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"3 SIMPLE WORDS: WE THE PEOPLE":
CULTURE, IDENTITY, AND THE
CONTENTIOUS POLITICS OF THE
CONTEMPORARY TEA PARTY
MOVEMENT IN MONTANA

Stacy Keogh

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STACY M KEOGH

Candidate

SOCIOLOGY

Department

This dissertation is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication:

Approved by the Dissertation Committee:

ROBERT A. FIALA , Chairperson

SHARON ERICKSON NEPSTAD

PHILLIP B. GONZALES

BILL BORRIE

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by

STACY M. KEOGH

B.A., HISTORY, GEORGE FOX UNIVERSITY, 2005

B.A., SPANISH, GEORGE FOX UNIVERSITY, 2005

M.A., SOCIOLOGY, UNIVERSITY OF NEW MEXICO, 2007

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ABSTRACT

The Tea Party is a social and political movement urging government accountability, individual fiscal responsibility, and personal liberty as outlined by the United States Constitution. In this dissertation, I examine the cultural components of the Montana Tea Party asking two primary research questions: (1) What are the cultural dynamics of the Tea Party? (2) How does this determine the way the Tea Party engages in contentious politics? I found that the way the Montana Tea Party utilizes the resources of religion to provide a culture structure familiar to participants. It utilizes religious rhetoric to provide familiarity to the nation’s civil religion, which is a politicized version of the sacred that is less spiritual than it is political. Finally, the Montana Tea Party consists of a variety of individuals representing a broad range of political ideology from moderate to far right. These perspectives vary socially, culturally, politically, and economically, representing various political parties, ideologies, and various degrees of religiosity. As a result, there is a

fragmented sense of identity, making it difficult to stimulate *collective* political action. The action that does take place in the movement is primarily individually forged, though always encouraged and supported peripherally from others in the MTP. This study speaks to the literature on political sociology, social movements, and the sociology of religion. It provides new social scientific evidence on culture and mobilization and suggests a new lens through which we may examine tactics of mobilization in the 21st century.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION TO THE TEA PARTY MOVEMENT

April 15, 2009: Tax Day. Frustrated, overwhelmed and appalled at the newly appointed liberal federal government, thousands of discontented, political Americans met in Washington D.C. to oppose government bailout programs. With a unified voice, they demanded that the American government return to the Constitutional mandates of liberty and justice for all legal, hard-working Americans. This gathering was more than just represent a group of people frustrated that some banks received bailouts while others were left by the wayside. It was more than just a peeved group of political or economic commentators eager to gain recognition through a public protest of government policies. Instead, it was a nationwide effort that urged disgruntled and frustrated conservative Americans to return to the foundations of our country. It signified a cultural paradigm shift in the way the country views politics. They urged Americans to remember how the first American patriots fought for tax breaks three hundred years in the past. They urged the American populace to construct a 21st century American Tea Party to protest the economic policies set in place by the United States government.

Since its appearance in the political arena, the United States TEA (Taxed Enough Already) Party movement has fascinated the media, political arena, social and religious institutions, with their radical economic policies and even more radical protest antics (Boykoff and Laschever 2011, DiMaggio 2011; Foley 2012; Meckler and Martin 2011; Skocpol and Williamson 2011; Zernicke 2011). Nearly four years since the emergence of the Tea Party, it still has an enormous impact on policy initiative, political culture and social organizations and institutions. Some may believe that the Tea Party movement is little more

than a branch of the already conservative Republic Party. However, scholars have documented its clear divergence from traditional party politics and moved into a new category of political participation that seems to defy social science classification (Foley 2012). Yet, its profound ability to attract large numbers of followers leaves many of these scholars in a quandary, asking, “Just what is the contemporary United States Tea Party?”

