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Change They Can't Believe In: The Tea Party and Reactionary Politics in America. By Christopher Parker and Matt Barreto. (Princeton University Press, 2013.)

The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism. By Theda Skocpol and Vanessa Williamson. (Oxford University Press, 2012.)

If we are to believe that the Tea Party was born kicking-and-screaming on CNBC in February 2009 and reached maturity just 20 months later on Election Night 2010, then the publication of several new retrospective books just three years later should come as no surprise. Things move fast in politics these days, and scholars have not been left far behind. If these two books were not so well-written, it would be much easier to denounce them as premature. But both are methodologically varied, analytically nuanced, and worth reading.

Christopher S. Parker and Matt A. Barreto's *Change* is the newer of the two and the more focused. Their work is firmly set in the political behavior tradition of public opinion survey and experimental research, but Parker and Barreto resist the inclination to simply report their tabulations. They build a theory of the Tea Party that is deeply rooted in social psychology and political history. They link supporters of the Tea Party to earlier right-wing movements of the 1920s and 1960s, but they find separation between mainstream conservatives and Tea Party or "reactionary" conservatives. Good news on that front, compared to more than two-thirds of Tea Party conservatives, only a third of conservatives believe "Obama will destroy the country"! Social movements, we hope, are based on individuals acting on their beliefs, and Parker and Barreto cut through the clutter of what many think Tea Party supporters believe to actually document it in a rigorous fashion.

Parker and Barreto thrive in dissecting and disaggregating the attitudes and beliefs of Tea Party supporters. They do not—which they readily admit—carve any new ground in explaining the institutions activists rapidly created over the last several years. For that perspective, Theda Skocpol and Vanessa Williamson—who beat Parker and Barreto to press by just a bit—take on the organizational gap with

their eclectically researched *The Tea Party*. While reading this book, I pictured Skocpol and Williamson on a *Fear and Loathing*-inspired trip to discover the heart of the Tea Party, and the book succeeds in getting close to the subject. In addition to analyzing polling and media data, the two visit local Tea Party meetings in Virginia, Arizona, Massachusetts, and Maine and describe those they encountered as "admirable and likeable" (15). While these local meetings are occurring at nearly 1,000 new Tea Party groups across the country, national leaders within and around the Republican Party begin to salivate about the prospect of a mobilized Tea Party. A California-based politico named Sal Russo, active in politics since the election of Ronald Reagan, re coined the political action committee he oversaw the "Tea Party Express" and quickly amassed a \$2.7 million campaign war chest. Former House Majority Leader Dick Armey's organization, FreedomWorks, funded Tea Party rallies, and Americans for Prosperity, largely financed by the Koch family, established a state-network of activists that linked to local Tea Party groups. But the authors of this book portray the relationship between national organizations and local groups as one of "mutual convenience, with little shared knowledge or joint investment" (112). One comes to understand the institutional dimension of the Tea Party less as a purely grassroots or elite-Astroturf movement, but one moving ahead so rapidly that bits and pieces of any number of organizing traditions—"A number of our interviewees cited the work of Saul Alinsky" (42)!—are jostling incoherently for control and attention.

Training workshops provided one arena where coordination occurred and knowledge was shared. Skocpol and Williamson note that national organizations held workshops attended by Tea Party activists that taught about traditional organizing strategies and provided "guidance on using new media like Twitter" (114). Given the importance of technology and new media to organizing on the Left in the run-up to the 2008 election and research that has documented the slow pace of technology integration on the Right (Karpf 2012), this dimension of the Tea Party movement is deeply intriguing. Yet the authors don't go much further than acknowledging: "Tea Partiers are remarkably active on the Internet; indeed, we are tempted to say that the past couple of years may have brought a huge leap in computer savvy among the mostly older men and women active in the

Tea Party” (129). I was left asking: to what can we attribute this huge leap? How active is the Tea Party exactly? And in what part of the Internet has that activity been channeled? Failing to fully investigate this tactical dimension of the Tea Party movement diminishes a bit what is an excellent book.

If other scholars are up to the challenge, by summer 2014, we should be awash in examinations of the Occupy Wall Street movement. If those books match the cutting insights of Parker/Barreto and

Skocpol/Williamson, our discipline will continue to provide timely and useful analyses of the major social movements of our times.

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Reference

Karpf, D. 2012. *The MoveOn Effect: The Unexpected Transformation of American Political Advocacy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Drawing connections between the Tea Party and right-wing reactionary movements of the past, including the Know Nothing Party, the Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s, and the John Birch Society, Parker and Barreto develop a framework that transcends the Tea Party to shed light on its current and future consequences. Linking past and present reactionary movements, *Change They Can't Believe In* rigorously examines the motivations and political implications associated with today's Tea Party. ...more. [Get A Copy. Amazon.](#) Published May 26th 2013 by Princeton University Press (first published January 1st 2013). [More Details ISBN.](#) I first came across this book about the tea party movement because I am mentioned in it. *The Tea Party and Reactionary Politics in America*. ISBN: 0691151830. Providing a range of original evidence and rich portraits of party sympathizers as well as activists, Christopher Parker and Matt Barreto show that what actually pushes Tea Party supporters is not simple ideology or racism, but fear that the country is being stolen from "real Americans"--a belief triggered by Obama's election. From civil liberties and policy issues, to participation in the political process, the perception that America is in danger directly informs how Tea Party supporters think and act. The authors argue that this isn't the first time a segment of American