social mobilisation and radical politics in South America, had argued that all politics, especially radical politics, is about constructing "a people," rather than a traditional class struggle in the Marxist sense. The conceptualisation of "people" as a category of analysis in Laclau and Mouffe's work, on the one hand, emphasises on the distinction and similarities between *plebs* and *populus,* and on the other hand, it advances and reinterprets the Gramscian construction of collective identity through hegemony and the centrality of the notion of fundamental class to efficacy of radical politics. They have argued that the social logic of populist discourse is about coalescing differential identities to forge a populist identity through a hegemonic articulation of equivalence in a populist demand.

The centrepiece of Laclau's discourse theory of populism is the social logic and the significance of the act of naming and the articulation of empty signifier. The hegemonic articulation of emptiness, in the name of a populist movement, becomes a necessary condition for constructing a populist identity – a people. In order to become the ground for articulation of equivalence among a variety of social groups, not necessarily a unity, the name or the signifier has to be empty. The empty signifier is not a signifier without a signified. The empty sign in a discourse serves as the locus or a point to which the universal negative feature, which differential concerns/demands/claims of differential social groups share, is tethered by displacing or weakening of its own particular positive feature in articulation of the populist discourse.

The notion of emptiness in Laclau's conceptualisation is similar to Michael McGee's (1980) notion of "ideographs." Like ideographs, empty signifiers are words from everyday language in political discourse that because of their seeming abstraction are difficult to anchor to any one ideology or a political project. Laclau's notion of empty signifier takes this idea a step further and explains how as a signification artefact, in a discursive political practice, the emptiness enables the equivalential element among differential concerns to rise to the surface, which leads to social production of the ground on which the construction of a people or a populist identity is articulated.

To understand Laclau's intervention in semiotics with his notion of "emptiness" let us briefly trace the idea back to Saussure and Lacan. Saussure (1986) explained that all signs are arbitrary and there is not a pre-existing relationship between a signifier and signified outside of linguistic discourse. In a discourse the relationship between a signifier and a signified (object or description of an idea) produces a plurality of meanings. Thus, when a signifier relates to a floating series of descriptions this makes it impossible to attribute a defined meaning outside of discourse. However, plurality of descriptions raises the question: what is it that remains the same in a signifier minus the plurality of descriptions? Does it mean, as Žižek (1989, 94-5) suggests, that minus plurality of description a signifier lacks a positive identity or is without a signified? For example, what is it that remains the same in the message of "change" minus the differential discontents of Democrats, Republicans, moderates, whites, blacks and others? As Lacan had

suggested, a signification or meaning does not float endlessly, it is retroactively held together by one of the signifiers in a chain of signification, which works as a "quilting point" (*point de capiton*) in a discourse (Laclau 1977, 304). I will later come back to how the name "tea party" emerged as the quilting point in the discourse of the Tea Party movement.

As alluded to above, Laclau and Mouffe's (1985c/2001) and its later development by Laclau (2005a) has attracted fierce criticism from both the critical theorists and scholars who take an empirical approach, based on self-interest and rational choice models, to political analysis. However, Marchatt argues, "Since empiricist analyses are not in possession of the ontological tools necessary to uncover the significance of the phenomenon and to decipher the name and true role of its subject, populism and the people constitute an *inherent limit* to political analysis and political theory" (2005, 4-5). Thus the criticisms from the empiricist perspective originates from its methodological premises and are on expected lines, but the criticism from fellow critical theorists with whom Laclau and Mouffe share their premises is perhaps of more value here. For example, Marxist critics argue that Laclau's approach is contrary to the traditional understanding of class struggle in a capitalist society and the hegemony of the elites (Woods 1986). Laclau and Mouffe's conceptualisation of hegemony is rooted in the discursive approach of Gramsci, but it challenges the "essentialism" in theorisation of class struggle. They question the Gramscian idea that "the fundamental class" is the locus of popular agency; instead, they argue that the construction of a "people" should be or is the goal of any radical politics (See Laclau 2005, 126-29). Laclau (2005a, 81-82) cites the construction of a people in the *Solidarność* movement in Poland as an example. The *Solidarność* movement was successful in constructing a new a populist identity, a *plebs* that is also the *populus,* by articulating equivalence between the differential concerns of shipyard workers and the concerns of the differential social groups in the rest of the country. Marchart (2005, 17) unpacking the complexity in Laclau's argument explains:

> *"When Laclau, on his part, differentiates between plebs and populus, we must not confuse the former with heterogeneity – For Laclau, the "people" of populism is a plebs who claims to be the only legitimate populus, since populism "requires the dichotomic division of society into two camps – one presenting itself as a part which claims to be the whole"* [PR, 83]."

