

In an essay based on the new updated edition of his book *America Right or Wrong: An Anatomy of American Nationalism*, which was published in September 2012 by Oxford University Press, Anatol Lieven argues that the Tea Parties in America draw their strength not only from the current economic crisis but also from their deep roots in the American tradition. With the economic and demographic decline of the White middle classes likely to continue indefinitely, he sees this radical conservative tendency as posing a serious threat to the effectiveness of US government and even to the future of US democracy.

The US Tea Party movement as such may have passed its peak; but its soul will go marching on through the Republican Party. This in turn will mean that the tendency that the Tea Parties represent will be able to go on blocking any US economic and social policy of which they disapprove. As Kate Zernicke of the New York Times has argued in her book *Boiling Mad: Inside Tea Party America*, "if the Tea Party might never run things, it was never going to be defeated either."

For while most opinion polls put Tea Party support at 20 per cent of the population at most, to block not just legislation in the USA you do not need a democratic majority. The US Constitution gives even the minority party in the Senate enormous powers to block not just legislation but also executive actions of which they disapprove. A committed 20 per cent of the electorate is more than enough to dominate the Republican Party and to achieve this blocking role in the legislature.

As a result, whether Obama or Romney wins in November, US economic policy will remain largely paralysed, and reform of America's government impossible. This is not good news, at a time when the US and world economies are in such trouble, and when the rise of China is facing America with a challenge the like of which it has never encountered in its history. Moreover, deep underlying social, economic and demographic trends in the USA make it highly unlikely that American radical conservatism – whatever form it takes - will weaken in the years to come.

When Tea Party supporters speak of the people they represent as the historical backbone of the USA and US democracy, they have a point. In the end, in most countries around the world democracy has stood or fallen according to the strength, the values and the loyalty of those groups called in America "middle class" (which include what in Europe would in the past have been called upper working class). The alienation of large sections of these classes from the political elites and the system of government, as demonstrated by the Tea Party movement, is deeply worrying.

The power of the Tea Parties reflects both the gathering crisis of the US middle classes and the old cultural lineage of radical conservatism in America. Far from being simply a specific response to the Obama administration and to the post-2008 recession, they are only the latest

in a series of radical conservative movements which have emerged in recent decades; and these in turn stem from a populist tradition which is much older still.

The conservative populist movements of the past generation stem largely from a decline in the economic and social status of the white lower middle classes and working classes which has been gathering pace for more than three decades, and which has accelerated sharply over the past five. The most worrying aspect of US decline is the increasing middle class economic hardship that is helping drive the Tea Party movement and increasing its hysteria. Stagnation of middle class incomes has now been gathering pace for almost four decades. Since 2008, it has become a steep decline. Compared to the decades before the Great Depression and from the 1940s to the 1970s, most individual middle class and working class incomes from the 1970s to 2008 stagnated or fell. By 2009, the US male median wage had dropped 28 per cent in real terms since 1970. Since 2007, median household income has fallen by almost 10 per cent.

This has been a truly shattering fall, which was only made bearable for a while by the entry of married women into the workforce, which supported overall family income – while at the same time increasing childcare costs and strains on family life. Adding enormously to the strain has been the rise of job insecurity even for those in good work, with unionized labour being replaced by short-term contracts without benefits.

This strikes at the very heart of the American Dream, by which people who are sober, respectable and work hard are guaranteed a good job and a better future for their children. It has been this history of middle class prosperity which in the past allowed America to overcome previous episodes of political extremism and return to moderation.

It has also been through the reality of the middle class American Dream – as well as the strength of US institutions and values – that successive waves of immigrants have been integrated into the American system. Without this steadily rising prosperity, both the integration of immigrants and the willingness of the existing population to accept them are likely to be radically reduced; and the white middle class economic anxieties reflected in the Tea Parties are indeed being strengthened by the relative demographic decline of the White population.

The Tea Parties also draw their strength from certain ideological traditions in America which stretch back for centuries – some of them even to the 17th Century England and Scotland from which the first American colonists were drawn. One explanation of the appeal of the Tea Parties is that they combine American civic nationalism, with its devotion to the Constitution and the institutions of US democracy, with elements of chauvinism and conservative religion.

Finally, the Tea Parties are also a response to very real problems. As Edward Luce of the Financial Times brings out in his brilliant and terrifying new book *Time to Start Thinking: America and the Spectre of Decline*, the institutions of government in Washington are increasingly dysfunctional and make any strategy of promoting economic development almost impossible, while the US taxation system is a nightmare which is beginning to inflict serious damage on the US economy. However, as Luce also indicates, the Tea Parties' diagnoses of the reasons for these problems are largely mistaken, and their proposed cures often verge on the insane.

