

THE TEA PARTY VS. THE INTELLECTUALS A MOVEMENT OF ATTITUDE, NOT IDEAS

by Lee Harris

Intellectual critics of the Tea Party movement most often attack it for its lack of ideas, especially new ideas — and these critics have a point. But the point they are making reveals as much about them as it does about the Tea Party. Behind the criticism lies the implicit assumption that comes quite naturally to American intellectuals: Namely, that a political movement ought be motivated by ideas and that a new political movement should provide new ideas. But the Tea Party movement is not about ideas. It is all about attitude, like the attitude expressed by the popular poster seen at all Tea Party rallies. Over the head of a hissing rattlesnake threatening to strike is inscribed the defiant slogan so popular among our revolutionary ancestors: “Don’t tread on me!” The old defiant motto is certainly not a new idea. In fact, it is not an idea at all. It is a warning.

If you are an intellectual, you can debate an idea, but how do you debate a warning? No evidence can be adduced to refute it. No logic can be introduced to poke holes in it. All you can do with a warning is to heed it or disregard it. “Don’t tread on me!” is not the deliberate articulation of a well-thought-out political ideology, but rather the expression of an attitude — the attitude of pugnacious and even truculent defiance. But take away this attitude, and what is left of the Tea Party? Not much that respectable intellectuals can respect. First of all, there appears to be no consistent ideology or coherent set of policies behind the movement. Second, when intellectuals turn to examine some of the more radical proposals championed in Tea Party circles, such as the abolition of Social Security or the return to the gold standard, they can only shake their heads in dismay. These crank nostrums are well past their historical expiration date. They may elicit fanatic support from the politically naïve and unsophisticated, but no one who knows how the political world operates will pay them a moment’s notice. Reviving the gold standard in order to solve our economic problems is akin to reviving the horse-and-buggy to reduce our level of carbon emissions. It ain’t gonna happen, and those who put their energies into pursuing these quack solutions are at best engaged in the politics of make-believe.

It is little wonder that so many sober intellectuals find it difficult to take the Tea Party seriously, except to see it as a threat to the future of American politics. But anti-Tea Party intellectuals who are liberal have a luxury that their conservative brethren don’t have. Liberals can attack and deride the Tea Party without fear of alienating their traditional allies among ordinary voters. Indeed, their mockery of the Tea Party makes good sense to them politically. It is throwing red meat to their base. But conservative intellectuals are in a wholly different position.

As the Tea Party gains in momentum, conservative intellectuals are faced with a dilemma: to join the party or denounce it. If they join, they risk losing their status as respectable public intellectuals. If they denounce the party, they risk losing influence over the traditional Republican base.

An alienation of affections

There is something puzzling about the dilemma confronting conservative intellectuals. The Tea Partiers, after all, are emphatic in their insistence that they are true-blue conservatives. Shouldn’t conservative intellectuals be delighted at the rise of populist movement made up of conservatives like themselves? But that is just the problem: The Tea Partiers are not conservatives like themselves. Eminent conservatives, such as David Frum and David Brooks, have made this point by their serial put-downs of the Tea Party movement, largely on the grounds that it lacks intellectual respectability. A few conservative intellectuals, and an even smaller number of liberal intellectuals, have expressed sympathies with the anger and frustration expressed by the Tea Partiers, but, by and large, they have

decidedly mixed feelings about the populist conservative movement. They believe it merits close attention, but not serious endorsement.

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For example, shortly after the Tea Party's Nashville convention, Arianna Huffington warned that too much emphasis on the "ugly" aspect of the Tea Party movement should not blind us to "the fact that some of what's fueling the movement is based on a completely legitimate anger directed at Washington and the political establishment of both parties. Think of the Tea Party movement as a boil alerting us to the infection lurking under the skin of the body politic." Though Arianna Huffington is usually put in the liberal camp, she is here expressing the sentiments of many leading conservatives more sympathetic to the Tea Party movement than Brooks or Frum. According to this point of view, the anger and frustration expressed by the Tea Party movement is understandable. They are the ugly symptoms of a serious problem. But the remedies proposed by the Tea Party to deal with these problems are simplistic and often downright wacko.

