

High Noon is Too Late for Tea: Seeking Ways to Engage and Oppose the Tea Party Movement

Phoenix Class War Council

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It's been quite interesting to see the reactionary right go haywire over the recent call to "crash the tea parties".¹ Reading their blogs, one can literally track the echo chamber effect in real time. One wing nut on the information superhighway characterizes the anarchists without proof as stooges for the Feds (the standard accusation from these folks) and before you know it the next kook is citing the first kook as proof.

For the Truthers in the movement in particular, the standard frame through which they see the world goes like this: the CIA/Feds manipulate movements that aren't "awake" (a term that refers to everyone outside that wing of the Tea Party movement). This skepticism of movements stems in part from their inherently conservative nature. They distrust peoples movements that tend to lead to generally progressive results. Naturally, then, in their eyes such movements must be run by outside paymasters. They are composed of poor fools who don't know they are being used (at best) if not outright paid thugs. Throw in a healthy dose of internets and capital letters and — boom! — the anarchists have transformed into a front for the CIA! Infoshop is an organization run by the NWO! Reality be damned!

If the Tea Party people could slow their roll for a minute, I think they would find a lot to learn from this exercise in self-delusion. But for them the ideology, so drenched in American patriotic mythology, trumps the reality. Because of this, a "teachable moment", so to say, is unlikely. So, instead, let's think about what we as anarchists can learn from the call and the reaction.

The first thing that occurs to me is the general wishy-washiness of the call put out on Infoshop. It really doesn't call for much. Indeed, some on the right have found it quite confusing. One criticism made frequently on right wing message boards and blogs that I think is quite prescient is the questioning of how anarchists can come out in defense of government. This is a fair point. Still, calling for the defense of social programs as a bulwark against austerity and direct attack by the capitalists is not necessarily a contradiction. For anarchists its always been more about the how than the nature of the concession exacted from the elite. After all, we're revolutionaries not reformists. The goal, as always, is the generalization of the attack until a broad insurrection rises to destroy Capital and the State. The struggle is the means to that end.

¹news.infoshop.org

However, when framed as an attempt to move the Tea Party to the left, it certainly starts to enter the dangerous waters of leftist defense of the State for its own sake. This is clearly not an anarchist position. Indeed, it's not clear at all how, as the call out suggests, a more leftist Tea Party (or Tea Partiers of a more leftist persuasion) would be any better. Are we calling them to support Obama? To become dissident Democrats? To become socialists? What exactly would moving them to the left mean and, more importantly, what would it mean for anarchists and the prospects for revolution? This relationship — one of persuading Tea Partiers to move leftward — fails to define anarchists as anything other than extreme liberals and is problematic to say the least. In this case we are nothing but the shepherds of the social welfare state, herding those who wander from the herd to its defense. People on the right are correct to call the piece out on this hypocrisy.

Next, I think that while the very short article is correct to recognize a shift towards fascism in some (increasingly dominant) tendencies within the Tea Party movement, its analysis is in the end quite unsophisticated. For instance, the piece really fails to recognize contradictions within the movement that can be exploited, not to move it to the left, but to divide it, neutralize it and, hopefully, to cause a shaking out of its more truly libertarian elements towards advancing the attack on Capitalism and State. That is, framed correctly, it is possible to intervene in this movement in order to give encouragement to the libertarian and working class elements within it so that they will break with the overall fascist tendency, the reactionary free market ideology and the infantile patriotism. I'll get back to this with some examples from Phoenix Class War Council's organizing here in Phoenix.

But as an aside, before I move on, I do think it's interesting and quite embarrassing for the Tea Partiers that several, much longer and much more critical essays (that deal with the question in depth), have passed them by entirely. It seems that this tiny little essay was just the right dimensions to be digestible by their very limited critical capacities. Likewise, it was probably just simple enough for the big money interests to blast it out like a megaphone to be consumed by the more conspiratorial and hardcore conservative reactionary elements of the movement.

Of course, being generally unaware of the recuperation of their own movement by big money interests because of the weaknesses in their own pro-Capital ideology (the class war equivalent of "Yes, sir, may I have another?"), Tea Partiers have been unable to interact meaningfully outside of the narrow script being written for them by the likes of long-time GOP operative Grover Norquist. Indeed, framed as it is between the "austerity for you, bailouts for us" politics of Obama's banker buddies and the white free marketeers of the Republican "drown big government in the bathtub" cadres, the capitalist class as a whole must be laughing its collective ass off over gold-flaked martinis considering the dialectical outcome of that lovefest of reactionary kissing cousins.