The social science research that has explored the dynamics of the United States Tea Party has documented the demographic composition of the Tea Party (Skocpol and Williamson 2011), outlined its basic political and economic agendas (Foley 2012; Meckler and Martin. 2012; O’hara 2010; Zernicke 2011), described its appeal to mainstream media (Boykoff and Laschever 2011, DiMaggio 2011; Zernicke 2011) and has even spoken with a few so-called Tea Partiers in an attempt to understand the political thought processes that pervade this new political movement (Skocpol and Williamson 2011). However, no published studies to date have actually explored the cultural dynamics of the Tea Party as a consistent participant observer in Tea Party meetings, activities, and social events, as well as through relationship building with Tea Party participants, allowing for a thicker description of the ambiguous party lines that define the United States Tea Party. Noting this deficiency in the literature, I set out to conduct an exploratory research project by asking two primary research questions: (1) What are the cultural dynamics of the Tea Party? and (2) How does this determine the way the Tea Party engages in contentious politics?

As sociologists, we ought to question how the movements’ dynamics and the construction of group identity that have propelled the Tea Party into the media spotlight in such a relatively short period. This study contributes to the growing literature on the nationwide Tea Party movement by building on the important foundations laid by scholars and

expanding Tea Party scholarship by exploring the cultural dynamics, identity, and effects of political mobilization in a particular region of the country: Montana. This study is unique from previous structuralist approaches of the United States Tea Party in that it not only explores the cultural dynamics and identity construction of politically conservative activists, but it also utilizes qualitative methods through participation in meetings and interviews with Tea Partiers directly to make statements about Tea Party culture.

United States Tea Party in the 21st Century

The United States Tea Party emerged as a political reaction to the progressive nature of national politics. Its birthdate and birthplace can be traced to Chicago on February 19, 2009. In a fiery on-air speech on CNBC, Rick Santelli harangued the democratic government for their policies that, he claims, was promoting “bad behavior” among the American population be distributed so-called handouts to those who were unable to provide for themselves. He stated:

We're thinking of having a Chicago Tea Party in July. All you capitalists that want to show up to Lake Michigan, I'm going to start organizing.... I'll tell you what, if you read our Founding Fathers, people like Benjamin Franklin and Jefferson, what we're doing in this country now is making them roll over in their graves.¹

¹ <http://newsbusters.org/blogs/tom-blumer/2009/02/19/rant-ages-cnbc-santelli-goes-studio-hosts-invoke-mob-rule-downplay>

His message reached millions, and inspired an estimated six million disgruntled individuals around the country to protest on April 15, 2009 (“Statistics Brian”). Americans to organized various acts of contentious politics around the nation. Highly influential economic elites, such as the Koch brothers, became central figures behind the nascent organization, managing funds and providing clear-cut fiscal prescriptions to the nation’s declining economy. By 2010, elites and grassroots mobilizers were working together, ironically, to fight for relief from big government, and to return to the founding principles of the country, as stated in the United States Constitution (Skocpol and Williamson 2011).

After nearly four years since the first Tea Party gathering, the general American population has become quite acquainted with the new conservative group, but the actual dynamics that lead to mobilization are much more obscure. Media experts and journalists have explored various aspects of the intriguing Tea Party activists who can often be seen parading around in public wearing tri-corner hats, red, white and blue face-paint (DiMaggio 2011; Zernicke 2011). Indeed, the Tea Party’s very name attracts the attention from both political sides given its historical connotations and romanticized imagery of citizen rebellion and patriotism. This new conservative breed of populism in some cases extends beyond economic grievances and is deeply embedded in an ultra-conservative worldview. Its timely birth – three months after the inauguration of a black, progressive, young, religiously ambiguous President Barack Obama –triggered an alert among traditional American conservatives. These conservatives, deeply rooted in individual fiscal responsibility, small government and typically religious fundamentalism, reacted to the shift in administration by establishing a group situated to the far right on the political spectrum. This shift implies a reaction to the progressive social policies represented by a new, liberal, government and a

perceived threat to traditional, “American” culture. Since most religious individuals are conservative (Wade 2012), often swaying the social agenda of right-wing politics, rejection of a more socially progressive society is not surprising.