Neither the Christian rightist movement of the 1970s, the "Republican Revolution" of the 1990s, nor the Tea Parties have recent years have succeeded in making their own candidate the Republican nominee for president, let alone winning the presidency. In the end, the party has always chosen a candidate with a chance of appealing to centrist voters. At the same time, it is all too apparent how each right-wing populist wave, as it recedes, leaves the Republican Party several notches to the right from where it had been previously. This has been demonstrated by the way that the essentially moderate Mitt Romney (author of a health care reform in Massachusetts which went somewhat further than Obama's) has been dragged towards radical positions.

An old-style Republican (though still more radical than Eisenhower), David Brooks, wrote as follows of the Tea Party role in encouraging the Republicans to reject compromise with the Obama administration in the debate over raising the US debt ceiling in July 2011, which almost led to a national default:

"If the Republican Party were a normal party, it would take advantage of this amazing moment. It is being offered the deal of the century: trillions of dollars in spending cuts in exchange for a few hundred billion dollars of revenue increases... But we can have no confidence that the Republicans will seize this opportunity. That's because the Republican Party may no longer be a normal party. Over the past few years, it has been infected by a faction that is more of a psychological protest than a practical, governing alternative. The members of this movement do not accept the logic of compromise, no matter how sweet the terms. ..The members of this movement do not accept the legitimacy of scholars and intellectual authorities. A thousand impartial experts may tell them that a default on the debt would have calamitous effects, far worse than raising tax revenues a bit. But the members of this movement refuse to believe it. If responsible Republicans don't take control, independents will conclude that Republican fanaticism caused this default. They will conclude that Republicans are not fit to govern. And they will be right."

As a result of this decades-long tendency, the Republican Party today would be largely unrecognisable to Dwight Eisenhower or even Richard Nixon – while the feral hatred of most Republicans for Barack Obama is directed at a president who has in fact governed – to the bitter disappointment of the American Left – as a kind of Eisenhower Republican. Even Ronald Reagan's Republican election platform of 1980 was far closer to Obama's of 2012 than to Mitt Romney's.

An irony here is that it is the Eisenhower years of the 1950s to which Tea Party members look as a vanished golden age, and which they wish to restore. This desire for a return to an idealized past, of a culturally and ethnically purer nation, a stable, traditional society, and a "moral economy" in which decent, hardworking people are guaranteed a decent job has been characteristic of radical conservative movements around the world.

Classes and groups in decline, or faced with new and unprecedented pressures, have always looked back in this way. In US history, such pressures are not new, even if they have become exceptionally severe in recent decades. For even while the country as a whole has grown colossally over the centuries, important sections of the population have always felt under threat

from economic, social, cultural and demographic change.

To understand both the power of the Tea Party movement and why its impact (if not the movement itself) is likely to prove enduring, it is important to understand that while on the one hand the Tea Parties reflect the growing hardship and cultural anxieties of conservative middle class whites in recent years, they are also only the latest in a series of radical conservative movements which have emerged in recent decades; and these in turn drew their strength from certain ideological traditions in America which stretch back for centuries – some of them even to the 17th Century England and Scotland from which the first American colonists were drawn. These traditions have been thoroughly Janus-faced: helping to lay the basis for American democracy and economic success, but also contributing greatly to what the American historian Richard Hofstadter (1917-1970), in a famous essay, called the "paranoid style in American politics".

This sense of defeat and embattlement stemmed originally from the original, "core" White Anglo- Saxon and Scots- Irish populations of the British colonies in North America; the specific historical culture and experience of the white South; and the cultural world of conservative Protestantism.

In America, the make-up of radical conservative forces has changed with almost every generation, as formerly "outsider" immigrant groups join the white middle classes and form a new synthesis with the older Protestant culture. The stream of feelings of dispossession and loss, however, has flowed continually from one cup to another, from the old "Protestant nativism" through McCarthyism to the Christian and nationalist Right and the Tea Parties of our own day.

Hence the phenomenon—so strange at first sight, but perfectly sincere, and entirely characteristic of the history of radical conservatism worldwide—of defenders of the American capitalist system like Newt Gingrich describing themselves as "revolutionary republicans," and adopting a style and rhetoric of radical alienation from the supposed ruling elites and dominant culture. Hence the popularity on the Right and the Tea Parties of rhetoric about "taking America back".