If this is the closest that our public intellectuals can get to empathizing with the Tea Party — by looking upon it as a "boil" on the body politic — then perhaps we should consider the possibility that America's intellectual elite has become radically out of touch with the visceral sensibility of a large chunk of their nation's population. This might not be a serious problem for liberal intellectuals, who, by and large, have long since ceased to have any interest in influencing the many Americans who have expressed sympathy with the Tea Party movement (according to various polls, as much as 40 percent of the population). But it poses a very grave problem for conservative intellectuals loyal to the Republican Party. Since the election of Nixon in 1968, the Republicans' political successes have been predicated on winning over the bulk of those Americans who have come to look on "liberal" as a dirty word. Nixon called them "the silent majority." Pundits after the 2000 election observed that they tended to live in the red states. Alienated by the causes championed by liberal intellectuals, they have reliably voted the Republican ticket, often simply because Republicans were not liberals. They may still vote Republican in the future, but only for those Republican candidates who are willing to join the party — the Tea Party, that is. This puts conservative intellectuals in a terrible bind. If they hope to retain their influence on the Republican Party, they must either join the Tea Party, too, or else battle it out to the bitter end. The bitter end strategy is fraught with peril, however. When conservative intellectuals like Brooks and Frum attack the Tea Party, they win accolades from liberal intellectuals, but they make no dent on the Tea Partiers themselves. Instead, the Tea Partiers simply look on them with the same contempt they have long felt towards liberal intellectuals.

The alienation of affection between intellectual conservatives and the Republican base is like any marriage that has fallen on hard times — it is not easy to determine who first started alienating whom or where blame should be assigned, or even if there should be any blame at all. Conservative intellectuals, appalled by the Tea Party, will of course blame those who started the movement, while the Tea Partiers themselves can return the charge by claiming that they have been betrayed by those conservative intellectuals who in their hearts gone over to the other side. They have become "polite company conservatives," as Tunku Varadarajan has called them in an attack that singled out both Frum and Brooks. The pcc (short for polite company conservative) is defined by Varadarajan as

a conservative who yearns for the goodwill of the liberal elite in the media and in the Beltway — who wishes, always, to have their ear, to be at their dinner parties, to be comforted by a sense that liberal interlocutors believe that they are not like other conservatives, with their intolerance and boorishness, their shrillness and their

talk radio. The pcc, in fact, distinguishes himself from other conservatives not so much ideologically — though there is an element of that — as aesthetically.

Logic 101 points out that ad hominem attacks are invalid. But Varadarajan is really not trying to rebut Frum and Brooks. Instead, he is making an observation about the social psychology of polite company conservatives — a point we need to examine at greater length.¹

The company we keep

The field of social psychology deals with how individuals are influenced by the circles in which they move. When the people we are around think a certain way about a particular issue, their judgment will invariably influence our own. Because most of us do not like to be in open conflict with the company we keep, there is natural tendency to align our opinions with those of our companions, especially when it is important to us to be looked upon favorably by them. A socialite moving up the social ladder will adopt the opinions favored by those on a higher rung, often without even noticing it. But under virtually all circumstances, there will be an unconscious movement towards a cognitive harmony with our friends and associates, a process by which our individual minds are fused imperceptibly into a group mind.

This process will be familiar to anyone who must frequently pass between opposing camps. An individual who is in polite company one day but in “rude company” the next will easily appreciate the pressure exerted by the group mind. To be accepted and respected by one group he must repudiate the values and ideals of the other, a problem that most of us avoid by limiting our company to a single group that shares the same values and tastes. But this solution comes at a price. Those who limit their company to a single circle of like-minded friends and acquaintances will inevitably become victims of an irresistible illusion. They will be completely unaware of the immense influence their specific social circle exercises over their own ideas and attitudes. If asked why they hold certain views and opinions, these people will sincerely argue that these are the views and opinions to which they have chosen to subscribe based entirely on their own deliberations and reflections. If asked why he supports gay marriage, for example, a liberal will not say, “Because I have been influenced by elite opinion.” He will argue that he supports it because it is morally right. Needless to say, conservatives who limit their company to others of like mind will suffer from the same illusions. If asked why he thinks Obama is a Marxist, a conservative will not respond by saying, “Because I have been influenced by my favorite right-wing blog.” Instead, he will tell you that it is obvious — anyone can see that Obama is a Marxist.