The core ideology guiding Tea Partiers is “the restoration of a democratic nation where the voices of the people are heard” (“Tea Party Patriots”). Three principles shape this ideal: Constitutionally limited government, free markets, and fiscal responsibility. The members of the Tea Party regard the Constitution of the United States and documents produced by the Founding Fathers to be the Supreme Law of the land. After demystifying the political jargon, the Tea Party essentially argues that, the liberties granted to citizens of the United States should be actively protected, limiting government provision in private affairs. Only by acknowledging the Constitution, Bill of Rights and other primary documents, will American citizens acquire true liberty. A free market is the economic consequence of personal liberty so therefore, the Tea Party opposes government intervention in private business. Fiscal responsibility of the individual is stressed by the Tea Party. According to the organization, “a Constitutionally limited government, designed to protect the blessings of liberty, must be fiscally responsible or it must subject its citizenry to high levels of taxation that unjustly restrict the liberty our Constitution was designed to protect” (“Tea Party Patriots”).

Similar to the Boston Tea Party of 1773, the contemporary United States Tea Party resulted from the government’s economic decisions in the early 2000s which led frustrations of over-taxed Americans, angered by tariffs, to challenge the American government. The major difference between these two tea parties was that in 1773, the original Patriots protested the British monarchy not because of government pay-offs, federally funded

bailouts, handouts and unjust policy initiatives such as socialized health-care. According to Dick Armey, a pioneer of the new conservative party, writes: “The spark that ignited the modern Tea Party movement was not just a question of bad economics – it cut to the core of basic American values of individual choice and individual accountability” (Armey 2010: 29). Armey argues that the Tea Party is the product of broken Republican commitments, the aggressive left-wing agenda of a Democratic regime motivated by redistributionist and technological innovations that allow people to find one another, organize, and get essential information in real time (ibid: 167). It is a way of reorganizing conservative ideologies in the United States that restores the Constitutional rights granted to American citizens.

Rasmussen and Schoen (2010) explicate the organizational infrastructure of the contemporary Tea Party by compartmentalizing it into four major components. First, ‘Organizational Backers’ such as Freedom Works provide infrastructural support for the movement. Such organizational support is essential for the movement to have nationwide recognition some economic backing. Second, the ‘Individual Organizers’ who conduct on-the-ground planning and solidarity work. This is the grassroots organizers who created Facebook events and made a few phone calls to organize the first Tea Party events in April 2009. Third, ‘Symbolic Leaders’—nationally recognized figures identifiable to outsiders (e.g. Sarah Palin, Rick Santelli) – whose political perspectives echo the movement’s sentiments and whose charismatic leadership have provided the movement with the initial drive to organize. Finally, ‘The Base’ is the bulk of the movement: “a cross section of America” that “represents a solid one-third of the electorate” (156, 158 –159), a number that has remained consistent for the last few years (Caren 2012).

While social scientists are still exploring the dynamics of the national Tea Party, what we do know is that they are primarily Republicans toting a fiscally conservative antigovernment political agenda (Skocpol and Williamson 2011; Caren 2012). While this may seem like nothing more than another wave of frustrated Americans, we cannot know for sure without first uncovering the dynamics that motivate and stimulate Tea Party activity in the United States. One way to explore this new wave of conservative mobilization is to explore the cultural dynamics embedded in the Tea Party. This may help us understand how Tea Partiers formulated their particular ideologies and mission statements, as identified nationally by Armev and specific Tea Party chapters. The very way in which they interpret the political and economic system may provide some insight into their methods of mobilization, and how this may or may not be indicative of the way movements may mobilize in the future.

Mobilization Dynamics

This study attempts to contribute to that literature by providing a cultural exploration into the mobilization dynamics of the Tea Party. It was not until the latter half of the twentieth century that scholars recognized culture as an important contribution to the social movement literature. Instead, scholars focused on the psychological components of movement participation, the mobilization of resources and the structural opportunities for political change. The Tea Party represents a social movement directed at political reform, a form of contentious politics that protests the government who – Tea Partiers claim – has

overextended its constitutional powers. The cultural dynamics of Tea Party protest activity has not yet examined by social scientists.