The Tea Parties can be best described as the reflection of an anguished white middle class state of mind, rather than a political movement in any traditional sense, let alone one with a program for government. Sarah Palin's highly emotional books, for example, are astonishingly free of specific policy prescriptions of any kind, beyond a vague and general demand for tax cuts and smaller government. The nearest that she comes in her books to a detailed domestic policy is to quote the banner of a "sweet old lady at the Boston Tea Party rally holding up a copy of the Constitution: 'When All Else Fails, Read the Instructions'." And a return to the letter of the original Constitution is indeed – together with lower taxes – the only demand that unites all Tea Party members.

In parts of the USA with high Latino populations, however, the Tea Parties do tend to be associated with one concrete policy demand, a tougher approach to immigration. Although in general the Tea Parties are very different from radical rightist movements in Europe, "nativist"

opposition to immigration does provide one important link.

Extremist politics produced by threatened middle classes are a familiar enough sight in European history, and are returning in parts of Europe under the impact of economic crisis and immigration. Two other key aspects of American radical conservatism are however very unfamiliar to contemporary Europeans, and largely explain the bewilderment with which Europeans regard American politics. Both have to do with religion: The first, with fundamentalist religious belief in the strict sense; the second, with what has been called "the American Creed", the passionate civic nationalist faith in the letter of America's constitution.

At around 60 percent, the proportion of Americans who declare in opinion polls that religion plays an important part in their lives has remained steady for more than a generation. Nor is there anything especially odd about this. When it comes to religious faith and its role in politics, it is of course Europe (and certain former European colonies like Australia) and not the United States that is the "outlier" in the world. Max Weber was right about many things, but his belief that economic modernisation brought with it the inevitable "disenchantment of the world" does not appear to have been one of them. In most places outside Europe, religion is doing just fine, even if its institutions and forms may have changed.

Christian fundamentalism does not dominate the Tea Parties, but is certainly strongly present in them, and seems to play an important part in shaping the Tea Parties view of America and its government. Republican Congresswoman, Tea Party leader, and former presidential candidate Michele Bachmann's faith and views were strongly influenced by the fundamentalist thinker Francis Schaeffer, who preached that the Renaissance and the Enlightenment both represented dangerous turns away from the "total truth" of the Bible.

According to CNN, 57 percent of Tea Party supporters polled agreed with the statement that "America is and always has been a Christian nation." On issues like gay marriage and abortion, majorities of between 59 and 64 percent of Tea Party supporters agreed with conservative religious positions, while 44 percent of self-declared conservative Christians polled agreed with the Tea Parties, against only four percent who disagreed. In practice, it seems likely that Christian conservatives are even more important than these figures suggest, given their well-recorded tendency to higher levels of mobilisation and participation than other groups. Both Sarah Palin and Michele Bachmann are deeply committed evangelical and fundamentalist Christians, whose faith has profoundly shaped not only their politics, but their personal lives. It should also be said that in both cases, their religion has inspired real efforts and sacrifices.

American fundamentalist Protestantism retains elements of thought which have come down with relatively few changes from much earlier eras. The religious historian Dean Kelley described it as one of the "huge political icebergs" of American life, which "move through time with massive stability, changing slowly and surviving in their essential form for many generations."

Its origins are pre-Enlightenment, and its mentality to a very great extent is anti-Enlightenment. For convinced adherents of this tradition, much of modern American mass culture is a form of daily assault on their passionately held values, and their reactionary religious ideology in turn reflects the sense of social, cultural, and racial embattlement among their white middle class constituency.

Fundamentalist religion has also always embodied an element of class and regional resentment against the religiously liberal "East Coast elites" on the part of what Thomas Jefferson called "the honester South and West", but what Republicans today would call "the Heartland" (Including most of the Midwest). According to Billy Graham,

"Let me tell you something: when God gets ready to shake America, he may not take the PhD and the DD. God may choose a country boy. God may choose a shoe salesman like He did D.L.Moody...God may choose the man that nobody knows, a little nobody to shake America for Jesus Christ in this day."

Thomas Franks (author of "What's the Matter with Kansas") and other have studied the way in which these class resentments on the part of lower middle class and working class whites have largely been channelled into cultural hatred of the "liberal elites" rather than – as was the case from the 1890s to the 1930s – into economic protest. A key reason for this shift has been the new cultural divide in the US since the 1960s between conservative religious believers and educated elites who are often at no pains to hide their contempt for religion.

Fundamentalist religion has thus played an important part in driving the polarisation of US politics, and also in increasing the contempt for scientists and experts of every kind which is such a strongly marked feature of the populist Right and the Tea Parties. The reason for this was summed up with perfect clarity by my fundamentalist landlady in Washington 15 years ago, who told me that "I am very sorry to have to say this, but if a person doesn't believe in God, well, I just can't really trust them on anything else." And when you come to think about it, this is a perfectly logical and sensible attitude to take, if one accepts the original religious faith.