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In the eyes of polite company conservatives, the Tea Partiers clearly represent “rude company” conservatism. David Brooks has strongly implied this by calling the Tea Partiers “the Wal-Mart hippies.” Wal-Mart, after all, is not the place where the polite company does its shopping. On the contrary, Wal-Mart is usually chock full of country bumpkins and blue collar types. But while Brooks’s put-down of the average Wal-Mart shopper might delight the sophisticated set that regularly reads the New York Times, it has close to zero effect on Wal-Mart’s customers. They are not bothered in the least that polite company conservatives like Brooks look down their noses at them. This is not because they fail to show adequate respect for David Brooks — it is because they have *never heard of David Brooks.*

There are advantages to everything, including ignorance. If you are too ignorant to know who the elite opinion makers are, you will be entirely indifferent to the opinions they hold. Since the people who shop at Wal-Mart do not normally attend the same dinner parties as

David Brooks, they will be completely indifferent to the scornful comments made about them by those who do. Because they never read the New York Times, and certainly wouldn't take it seriously if they did, they could care less about what its op-ed writers say about them. As a result of their ignorance of such matters, they do not judge ideas by whether they come up to the standards of intellectual respectability accepted by the elite. They judge them with their own common sense, caring little whether their conclusions will be shocking and scandalous to polite company. By doing so, they remain outside the influence of elite opinion makers.

The nature of American politics has been revolutionized by the Tea Party's ability to politicize people who were once apolitical.

Of course there is nothing new in the fact that plenty of ordinary working-class Americans are ignorant of, and indifferent to, the elite opinion makers. This has always been the case. But for most of our nation's past, this approach to elite opinion had a negligible effect on our way of politics. The reason for this was simple. Those who weren't influenced by elite opinion usually had no political opinions of their own and so had nothing that could be influenced. They were apathetic and apolitical. They did not interest themselves in public affairs, usually because they didn't find public affairs very interesting. They had better things to think about — their jobs, their families, their homes, their cars, their favorite sports team. If other people were willing to tackle the complicated and tedious problems associated with governing the nation and defending it against foreign foes more power to them. So long as the managerial elite was taking care of business, and ruffling no one's feathers, ordinary Americans were content to stay on the sidelines. The silent majority would remain contentedly silent, provided that the elite in charge of things did nothing to offend or outrage them.

This is no longer the case. The shock of September 11, the protracted wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the debacle following hurricane Katrina, the inability to control illegal immigration, the financial crisis, the massive bailout, the election of Barack Obama — all these events catastrophically undermined the implicit trust that the silent majority once placed in the competency of our national leadership. For many it has become an article of faith that something has gone terribly wrong with our country. Meanwhile people who previously never bothered to take the trouble to form a strong opinion on political questions began to rally together, staging conventions, endorsing candidates, issuing platforms. Overnight, the apolitical have been transformed into the politically committed. Zeal has replaced apathy. Those who a generation earlier might have expected their leaders to do the right thing have now become convinced that their leaders will inevitably do the wrong thing. Suspicion and paranoia have replaced confidence and trust. The attitude of citizens towards those handling the nation is no longer more power to them, but rather, take away the powers they have stolen from us.

The nature of American politics has been dramatically revolutionized by the Tea Party's ability to politicize people who were previously apolitical. Having never felt any deference for elite opinion makers in the first place, the newly politicized Tea Partiers find it easy to turn their backs on them. Having never been in the mainstream, they have no qualms getting out of it. Having never spent any time in polite company, they are indifferent to the opinions that circulate there. Instead of relying on elite pundits, the Tea Partiers prefer to get their opinions from flagrantly non-elite sources, such as right-wing blogs and talk radio, both of which are held in disdain by respectable mainstream intellectuals. Tea Partiers enthusiastically embrace what polite company regards as intolerance, boorishness, and shrillness. They wholeheartedly identify with the hissing rattlesnake on their posters and they feel no qualms in warning off intruders with their defiant "Don't tread on me!" That is why any attempt to discredit the Tea Party movement by attacking its lack of intellectual respectability is certain to backfire. Such a strategy will simply confirm what

the Tea Parties already know: that America is governed by an out of touch elite that is openly and relentlessly hostile to the values of ordinary men and women like themselves.