As it is, the Tea Party is being used as a hammer to attack the last remaining source of middle class wages in the US — the state bureaucracy. The hypocrisy of blue hairs on Medicare and Social Security ranting against "socialism", or military families on government pensions and Veterans Administration health care screaming about "Obamacare" is certainly good for a hearty belly laugh. But the sad truth is teachers, municipal workers and the rest, among the last vestiges of the albeit quite flawed union organizations in the US, are now taking the brunt of the final assault on the last vestiges of concessions extracted from the capitalists by the working class. Such past attacks on Capital, however, having been corrupted by the political relationship of white supremacy, never included everyone, and large populations were left out or pushed out of the deal. And, white supremacy being a relationship to Capital that exists at Capital's convenience,

and now having dismantled the heart of organized workers in Detroit (to the cheers of much of the white working and middle class), the capitalists are now moving in for the kill. The Tea Party (having refused solidarity as a weapon), armed now only with its self-hating free market fantasies, is the eager accomplice to the murder, witting or not.

Of course, as anarchists we should defend neither the state bureaucracy nor bloated leftist unions in a knee-jerk fashion. Still, we are left with the fact that the attack on the formally organized wing of the working class has reached levels unprecedented in most Americans' lifetimes. Something fundamental has changed in the relationship between capital and the working and middle class. The Tea Party emerges from this new cocktail. They seek to reassert what they perceive to be a looming collapse of the deal of white supremacy. But is the deal still to be had?

When considering this question, the libertarians within the movement should not be confused with the conservative, fascist wing. The libertarians are attracted by ideology, but they are not the knife's edge in this fight. We share some key things in common with them and the Tea Party is not necessarily a happy home for them. Like the relationship between anarchists and communists, the one between libertarians and conservatives is not as seamless as outsiders might otherwise believe. In fact, they are a point of potential conflict because their overall politics do not fit well within the overall goals of the movement, and the conservative leadership knows it. Hence their vigorous push to consolidate control and marginalize libertarian elements.

In PCWC lingo, this conflict is a site of potential "fractures and fissures". That is, putting pressure on this contradiction can potentially cause a split, a falling out or a "coming to Jesus" moment. It can also force one element to stay true to its stated ideology over otherwise reactionary political tendencies. This is something to keep in mind and it points to a fourth way to engage the Tea Party movement beyond either ignoring them, attempting to move them to the left or outright unconditional opposition.

Let me give an example of what I mean. When PCWC was organizing the Inglorious Bastards Bloc² to confront the National Socialist Movement³, we reached out to libertarians on the right. In Arizona, the libertarian tendency is probably the largest dissident faction in politics. So, in our call to action, which was posted to the largest libertarian news site in the state and got a lot of play in local media, we addressed a particular section to them:

We at PCWC also want to extend a particular invitation to our friends in the Libertarian movement. Because of your vigorous protests at Obama's recent speech, you have been painted as racist. We know that you feel this is unfair. You see yourselves as protesting this country's turn towards fascism. We sympathize with this argument and are ourselves no fans of the Obama administration. However, we want to point out that unlike some of your past protests, the NSM rally offers you the perfect opportunity to make known your opposition to fascism in an unambiguous way. We hope you come to the event.

Our intent here was to call the libertarians in Arizona, who had been flirting with anti-immigration positions for quite a while, to choose whether they were going to act on their alleged opposition to fascism or whether they were going to defend the Nazis. Up to this time, large parts of the libertarian movement in the state had flirted, to say the least, with a kind of anti-immigrant

²firesneverextinguished.blogspot.com

³firesneverextinguished.blogspot.com

politics that emerged mostly from their unconscious defense of whiteness. At best, they had stood by without speaking up against the crack down on immigrants and brown people generally.

If you know anything about libertarianism as an ideology, whether right or left, a firm commitment to free movement comprises a core tenet. Our sense, through careful analysis of the anti-immigration movement, was that the libertarian wing was uncomfortable to say the least with the relationship. It was more a politics of default, which is what whiteness is in many ways. We also recognized that at the heart of the conservative reactionary wing of even the anti-immigrant front is a pretension to libertarian, constitutionalist values. Values that are almost never lived up to when they come in conflict with whiteness. So, we said to libertarians: will you defend your rhetoric or your whiteness? Will you stand up against fascism or find yourself in the camp of the NSM? If you stand today against fascism we will stand along side you. It's important to note here that such calls were not disingenuous. We meant it.

In this sense, we hoped to appeal to the better nature of the libertarians and to weaken the broader reactionary current. This was in the context of several other interventions into movements in which they participate. And libertarians did the right thing and came out. Interestingly, a week following our triumphant victory against the NSM⁴, the "mainstream" anti-immigrant movement "Save Our State" had a rally. The NSM, who had showed up without challenge many times before to these events, was attacked physically and driven out by organizers. The NSM are racists, they claimed, and had no place at the SOS event. Split accomplished. NSM out maneuvered. The right had attacked the right and the NSM had been denied future access to fertile grounds for organizing. And libertarians had taken a consistent position against white supremacy.