In Europe and elsewhere in the past, right-wing populism always had an authoritarian and anti-democratic cast (though that may have changed in recent years if one looks at the current run of extreme right-wing parties). In the USA, with the exception of a politically irrelevant fascist fringe, that has never been the case. Episodes of chauvinist hysteria directed at racial, ethnic, religious and political groups and foreign enemies have always been expressed in terms of a defence of democracy and the Constitution – a combination brilliantly analysed by Louis Hartz in his largely forgotten classic, *The Liberal Tradition in America*.

This phenomenon of chauvinist extremism in defence of liberal democracy would seem to have two roots. The first is the Frontier, where White communities with at least an appearance of rough democratic equality fought for their lives against American Indians who were considered altogether outside the law. Together with the exclusion and suppression of the Blacks in the South, this bred a tradition of communal solidarity in defence of American civilisation and against outsiders, and a belief that while democracy and the Constitution must be defended at all costs, their protections only apply to those who are committed to defend them.

The second source of what Hartz called "Lockean absolutism" is the sheer power of American civic nationalism itself. Instilled relentlessly in Americans by the school system, the media and popular culture, this faith has only intensified over the past century as it has become a central part of the process of assimilating successive waves of immigrants. In the words of Richard Hofstadter, "It has been our fate as a nation not to have ideologies but to be one." The phrase

"American Creed" expresses the almost religious power of this civic nationalist belief.

A British journalist, Andrew Gumbel, has a fine description of the relentless instillation of this civic nationalist Creed through the education system – quite as relentless (though significantly different in content) as the instillation of nationalist ideas by 19th and early 20th Century state education systems in Europe. Gumbel describes his reaction when his son first went to school in California in 2003:

"Even after five years in the United States, I continue to be surprised by the omnipresence of patriotic conformism . . . With my son's education at stake, I can't help pondering the link between what is fed to children as young as six and what American adults end up knowing or understanding about the wider world. There is much that is admirable in the unique brand of idealism that drives American society, with its unshakeable belief in the constitutional principles of freedom and limitless opportunity. Too often, though, the idealism becomes a smokescreen concealing the uglier realities of the United States and the way in which it throws its economic, political and military weight around the globe. Children are recruited from the very start of their school careers to believe in a project one might call Team America, whose oft-repeated mantra is: we're the good guys, we always strive to do the right thing, we live in the greatest country in the world. No other point of view, no other cultural mindset, is ever seriously contemplated . . ."

Gumbel quotes a song from his son's elementary school class:

"America, I love you!
From all sorts of places,
They welcomed all the races
To settle on their shore . . .
To give them protection
By popular election,
A set of laws they chose.
They're your laws and my laws,
For your cause and my cause
That's why this country rose."

These words would cause any historically aware black or American Indian to grind his or her teeth—but, as Gumbel points out, are taken by most American children as simply natural.

The idea that democracy and the Constitution are coterminous with US national identity is so deeply rooted among Americans that it is extremely difficult to analyse them critically without feeling that you are in some sense placing yourself outside the community. Or at least, this is true of the White middle classes, for whom this patriotic faith is part of their folk identity. For obvious reasons, Blacks, Latinos and American Indians have a very different perspective on the US tradition.

A quasi-religious faith in the Constitution permeates the language of many American conservative intellectuals. Thus the Mount Vernon Statement ("Constitutional Conservatism: A Statement for the Twenty-First Century") of February 2010, drawn up by a long list of such

intellectuals, begins as follows:

"We recommit ourselves to the ideas of the American Founding. Through the Constitution, the Founders created an enduring framework of limited government based on the rule of law. They sought to secure national independence, provide for economic opportunity, establish true religious liberty and maintain a flourishing society of republican self-government.

These principles define us as a country and inspire us as a people. They are responsible for a prosperous, just nation unlike any other in the world. They are our highest achievements, serving not only as powerful beacons to all who strive for freedom and seek self-government, but as warnings to tyrants and despots everywhere."

American faith in democracy is deeply moving, and it is also justified by history: the history of its role in shaping the United States, and the role of the United States in spreading and upholding democracy in the world. There is nothing wrong with the American Creed as such. The problem comes with the quasi-religious worship not of democracy but of the letter of a Constitution drawn up more than 200 years ago by a small number of White oligarchs, and the belief that this Constitution cannot be changed to suit the needs of a very different America from that of 1787 AD.