However, Žižek has criticised the universalism and conceptualisation of "people" in *On Populist Reason* (2005a). Žižek has argued that the theorisation of "people" in Laclau's recent work undermines the significance of class analysis and class struggle in critical studies. Žižek has vehemently disagreed and challenged Laclau's explication of the social logic of populism and construction of a people as a necessary condition for radical politics. Žižek argues:

> *This supplement to Laclau's definition of populism in no way implies any kind of regress at the ontic level; we remain at the formal-ontological level and, while accepting Laclau's thesis that populism is a certain formal political logic, not bounded by any content, only supplement it with the characteristic (no less "transcendental" than its other features) of "reifying" antagonism into a positive entity. As such, populism by definition contains a minimum, an elementary form, of ideological mystification, which is why, although it is*

> *effectively a formal frame or matrix of political logic that can be given different political twist (reactionary-nationalist, progressive-nationalist), nonetheless, insofar as, in its very nation, it displaces the immanent social antagonism between the unified people and its external enemy, it harbours in the last instance a long-term protofascist tendency* (Žižek 2006, 656-57).

Laclau disagreeing writes, "The actual fact is that my notion of the people and the classical Marxist conceptualisation of class struggle are two different ways of conceiving the construction of social identities, so that if one is correct the other has to be dismissed – or rather reabsorbed and redefined in terms of the alternative view" (Laclau 2006, 647). For reasons of space, I will not go into the extended and highly complex philosophical debate between Laclau and Žižek here. For further discussion, see Žižek's critique of Laclau and the rejoinder in *Critical Inquiry*. However, later in the conclusion I will come back to Žižek's core disagreement with the replacement of the notion of class in a popular struggle with the idea of "a people," which as this essay suggests is a problem in the context of Tea Party's populist practice.

Returning to the purpose of this essay, which is to understand and speculate what are the implications of the articulation of universalism in Tea Party movement for a democratic polity with respect to diversity and social heterogeneity. Thus to understand the Tea Party phenomenon, as suggested above, we need to understand the social logic in the populist discourse of the movement. However, before interpreting the social logic in Tea Party's discursive practice, let us first identify some of the discursive components in the groundswell phenomenon in the months leading to 2010 mid-term elections.

The Tea Party Phenomenon

There was a swift change of mood in the country following the 2008 election and the biggest financial crisis since the Crash of 1929. The people moved away from Candidate Obama's populism and his call for *end of politics* to a creeping antagonism towards President Obama's administration, which in a way was a *return to politics*, as we have known it for many years. As mentioned earlier, we can reasonably argue that the Tea Party movement originated in the widespread reactionary protest against the Wall Street bailouts, economic stimulus, and the health care bill and other policy measures taken by the Obama administration that grew the size of the government and the deficit. Though, the institutionalised Tea Party is now an insurgent block in the Republican Party; however, in the summer of 2009, to some extent the Tea Partiers were angry with both the parties and the movement was largely organic. The Tea Party folks were "mad as hell" in the Town Hall meetings, in the summer of 2009 (Zernike 2010).

In April of 2010, Rasmussen Poll reported that about 24 percent of Americans had some kind of connection to the Tea Party and 34 percent knew someone close who was a tea partier, about 1 in 10 Americans considered themselves as members of this grassroots movement and about two-thirds of them were men and described themselves as conservatives.[1] In August, CNN Poll reported that the number of tea partiers climbed and included about 57 percent of Republicans, 18 percent of Independents and about 8 percent of Democrats.[2] Some Republican politicians and Libertarian ideologues, such as Senator Jim DeMint and Dick Armey of Freedom-

Works respectively, courted the Tea Party, but for the most part the movement was grassroots run with about 2,500 chapters across the country that were loosely connected at the national level to the Tea Party Patriots (www.freedomworks.com). Thus, the tea party phenomenon had all the hallmarks of a genuine grassroots movement against the elite-country club run and controlled institutional party politics in the United States.