How scholars approach cultural dynamics of mobilization varies somewhat. Cultural sociologist and social movement scholar, Stephen Hart (1996: 98), identifies five points that are central to understanding the cultural aspect of social movements:

- (1) Cultural elements in the environment, embedded in pre-existing traditions (e.g. images, templates, concepts).
- (2) How these pre-existing elements are structured (e.g. rhetorical strategies, narratives).
- (3) How cultural craftwork is carried out movement participants as pre-existing codes are selectively appropriated, interpreted, transformed, and applied.
- (4) How cultural forms created within movements work for the movements (e.g. what kind of orientation, guidance, rituals, and legitimation they provide)
- (5) How these cultural forms ultimately affect public discourse and political events

In the chapters that follow, I use Hart's guidelines as a starting point to explore various dimensions of Tea Party activity. This investigation of the development of Tea Party culture, therefore, is a unique contribution to the academic research previously on the Tea Party, which is restricted to broad-based nation-wide analysis of movement trends, resources and incentives. In this dissertation, I argue that the Tea Party qualifies as a social movement and can therefore be examined by Hart's (1996) criteria. The Tea Party incorporates various elements of conservative culture to artificially construct a movement representing the

rejection to liberalism and governmental expansion. The task for this study then is to examine how culture is incorporated, utilized, and constructed in the Tea Party, and to be familiar with the relationship between culture and collective action.

Culture and Movements

In 1986, Ann Swidler wrote a groundbreaking article analyzing culture as a fluid, rather than static, contribution to collective activity. She presented this new approach in the catch phrase “Culture in Action,” arguing that culture should be perceived as a motivating force that comes with a toolkit of words, phrases, symbols, beliefs and rituals which lead to a strategy of action and helps shape action by defining what people want. Culture, therefore, “has an independent causal role because it shapes the capacities from which such strategies of action are constructed” (Swidler 1986: 277). It does not provide an explanation from movement activity; rather it *describes* the characteristics and processes within in a movement, which thereby contributes to tactical decisions made by group members.

By extracting pieces of culture within a movement – or the group’s conceptualization of culture – social scientists have the conceptual tools to examine how group members interpret their social surroundings and furthermore arrive at courses of action (Klandermans and Johnston 1996). This process does not come without challenges; for the identification of social movement culture is limited to the researcher as his or her outsider perspective is restricting, preventing full understanding of motivational thought processes. As Alberto Melucci suggests, investigating whether the structural conditions that define the actor, or alleged actor, are capable of explaining the types of behavior observed,

[I]t is assumed that the structural “thickness” of a social condition should explain action, which is not able to in itself to carry the “true” meaning of what is observed. One has to refer to a more substantial reality beyond the appearance of the phenomenon. A self-restrained application of this approach could provide useful information on the social profile of participants in social movements and on some society macro-processes that affect collective action (Melucci 1995: 56).

Therefore, the role as a researchers ought to explore the data as it is made available based on the so-called “substantial reality” (Melucci 1995) available to the researcher. The thick description and analysis of movement culture will provide a new lens that explains the emergence of conservative political groups like the Tea Party.