What sparked the Tea Party revolt is mounting dissatisfaction at living in a society in which a small group has increasingly solidified its monopoly over the manufacture and distribution of opinion, deciding which ideas and policies should be looked upon favorably and which political candidates will be sympathetically reported. Even more, the Tea Party rebels bitterly resent the rigid censorship exercised by this elite over the limits of acceptable public discourse. Those who have the power to rule an opinion “out of order” do not need to take the trouble to refute it, or even examine it. They can simply make it go away.

The goal of such censorship is to create a population that has been so well trained and disciplined by the political elite that it will be incapable of even thinking forbidden thoughts. When the forbidden thoughts are deeply repugnant to us personally, it is easy to sympathize with the goal of the censors. The elimination of racist thinking, along with all the other forms that bigoted intolerance can assume, would surely be a national blessing. But this blessing would come at a steep price. If the censors have the power to eliminate thoughts they find objectionable, what will prevent them from abusing their formidable capacity by imposing their own narrow agenda on the rest of society, and for their own selfish purposes? Indeed, what is to keep them from establishing a totalitarian regime that does not need to rely on terror or brute force simply because it has developed far more effective methods of obtaining the consent of the masses — namely, cultural indoctrination?

Challenging cultural hegemony

In his most famous novel, *1984*, George Orwell envisioned a society in which the ruling elite has successfully mastered the politics of mind control by altering what was formerly known as the English language into a vehicle of subtle propaganda known as Newspeak. For Orwell, the first and most important step to political totalitarianism was the consolidation of elite control over mass culture. The more thorough and pervasive this control, the harder it would become for anyone to think outside the box of approved ideas. Imperceptibly and over time, the elite would shrink the dimensions of this box until people had very little choice but to toe the party line — not because they thought it to be correct, but because they could no longer imagine an alternative to it. The party line becomes their common sense.

Cultural hegemony, according to Gramsci, did not have to be imposed on the people through threats and intimidation.

A generation before Orwell devised the idea of Newspeak, the Italian communist Antonio Gramsci had developed a concept that in many ways foreshadowed it, but with one major and considerable difference. Before Gramsci discovered Marx, he had been a student of languages. Gramsci was especially fascinated by what happened when two languages collided. Throughout European history, conquerors had routinely moved into new territories where the inhabitants spoke a different language. In some cases, such as the Normans in France, it was the conquerors who picked up the language of the conquered, but more frequently, it was the other way around. What explained this fact? Why did a conquered people so often abandon their own language in order to learn the language of their conquerors?

Gramsci argued that what led people to discard their native language was the greater prestige of the conqueror’s language. The idea of prestige, which had never played a role in classical Marxism, became the key to Gramsci’s most famous concept, cultural hegemony. For Orwell, the cultural hegemony sought by the totalitarian state had to be imposed on the masses through diabolically cunning devices such as the telescreen, a reverse television system that permitted the Thought Police to watch and monitor the

activities of citizens in the privacy of their own homes. People did not watch the telescreen. Instead they were watched by it, fully cognizant that if they did anything to displease Big Brother they could face the most ghastly consequences imaginable.

For Orwell the basis of cultural hegemony was terror. For Gramsci, on the other hand, it was prestige. Cultural hegemony, according to Gramsci, did not have to be imposed on the people through threats and intimidation. It didn't need to be imposed at all. Conquered subjects sought to emulate the prestigious language of their conquerors, while they simultaneously came to look down on their own native tongue as gross, defective, and inferior. In modern liberal societies the same principle has been at work, but with different players. As education became the ticket to worldly success, it naturally became a source of prestige. Prestige no longer came from conquest by arms, but from earning a Ph.D. In modern secular societies, the eminence of the intellectual elite allowed it to unilaterally allocate prestige to select ideas, thinkers, and institutions. Objects imbued with the magical glow of prestige did not need to be pushed on people — on the contrary, people eagerly vied with each other to obtain these objects, often at great personal sacrifice. That is why prestigious institutions, such as major universities, well-endowed foundations, and posh clubs invariably have far more candidates for admission than can possibly be accommodated — a selectivity that makes them even more desirable and prestigious. That is the beauty of prestige: It doesn't need to lift a finger. It can just sit back and relax, confident that people will flock to its feet, begging for the crumbs from its luxuriant table.