Some commentators have made the claim that the Tea Party was merely a movement of a very conservative wing of Republican Party. For example, some have argued that the Tea party is not a new phenomenon. They have suggested that it is a reincarnation of the American Liberty League that organised opposition to the New Deal in the 1930s and the John Birch Society that opposed John F. Kennedy's election and civil rights movement in the 1960s (Drum 2010). The NYT/CBS Poll found that the Tea Party movement was overwhelmingly white and Christian. Moreover, the fact that in the midterm elections the partiers supported Republican candidates supports the above argument.[3] Nevertheless, the Tea Party movement's differential membership and social base of supporters, like most populist movements, seems to frustrate a one-dimensional characterisation of the movement. The diffused nature of the Tea Party movement, like any other populist movement, confounds any rational choice political analysis based on traditional interest groups rooted in political ideology, class interest, religious affiliation, and race. Like most populist movements, the Tea Party represents a motley collection of differential issues and associated subjectively held social identities.

For the libertarian group in the movement the core issue was government's intervention in the market with the bailouts, stimulus, and what they saw as restrictions on individual liberty and undermining of individual responsibility in the mandate provision of the health care bill. Mostly classical Libertarian issues such as smaller government, isolationism in foreign policy, cut in defence spending, cuts in international aid, state rights and autonomy for local communities dominated tea party discussion forums (personal observation). The tea partiers largely expressed conservative views on economic and foreign policy issues, and did not overtly engage with cultural issues that have been the lynchpin of the conservative discourse in the last three decades. Main representatives of the Libertarian voice were Rand Paul in Kentucky, Joe Miller in Alaska and Nikki Haley in South Carolina. Joe Miller suggested cutting international aid and Rand Paul saw Civil Rights Act and White House response to BP Oil Spill as government intervention in business and as "un-American."[4] The other core groups of tea party cohorts were senior citizens who were the prime movers behind the initial wave of discontents in town hall meetings in the summer 2009. For the senior citizens the issues included the protection of their entitlements such as healthcare and the concern about their retirement investments such as 401(k)s that had shrunk as result of the meltdown on the Wall Street. Yet they were at odds with the healthcare reform and regulation of the financial industry.

Surprisingly, the jobs issue that dominated the media discourse and was perhaps the real issue behind the discontent among traditional Republicans, disaffected Democrats and Independents, did not appear prominently in the discourse of the Tea Party. Even the banners, posters and signs at the Tea Party rallies only occasionally referred to jobs and when they did, they mostly were about how the stimulus

failed to create jobs.[5] It seems that improvement, if any, in the jobs scenario would not have lessened the anger in the tea party movement and the antagonism the partiers felt towards the Obama presidency in particular and the government in general. Unemployment was already a problem on the horizon in the last two years of the Republican administration, but it did not produce an antagonism among the differential cohorts who later came together in the protests held under the banner of the Tea Party.

For the group of Christian fundamentalists in the movement the core issue was traditional cultural values, opposition to the doctrine of separation of Church and State and the belief that President Barack Obama was a hidden Muslim. The key representatives of the voice of the religious fundamentalists were Christine O'Donnell in Delaware, Sharon Angel in Nevada, Sarah Palin at the national level and Glenn Beck in the media. There was also a small, but visible group, which still held on to the outdated racial values, the "confederates in the attic" types (Horwitz 2000). In its report on the Tea Party phenomenon the NACCP suggested that for this group the core issue was racism and the tea partier's unwillingness to accept a Black man as the president and his American citizenship (Burghart and Zeskind 2010). Then there was a cohort of business community, for whom the core issue was the stricter regulations on business such as the financial regulation bill and the proposed cap and trade legislation. The key representatives of the voice of this group were Carly Fiorina and Meg Whitman in California who came to the political field from the corporate world.