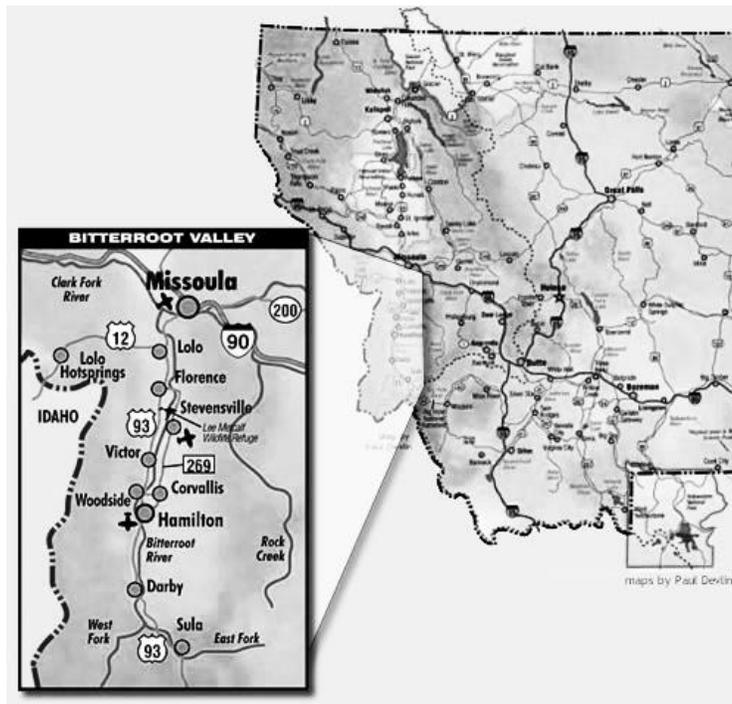
The Context: Montana

Before continuing the story on the rise of conservative political groups in Montana, it is essential that I describe the social, economic and political context in which this study is based.

This study examines the Tea Party in Montana specifically. I do not claim that this region is particularly unique and therefore more worthy of study. Rather, I chose to explore this region as a convenience sample given my awareness of Tea Party activity in the area. Rather than examining the state of Montana as a whole, I explore western Montana and the Bitterroot Valley specifically, due to its enormous growth and societal development in recent years (to be explored at length in chapter five). Furthermore, this area is incredibly diverse in

terms of political orientation, social outlook and economic stratification, and holds the majority of the state's population, thereby making it generalizable to the state as a whole. See the figure below for a map of the Bitterroot Valley.

Figure 1.1: Bitterroot Valley



Montana's Bitterroot Valley runs about 100 miles from north to south into the Anaconda region of western Montana. The city on the north end of the valley has a population of nearly 70,000 people, is considered the liberal epicenter for the region, and is the second largest city in the state. The next largest city in the Valley is located fifty miles south of Missoula, with a population of approximately 12,000 people. According the 2000 US Census, population growth in the Bitterroot counties alone has increased 25% in the last

fifty years and up to 44% in the last twenty years, implying major demographic changes in the local population. Many Montanans in the Bitterroot Valley are retirees, college students, or work via satellite correspondence, which does little for local economic development.

In the area between Missoula and Hamilton, rest a few small towns that are anything but docile. Jared Diamond's popular sociological book, *Collapse*, opens with an overview of Montana's Bitterroot Valley, describing the area as "a land of paradoxes" (2005: 30) where the old and new clash, stifling both economic and social progress in the valley. Moreover, the inland northwest has been a hotbed of conservative political mobilization in the last half-century, from the rise of rural populism to the extreme activities of the militia and Freemen of Montana, as described in chapter three. The economic problems that face the region have translated into economic problems for Montanans in the last century had changed a region that was once the richest in the nation to become the poorest (Swanson 2001). As a result, an extremely polarizing effect has occurred in Montana politics; one in which society literally "cannot agree on a vision for their state's environment and future" (Diamond 2005: 56).

Much like other citizens of traditionally conservative states, Montanans tend to be individualistic and suspicious of governmental regulation. At the turn of the twentieth century, the federal government owned over one quarter of the land in the state. However, Montanans remained culturally and geographically isolated from the federal policies and decision-making processes happening thousands of miles away in Washington D.C. (Diamond 2005). Skeptical that the government officials were truly looking out for the best interests of rural Montana – a remote frontier land atypical of east coast urbanism – Montanans remained conservative on land use policies, economic expenditures, and social or moral conservatism, an attribute the rest of the country seemed to have strayed from long

ago. At the same time, state pride grew, as their cultural and geographic isolation in the United States of America remained distinctive from the other 49 states and an anomaly to liberalism, generally.