Later, libertarians started to turn out for pro-migrant events. Their politics are now more consistent and a facet of the white reaction has been weakened. A few months after Inglorious Bastards Bloc, there has been a bit of a revolt in the Republican party against the main pusher in the Senate of anti-immigrant legislation. The most prominent face of libertarianism in the state has come out against a new anti-immigration law because it opens the door to Real ID controls on movement.

Interviewed by local *New Times* writer Stephen Lemons, he said: "This is the police state in immigration camouflage. You want to know how that Nazi Germany [stuff] happens? This is how it happens." Lemons continued, writing, "Hancock observed that the immigration issue often becomes a Trojan horse for civil liberties, with people willing to give up their rights in exchange for ridding their community of illegal immigrants. He called Russell Pearce a 'Judas goat,' leading ordinary citizens 'to the slaughter.'"⁵ This in particular was a point we had hit hard on in the past.⁶

In essence what they had done what choose a consistent position over their alliance to whiteness. And we welcome it. This was possible because, among other things, we recognized a contradiction within their position, thought about their politics and their relations to others, and engaged them. We pushed on a contradiction, held them to their rhetoric and offered an either/or choice: defend the NSM or defend migrants. What will it be? We were both vocal and unequivocal in our position. We were fanatical: free movement for all people without compromise. It's

⁴firesneverextinguished.blogspot.com

⁵blogs.phoenixnewtimes.com

⁶firesneverextinguished.blogspot.com

worth noting that since being booted from the SOS event, the NSM has not shown its face — even to counter protest at immigration rallies.

So, I reference this one particular incidence of the “fissures and fractures” practice we have been using as a potential fourth way to engage the Tea Party. I could list others. But the essence of the strategy is this: find the contradictions within it and push on them; try to give elements in the movement either/or choices; call them on their hypocrisies; and, most importantly, find elements within them to whom sympathetic arguments can be made. These elements, if approached honestly and directly, can pick up your criticisms and make them their own.

Because, when facing your opponent, it’s not always necessary to defeat them outright through head on attack. And persuasion of the broad reactionary current is generally impossible. However, you can, especially when you’re a minority movement, look to split them and see what the political fallout is. In our experience at PCWC, the result tends to change political relationships in some interesting ways, remaking the field of battle and providing for new opportunities for anti-authoritarian, anti-capitalist politics that weren’t possible before.

We find this is particularly the case with the context of white supremacy, which is in fact a political relation that tends to trump all others. In the case of those who advocate the free market, history shows to what extent their denunciations of social programs is in fact belied by their reliance on the social program of whiteness, which has its roots in settlerism, slavery and imperialism and has its most prominent manifestation domestically nowadays in the the prisons and the various police departments. Indeed, the Tea Party’s demand for the dismantlement of the welfare state, framed as it is under non-revolutionary pro-capitalist conditions, is in fact a demand made against what they believe to be the improper redistributive nature of taxation and the welfare state; that is, the welfare state, they think, takes wealth from those who “earn it” (which we understand to mean whites) from those who do not (everyone else). They of course reject this characterization, but that in my opinion doesn’t make it less true.

It is the contradiction of white supremacy that reveals the lie behind the working class revolt elements within the Tea Party. It is also what will in the end deny them anything more than the pathetic privileges of white supremacy at the end of the day. Such a limited vision is anything but revolutionary to be sure. And, by reinforcing white supremacy, it does nothing to go after the fatcats that many of the Tea Party members are legitimately angry at. Notice the disappearance of anti-bailout rhetoric from the movement.

By finding ways in which this contradiction can fall out one way or the other, new relations by definition become possible. Previously contradictory relations sort themselves out. Further, by taking a revolutionary anarchist position against both the state in general (but against the attack by the capitalists on its few remaining positive redistributive tendencies), and also against white supremacy, the issue becomes framed in a way that is likely to drive the conservative element batshit insane. And because of the fundamental nature of white supremacy to maintaining American capitalism, the opportunities for revolution become enhanced considerably.

The goal is not to build revolutionary alliances with the libertarian right. Such a thing isn’t possible. It is to undermine the broader opposition, to give space and encouragement to a dissident faction with which some common ground exists (itself within a larger reactionary movement), to reveal the true nature of that movement, and, in our case, to weaken white supremacy in order to open up the potential for a broader revolt against capitalism and the state.

Of course, such interventions, however useful, only buy time and opportunity. But once that opportunity comes knocking, you need to have something there as an alternative. That means

events that can be attended. Actions that can be pointed to and that can inspire. Decent theory that can explain the true cause of the crisis. Solidarity that can be delivered. And allies in the broader struggle. For white people, what this means is following the decades old admonishment from Malcolm X: it is our obligation to confront white supremacy within the white communities from which we come. Reaching out, over, behind and around reactionary movements to engage white people in discussion of anti-authoritarian, anti-capitalist and anti-racist ideas is vital. In many ways, we share potential constituencies.

Capitalism is in collapse. The state is anemic. Traditional reactionary currents are in flux. If we lose this one, it's on us.

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