As alluded to earlier, what is important to consider here is that various groups affiliated with the tea party were not only raising differential issues, but also they were in some cases at cross-purposes to each other. For example, the retiree's anger at the cuts in Medicare was at cross-purposes with the discontent with big government, deficit and the demand to reign in the spending. The Tea Party's demand to cuts taxes and preserve Medicare was a contradictory demand. The irony in the Tea Party movement, like in other populist movements, was the articulation of contradictions, such as "get your government's hand off my medicare," that seemingly appear to cohere in the face of the antagonism towards the government. The main contradiction in the discourse was libertarian advocacy of individual liberty and cut in defence spending, which was at cross-purposes with cultural values of Christian fundamentalists and their almost xenophobic concern arising out Islamic terrorism.

The libertarian discourse of the tea party movement problematises the fact that the membership of the tea parties across the country was more than 50 percent religious, compared to 35 percent in the general population (NTY/CBS Poll).[6] Individual choice is not necessarily a Christian or religious virtue, but since the alliance of evangelists with the Republican Party, during the Reagan years, the notion of individual choice has emerged as a key metaphor in the conservative discourse. In the conservative political discourse the notion individual choice as opposed to the notions social justice has lost its particular meaning transforming into a caricature or a void, to be filled by each one of us according to our sentiments. For example, this is what Glenn Beck reportedly said, "Communist in the White House are bent on "fundamentally transforming" the country; progressives speak of putting "the common good" before the individual, which is exactly the kind of talk that led to

death camps in Germany" (Liebovich 2010). However, this may sound like crazy talk, on the fringe, but it is a symptom of the contradictions in the subject positions of the Tea Party members and supporters. For example, Glenn Beck is born again Mormon who believes in the intervention... and at the same time is libertarian on economic issues. Therefore, the question here is how these contradictions in the differential issues and claims came together in the massive tidal wave of discontent and anger in the months leading to the 2010 mid-term elections. Prima facie, from the surveys and media coverage what we learn is that the thread that links the chain of supporters and sympathizers of the tea party movement is the discontent and disappointment with the government and anger towards Obama presidency.

In the following section, as promised above, I will now explain how the tea party movement articulated equivalence among seemingly differential issues/discontents/demands/claims discussed above by understanding the components of the social logic in the Tea Party's populism.

Understanding the Populist Political Practice of the Tea Party

By understanding the social logic in the populist discourse of the Tea Party movement I hope to be able show how the movement articulated equivalence among differential issues and discontents that produced the anger and antagonism towards the government in Washington and the Congress, and not the least against President Barack Obama, Senator Harry Reid and Congresswoman Nancy Pelosi. As discussed earlier the central feature of the discursive practice of populism is not only about speaking to power, but it is about constructing "a people" and empowering popular agency and the capacity to aspire through the hegemonic articulation of equivalence among differential issues and associated identities. As discussed earlier, in Laclau's theory of populism the following three key concepts explain how the social logic of articulation operates in populist discourse and practice: empty signifier, hegemonic articulation, and antagonistic social frontier. A populist discourse leads to social production of a ground that highlights the equivalential feature in differential demands/concern/issues and as consequence produces equivalence among differential social identities that leads to the construction of "a people" or a populist identity.

Empty Signifier and Hegemonic Articulation in Tea Party Discourse

Politics of populism, of right and left shades, brings together variety of groups/social identities with differential issues as part of one social movement. The differential issues constitute a chain of demands/claims/discontents that the institutional political order has failed to address adequately in a differential manner. When institutional political order fails to address demands differentially they transform into claims harbouring discontent and anger. The negative feature of the discontent and anger establishes equivalence among the differential claims. For example, in the Tea Party movement the groups who joined the movement felt that the government, both Republican and Democrat, frustrated their differential issues and demands, which over time transformed into unfulfilled claims that included commonly shared antagonism against the government, which was provocatively symbolised by the Tea Party slogan – *Take Our Country Back*. However, we need to recognise here that

often grassroots movements on the extreme right or the extreme left of the political spectrum raise issues that are so out of the mainstream that an institutional political order can rarely address them, while accepting the universalism in the claims, without oppressing some social groups. The only way a party based political system can address demands/claims is by treating them differentially. Institutional party politics deals with heterogeneity of the social and the differential issues it raises by applying the democratic principle of majority, but at the same time, the constitutional safeguards also prevent the tyranny of the majority.