Above all, as already noted, both the power of the U.S. Senate and its internal rules (especially the filibuster) give immense power to a minority in that body to block legislation. This not only frustrates the entire democratic process, it boosts the wasteful government spending which the Tea Parties and the Right say that they desire to reduce—because it helps give senators the ability to extract massive subsidies and benefits for their states in return for their votes.

The increasing radicalization of the Republican Party, and the retaliation it has provoked by the Democrats, has led to an immense expansion of the use of the filibuster. In the 1960s, around eight percent of bills were faced with a filibuster. In the 2,000s, it has been around seventy percent. This is not a recipe for the decline of progressive government; it is a recipe for the decline of effective government in general. Worship of the Constitution makes it even less likely that Tea Party—inspired Republicans will contemplate even small changes to the Senate's rules, let alone the Constitution in general.

Their refusal to do so is not, however, irrational from their own point of view. For any serious consideration of a change to the U.S. Senate is bound, sooner or later, to come to the conclusion that bad as they are, it is not the rules of the Senate that are the greatest barrier to the will of democratic majorities in America; it is the composition of the Senate.

The existing distribution of U.S. Senate seats is colossally weighted in favour of White conservatives. The rule that every state of the United States has two senate seats irrespective of population was framed at a time when the largest state (Virginia) had twelve times the population of the smallest (Delaware). As of 2012, the largest U.S. state, California, has more than seventy times the population of the smallest, Wyoming—but they both have two senators. Above all, this means that six western states with only three percent of the U.S. population have twelve senators between them and are thus in a position to block any legislation that displeases

their mainly White conservative populations. This has already contributed enormously to blocking legislation on a range of issues which affect the populations of those states either emotionally or materially, from gun control to carbon taxing.

As long as the United States as a whole had an overwhelmingly White majority, the issue of disproportionate representation did not become couched in racial terms. This is very unlikely to remain the case, however, as the White proportion of the population declines. According to the projections of the U.S. Census Bureau, Whites will cease to be a majority (while remaining a plurality) sometime between 2040 and 2050. The proportion of Latinos meanwhile will have grown to almost a quarter of the U.S. population. Long before that, Latinos will be in a majority in conservative states like Texas and Arizona.

Even in times of growing economic prosperity, a shift on this scale would have been bound to cause tensions (especially when a sizeable proportion of the change is due to illegal immigration)—and the next three decades do not seem likely to be ones of growing prosperity for many less- educated Whites.

Of course, the White population of the USA does not constitute anything like a united bloc, and barely a quarter of them express support for the Tea Parties. The issue is not White power as such, but the disproportionate power which the makeup and rules of the Senate give to conservative Whites from a small number of states. The cultural-political divide among White voters can be almost drawn with a knife in parts of the US, for example in Oregon and Washington, where the liberal coast is sharply divided from the conservative, small-town and rural interior.

Nevertheless, certain trends with a partly racial aspect are already apparent. In 2008, Obama failed to gain a majority of the White vote, and was elected only because Blacks and Latinos turned out to vote in highly unusual numbers. As important as the "White" element is the "Grey" one. A large majority of older White voters cast their ballots against Obama, but he won a majority among younger Whites. In contrast to most previous elections, however, the Democratic vote was noticeably down among less educated Whites.

Barring complete economic collapse on the scale of 1929-32, for a long time to come older middle class voters will have a strong interest in keeping taxes low, resisting reform of Medicaid and social security, and also resisting state education and health programmes intended to help younger Americans. As a higher proportion of these younger Americans become non-White, it seems likely that more and more politics will be defined by a "Grey-Brown" divide, with parts of the existing Constitution as a cause of increasing resentment among "Browns" and a matter of fanatical attachment among "Greys".

The constitutional principle of states' rights has been used as a racial tool, in one way or another, for most of U.S. history. From the 1840s to the 1960s, this was the White South's principal tool and argument in trying to block first freedom and then civil rights for the Blacks. Indeed, the current Republican and Tea Party obsession with states' rights is one aspect of the much-remarked "southernisation" of the Republican Party since the 1960s.

In both the 1860s and the 1960s, however, White majorities in the United States as a whole eventually overcame Southern White resistance. In the future, there is a real risk that as a result of growing White middle class anxieties about economic, demographic, and national decline, a majority of White will come together in defence of an increasingly dysfunctional and unrepresentative constitution which is more and more obviously being used to defend White dominance at the expense of non-Whites. Such a development would mark the end of America's greatness and her democratic example to the world. In such circumstances, the wild rhetoric of the Right about resorting to arms in defence of the Constitution might also lead to something more than mere rhetoric.

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