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A governing elite that has a monopoly over the allocation of prestige has immense power over a culture. It can decide what ideas, thinkers, and movements merit attention, while it can also determine what ideas, thinkers, and movements should be dismissed with scorn and contempt — assuming that the elite even condescends to notice their existence. Needless to say, such a setup will lead to a high degree of intellectual cronyism, in which members of the “in” group mutually endorse and reinforce each others' prestige; but like crony capitalism, this is standard operating procedure of all elites and should come as no surprise. Relying on the natural human desire to gravitate towards prestige, the intellectual elite has no need to resort to the ham-fisted methods of Orwell's Big Brother.

Despite the fact that Gramsci regarded himself as a Marxist, the central role that he gave to prestige led far from Marxist orthodoxy. In Marxism the ruling class can be easily identified: it has a monopoly on the production and distribution of things. For Gramsci, there is a new ruling class, which has a monopoly on the production and distribution of opinions. Capitalists only trade in products and services. Intellectuals shape and mold people's perceptions and ideas. In earlier societies, in which intellectuals could only influence people by books and pamphlets, their reach was limited. But with the advent of the modern technology have come new means of reaching out to even the most illiterate masses, influencing them in new and subtle ways, while ingenious methods of psychological manipulation and subliminal persuasion have made it quite simple to mask propaganda under the guise of entertainment. The intellectual elite, simply by achieving cultural hegemony over the masses, could obtain a power of influencing the popular mind that tyrants and despots of a previous era only dreamt about. Because of their immense prestige with the general public, the intellectual elite can frequently win people over to their cause. Those who wish to be regarded as intelligent and current in their ideas will quickly move to adopt those ideas that happen to carry the greatest intellectual prestige at any given time, just as the fashion-conscious will quickly start dressing themselves in the latest clothes concocted by the most prestigious designers. The spell cast by prestige gives those who possess it an immense power to influence society. For Gramsci, the prestige of the dominant elite was sufficient to make people discard their native language

in order to acquire a language that ranked higher in prestige. And if people are willing to change languages because of prestige, they will certainly be willing to change their ideas, their values, their customs, and their traditions for the same reason.

Defying the iron law of oligarchy

For better or for worse, the profound cultural changes in American life during the past half century are testament to the enormous influence exercised by our cultural guardians. Ideas, customs, and traditions that no longer find favor in the eyes of the cultural elite have been stigmatized as out-of-date and old-fashioned, while an array of progressive policies have received the imprimatur of elite prestige. In fact, about the only segment of the population that has remained resistant to these progressive policies are the crowds that assemble at Tea Party rallies, holding up their handmade posters. It is the Tea Partiers' indifference to the whole idea of intellectual respectability that renders them immune to the prestige pressure that molds and shapes the ideas and opinions of those who do care about being intellectually respectable. To put it another way, the Tea Partiers can escape the otherwise all-pervasive influence of our cultural elite because they are the people who Gramsci called marginalized outsiders.

When referring to marginalized outsiders, Gramsci had in mind the kind of people who inhabited his native island of Sardinia. Tough and hardy, ferociously independent, stubborn in their ways, and pugnaciously proud of their own cultural identity, Sardinians embodied the "Don't tread on me!" attitude and were prepared to back it up with action, often quite violent action. Italians born on the mainland looked down on the islanders, regarding them as crude and uncouth, which by sophisticated standards they certainly were. They also spoke a dialect of Italian that was considered barbarous by those who spoke the preferred Tuscan dialect of the educated and cultured classes. Yet Gramsci, far from feeling shame about his native Sardinia, remained intensely proud of it all his life. Indeed, it was thanks to his native Sardinia that Gramsci came to recognize that snobbery is a powerful form of oppression. Those who establish a monopoly of prestige are no more willing to share their *cosa nostra* with others than those who have created commercial monopolies.