In populist movements the unaddressed demands/claims/discontents come together as a chain because they share a negative feature beyond their positive differential characteristics (Laclau 2006, 652). For example, as mentioned earlier in the Tea Party movement the negative dimension was the discontent and anger towards the government and established power structure. A discursive populist practice is the articulation of the central signifier in the populist discourse as the equivalential element among all the differential concerns. The logic of articulation in populist political practice is to overcome the specificity and the heterogeneity in a chain of issues, discontents, claims, and associated social identities. Therefore, the equivalence is not in the positive feature or identity, but is the absence of fullness or totality or opposition to the common opposition or the other that emerge as the antagonistic frontier. We will come back to this later in the section on the antagonistic social frontier.

Laclau (2006, 647)writes that, "any politico-discursive field is always structured through a reciprocal process by which emptiness weakens the particularity of a concrete signifier but, conversely, that particularity reacts by giving to universality a necessary incarnating body … hegemony as a relationship by which a certain particularity becomes the name of an utterly incommensurable universality." For Laclau, a signifier that is articulated as a quilting point becomes a sign of equivalential identification among a plurality of description, differential identities and issues – a point that represents an absence of fullness, a universality in a chain of particularities. Thus by "emptiness" Laclau does not mean that a signifier is without a signified or the signifier does not have a positive identity, it is only displaced in favour of a shared negative feature in the chain of signification (Laclau 2005a, 102-05).

Now, if we take the example of the Tea Party, what could be the central signifier in its discourse that could establish equivalence among differential concerns of different groups, mentioned earlier, that joined the movement? I suggest that it is the name itself – Tea Party. The name Tea Party is impregnated with historical context, the Boston Tea Party, and the opposition of self-governing communities in the 18th-Century America to unjust taxes imposed by the colonial government. It is a symbol of resistance of the people to the structures of power. The idea of autonomy and anti-taxes campaign drew its inspiration from the libertarian philosophy of the time. However, in the articulation of the discourse the libertarian core in meaning of the sign "tea party" was displaced of its particular meanings so that it could function as a universal symbol of the equivalence and negative feature among all the differential concerns of the social groups in the movement – the negative feature being the opposition to big government and Washington. Laclau emphasises that representation by a sign of populist demand is only possible if a

particular demand signifies the chain as totality. Tea Party and its particular libertarian connotations come to represent such a totality. The social logic by which a particular signifier becomes a signified representing a universal is the hegemonic articulation of equivalence. Thus, the emptiness articulated in the key signifier, Tea Party, becomes the ground for the concerns/demands/claims of the diverse social groups to coalesce, despite some of the fundamental contradictions in the discontents among all the groups, and a condition for political efficacy. It is important to keep in mind, as Laclau has argued that the signifier "does not express the unity of the group, but becomes its ground" (Laclau 2005a, 231).

Thus the central feature of populist political practice is not only appealing to the interest of the grassroots or speaking to power or elites, but it is about constructing "a people" and empowering popular agency and the capacity to aspire through "*hegemonic articulation*" of equivalence among differential issues and identities (Laclau 2005a, 240). The key signifier, the tea party, in a chain of signifiers established a hegemonic relationship to a variety of discontent in the country, such as big government, spending, deficit, and health care that suggested the country was going in wrong direction, also confirmed by the polls. However, I would like to point out that in the equivalential chain of discontents or claims of the Tea Party movement not all differential concerns were subsumed. For example, the opposition to war, which was common among the libertarian groups, was a concern that could only appear on the fringes of the Tea Party's discourse despite its connection to deficit and big government. As mentioned above, another common negative feature that all differential concerns in the Tea Party movement shared was the same antagonistic social frontier in discourse, which was an important element in the articulation of populist demand/claim and construction of associated populist identity, a people – the tea partiers.

Antagonistic Frontier and Construction of a Populist Identity

As suggested above, Laclau (2005a) explains that for a chain of differential discontents/claims to transform into an equivalential chain, what is required is the articulation of equivalential logic in a common opposition or the negative feature in the chain. For the Tea party movement the common opposition is the government in Washington, which according to the movement was taking control of their "mediating structures of daily life," reminding of the historical link of the Tea Party movement with the culture wars of the previous decades (Berger, Neuhaus and Novak 1977). The government was colonising and intruding into the daily lives of autonomous communities, especially in the heartland. Even though, a historical irony is that the government and its apparatuses have been instrumental in creation of these supposedly autonomous communities in the heartland in the first place.

Often person(s), institution(s), and issue(s) emerge as an "antagonistic frontier" in the discontent of people across the political spectrum that contributes in bringing together people (Laclau 2005a, 83). The antagonistic frontier forms the basis for articulating equivalence across ideology, issues and discontents. In its articulatory practices, the Tea Party displaced the particularity of the subject positions of differential social groups arising from their differential concerns by privileging an equivalential negative feature or antagonism towards the government in Washington. The populist discourse of the Tea Party articulated the government ... Reid as

being on the other side of the antagonistic social frontier; making the voting out the incumbents the populist demand/issue – *the war cry of the movement.*

As suggested in earlier, the historical event of the Tea Party, a national memory with mythic proportions has influenced the understanding of patriotism and shaped the social construction of American nationalism in traditionalism reconstructed as historical fundamentalism (Carp 2010; Lepore 2010). The differential issues, subject positions and associated identities find equivalence in the populist demand and transform into popular subject and populist identity, i.e. the tea partiers or as the tea party liked to put it – "Patriot." In the populist discourse of the Tea Party, there was a sense of loss of a reconstructed and recovered imaginary past, similar to most reactionary movements. The tea party seemingly represents a desire among those disillusioned with growing heterogeneity to revert to a homogeneous social totality of white, Christian, English-speaking America – the so-called Tea Party Patriots. In an ironical turn in contingencies of history, that the Tea Party Patriots displaced the Obama-people and became the new people of "change" in the 2010 mid-term elections. The message of "change" and the discursive political practice of antagonism seem to have returned haunting for the Democrats.

Conclusion

By unpacking the social logic of articulation in the discourse of the Tea Party movement, I have tried to show how the differential social groups and associated differential issues such as deficit, tax cut, and health care came to share equivalence in the populist discourse. Additionally, we saw that the glue that binds the differential concerns is the hegemonic articulation of the equivalential component in the emptiness of the key signifiers in the discourse such as, the name "tea party" and the message of "change." In 2008, Barack Obama campaign controlled the narrative by controlling and owning the empty signifier "change" and antagonism to the old guard in Washington. The Tea Party movement, in 2010, appropriated the message of "change" and used it to articulate a new equivalence among the differential concerns of the people. In the movement's discourse, particular meanings in the differential issues were displaced and hegemonically substituted by the universal negative – a reactionary-nationalist identity and the antagonistic social frontier – opposition to the government in Washington, symbolically represented by the trio – Obama, Reid and Pelosi.

Thus, the irony here is that reactionary and right wing populist movements have turned out to be sophisticated practitioner of populist discourse. Candidate Barack Obama's populist campaign in 2008 drew its inspiration from Saul Alinsky (1971) and successfully used the antagonism and disillusionment with George Bush and Republicans to his advantage (Corsi 2008; Miller 2010). Saul Alinsky (1971) in his primer on radical politics and community organising lays special emphasis on language, tactical use of words, and communication. The populist on the right seem to have successfully appropriated the repertoire of Alinksy (See Leahy 2009). In his book, Leahy argues that the tea partiers should learn from Alinsky and use same tactics that groups on the left have used to build a popular majority. The conservative political strategists have perfected the tactics of subversive use of empty signification in the organising of populist rage at the grassroots against issues such as immigrants, women's right to choose, social compact with the poor,

and global warming (Luntz 2007). In some respects, as Michael Kazin (1988) had alluded to, the conservatives have controlled the populist political space on most contemporary public issues by mastering populist practice. Lakoff (2008) has argued that Republicans have controlled the key metaphors that we use to make sense of the world and define American social totality.