The only defense that the marginalized outsider has against this onslaught is to not give a damn. And the fact that the Tea Party movement does not give a damn about the current standards of intellectual respectability makes it problematic for the intellectual, who cannot take the same attitude. But it is also the characteristic that justifies the Tea Party's claim to be revolutionary. To be sure, this is not the revolution envisioned by Marx, in which the working class overthrows the capitalist class. It is rather the revolt of common sense against privileged opinion makers, and, by its very nature, it can only be carried out by men and women who are not constrained by the standards of intellectual respectability current in polite company. Again, it is precisely their status as marginalized outsiders that allows them to defy the monopoly of prestige possessed by the cultural insiders. This fact may put them beyond the pale as far as the conservative intellectuals are concerned, but it is precisely what makes them a force capable of resisting the liberal elite's efforts to achieve cultural hegemony — a resistance that conservative intellectuals had hoped to mount but which they have not mounted, which explains why the Tea Party movement has so little use for them as a whole. As the Tea Partiers see it, what is most needed right now are not new ideas — we have already had far too many of those. What is needed is the revitalization of a very old attitude — the attitude shared by all people who have been able to maintain their liberty and independence against those who would take it away from them: "We do not need an elite to govern us. We can govern ourselves."

Ideas, customs, and traditions that no longer find favor in the eyes of the cultural elite have been stigmatized.

A strong argument can be made that this attitude is based on a delusion. A government of the people, by the people, and for the people cannot perish from the earth, because none has ever existed on the earth. Orwell's *Animal Farm* famously tells us that some animals (humans included) will always be more equal than others, which means that every society that has claimed to be a democracy has in fact been managed by an elite, or juggled among a competing group of elites. Sometimes the elite has governed openly, sometimes covertly. Even in ancient Greece, critics argued that the veneer of popular democracy was merely a mask for the cynical manipulation of plutocrats. Twentieth century thinkers such as Gaetano Mosca, Vilfredo Pareto, and Robert Michels have argued that every functioning society will inevitably be governed by a ruling class, just as every business enterprise will be governed by its executives — it is what Michels has dubbed “the iron law of oligarchy.”

All this may be perfectly true. Elite rule may be unavoidable. But this conclusion does not mean that the delusion of pure democracy should be tossed into the trash bin of history. On the contrary, the iron law of oligarchy is itself the best reason for keeping the democratic delusion alive and well. The American philosophy of pragmatism has long recognized that an idea can be an illusion and yet still play a vital and wholly positive role by motivating people to act on it. In particular, the illusion that the people can govern themselves, without the need of an elite, has proven to be immensely useful in restraining elites in their incessant quest for greater and greater power.

The only truly effective check on elite rule is the fear that the people will become fed up with it. When the people decide to try to rule themselves, their first step toward self-government will be to toss out the old elite. True, the people may simply end up by bringing in a new elite, but this is little consolation to the elite that has been replaced. Hence, any ruling elite that wishes to maintain its hold on power will learn to exercise its power within prudent limits, not overreaching and creating dangerous resentment and backlash among the people. This formidable check on elite power does not arise from flimsy constitutional safeguards, which can always be circumvented, but from the suspicious, even paranoid attitude of defiance displayed by ordinary citizens, which is much harder to get around.

The lesson of history is stark and simple. People who are easy to govern lose their freedom. People who are difficult to govern retain theirs. What makes the difference is not an ideology, but an attitude. Those people who embody the “Don't tread on me!” attitude have kept their liberties simply because they are prepared to stand up against those who threaten to tread on them. To the pragmatist, it makes little difference what ideas free people use to justify and rationalize their rebellious attitude. The most important thing is simply to preserve this attitude among a sufficiently large number of people to make it a genuine deterrent against the power hungry. If the Tea Party can succeed in this all-important mission, then the pragmatist can forgive the movement for a host of silly ideas and absurd policy suggestions, because he knows what is really at stake. Once the “Don't tread on me!” attitude has vanished from a people, it never returns. It is lost and gone forever — along with the liberty and freedom for which, ultimately, it is the only effective defense.

Lee Harris is the author of *The Next American Civil War: The Populist Revolt Against the Liberal Elite* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010). His previous books include *The Suicide of Reason: Radical Islam's Threat to the West* (Basic, 2007) and *Civilization and Its Enemies: The Next Stage of History* (Free Press, 2004).

¹ While Varadarajan has criticized polite company conservatives, he has by no means been a blind or enthusiastic champion of the Tea Party.