This brings us to the problem of articulating social totality as outlined earlier in the conceptualisation of "a people" in Laclau's discourse theory of populism or any radical politics. Laclau (2005) drawing from Hegel argues that the civil society celebrates particularity and heterogeneity, whereas, the political community, e.g. national community, celebrates universality. The Marxists populism was perhaps the first to conceive of universal or social in their notion of a classless society outside the structure of a nation-state, which was a theoretical possibility, but a utopia from a pragmatic perspective. We saw above that Laclau seems to suggest that the universalism in the category of "a people" is a substitute for traditional Marxist emphasis on the primacy of working class as the fundamental class. However, as we saw above in the discursive practice of the Tea Party that the construction of "a people" through articulation of hegemonic relationship in populist political practice can equally be part of the repertoire of a reactionary populism, which should pose a serious problem for progressive populism. Žižek criticising the notion of hegemonic articulation and antagonistic frontier has argued, "antagonism between unified people and its external enemy, it harbours in the last instance a long-term protofascists tendency" (2006, 557). Laclau (2006) has pointed out that we need to take into account that a populist identity does not exist before the articulation of an antagonistic frontier in political discourse. However, the Tea Party movement demonstrates pre-existence of some of the hallmark signs of a "reactionary-nationalist" movement, especially if we view the historical links of the Tea Party movement with the American Liberty League and the John Birch Society as more than just a fringe phenomenon. In 2008, the narrative in the Democratic populist discourse was that there was no blue or red America, but "the United States of America," a seemingly "progressive-nationalist" identity. Then in 2010, the Tea Party movement substituted the United States of America with the populist identity of Tea Party Patriots that demonstrates a lurking "a proto-fascists tendency," as speculated by Žižek (2006) in his criticism of privileging the notion "people" over "class" in popular mobilisation. The hegemonic articulation of reactionary-nationalist populist identity could be a threat to social heterogeneity in the national political space, which is becoming more diverse because of increasing population of non-European immigrants in America.

I have tried to argue that we must agree with Laclau that the conceptualisation of populism from the perspective of content and ideology that speaks for the people and works against the established power structures is problematic. Instead, we should see populism as a discursive political practice that is independent of content and ideology. This also makes it imperative that scholars and political theorist should critically analyse populism of all ideological shades. However, the paradox is that the assumption of an universalism or a totality or a people in a democracy is primarily a necessary goal for public policy, where everyone is treated equally and presumably is taken as part of a homogeneous group, whereas, in all other aspects including electoral politics and everyday life we must celebrate heterogene-

ity and diversity of the differential concerns of the social groups. The institutions of democracy and electoral party politics thrive on the acceptance and recognition of social heterogeneity in the polity. Democracies celebrate heterogeneity holding on to the principle of equality and democratic polities develop institutional processes and safeguards such as separation of power and constitutional oversight through a relatively independent judiciary that ensure fairness and justice.

Finally, the hope lies perhaps in the fact that any universalism in the articulation of a consensus or construction of a people, in politics, to some extent, is always a result of partial hegemony, and the articulation of consensus is not permanent. The consensus or universalism is only temporary and very soon crumbles, as the hegemony itself is provisional (Mouffe 2004, 104). I suggest that it is already happening with the Tea Party movement institutionalised as a caucus within the Republican Party. However, the "social knowledge" that Tea Party's populism has produced among its constituents can have far-reaching influence on American politics. Institutional party politics deals with issues/discontents/claims/demands differentially or by coalescing them under quasi-universal categories of political parties such as Democrats and Republicans. Now perhaps we have a third quasi-universal category of the Tea Partiers as the movement was institutionalised as a caucus in the Republican Party, like the extreme left is a caucus in the Democratic Party.

Notes:

1. See Rasmussen Poll, April 13 2010. Downloaded from the World Wide Web on August 25, 2010. <http://www.rasmussenreports.com/public_content/politics/general_politics/april_2010/34_say_they_or_someone_close_to_them_part_of_tea_party_movement>

2. See CNN Opinion Research Polls – Tea Party. Downloaded from the World Wide Web on September 15, 2010. <http://i2.cdn.turner.com/cnn/2010/images/08/13/rel11d.pdf>

3. See NYT/CBS Mid-term election poll. Downloaded from the World Wide Web on August 30, 2010. <http://documents.nytimes.com/new-york-timescbs-news-poll-a-pre-election-day-glimpse-of-a-politically-disappointed-nation?ref=politics>

4. See AP News Wire, Rand Paul: Obama BP Criticism "Un-American" GOP Senate Candidate is under Fire for Comments about Civil Rights Law, June 21 2010.

5. See "Tea Party Signs" in Mother Jones, Sep/Oct 2010.

6. See NYT/CBS Mid-term election poll.

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