Despite the cultural and physical distance from national policymakers, Montana is still highly dependent on federal programs and funding for economic survival. Nearly half of the income of Montana residents comes from other U.S. states or federal government transfer payments (such as Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, and poverty programs) and private out-of-state funds (out-of-state pensions, earnings on real estate equity and business income), rather than from a state-based economic system (Diamond 2005: 74).

A community built on miners, farmers and ranchers the southern tip of the Bitterroot Valley has become a popular vacation spot for the wealthy. While more people are flocking to the area every year, the United States census actually shows a drop in full-time residence in recent years. According to population estimates, the city of Hamilton lost nearly 4500 citizens in the last decade alone. Rich out-of-staters tend to congregate in Hamilton (the south end of the Bitterroot Valley), where country clubs, private golf courses and small private aircrafts provide all the necessary amenities for long fishing and ski weekends in the state. These part-time residents must carefully monitor the number of days spent in their Montana homes: they must reside in Montana no more than 180 per year in order to avoid having to pay state income tax (Diamond 2005: 61). As a result, Montanans are in a difficult situation: In order to support their currently quality of life they must incorporate federal economic program, which decidedly contradicts state pride.

In the inland Northwest, the Tea Party movement is shaped by the growing popularity in eastern Washington of Ron Paul, the Libertarian congressional representative from Texas,

and by a legacy of anti-government activism in northern Idaho at the battle of Ruby Ridge, and the standoff of the Montana Freeman near Bozeman (Barstow 2010). Many of the extreme supporters of right-wing conservatism in western Montana are members of the militia.² I discuss each of these conservative groups in detail in chapter three. Diamond (2005) noted that a major consequence of these far right political attitudes in opposition to governmental zoning or planning and a feeling that landowners should enjoy the right to do whatever they want with their private property.

The problems that face the region have mounted over the century, feeding into economic concerns effecting Montana citizens statewide. Growing numbers of wealthy vacationers and retirees settling into the Bitterroot Valley has overtaken the community founded primarily by miners, farmers and ranchers. Yet despite the spattering of wealth in the southern party of the valley, the steep downward slope of economic prosperity for the average western Montanan has changed a region that was once the richest in the nation to become the poorest. Hence, the growing social and economic contrasts among residents in this area seem to provide a prime environment for a reactionary conservative movement, and offer a unique sociological setting to study the Tea Party movement. Given the culture of conservatism in the region (which I explain further in coming chapters), the proliferation of Tea Party activity in Montana follows the historical trajectory of conservative mobilization in the regions past, yet represents something new about the way Americans view conservative politics.

² I did not have access to research these groups directly.

Outline

Frank (2004) argues that on a national scale, the conservative coalition is the dominant coalition. Indeed, the Tea Party's primarily conservative nature allows it to merge ideas and cooperate with right wing politics makes it a nearly invincible political force. I argue that the cohesion of conservative politics in Montana has given the Tea Party in Montana its broad-base of constituents. I will make this evident in the forthcoming eight chapters. The dissertation proceeds as follows:

Chapter two frames the project by laying out the theoretical framework already established for understanding social movements. In this chapter I conceptualize terms that I will utilize throughout the dissertation, including "social movement" and "conservative." I argue that the Tea Party is a social movement, which challenges other academic perspective, and describe how this movement may contribute to the broader social movement literature, and its implications for the future of conservative mobilization. I then describe the impact culture has on mobilization, and why it is imperative for social movement scholars to recognize how the interpretation and expression of culture and how it helps solidify group solidarity contributes to the strategic choices and decisions making processes of the movement.

Chapter three explores the historical context of right-wing groups in the United States. In this chapter I conceptualize conservatism and demonstrate its impact on society for the last century. The conservative groups I review in chapter three share similarities and differences with the contemporary Tea Party movement. As a point of comparison, therefore I discuss the overall structure of these groups so I may later compare them to the activities of

Tea Party constituents. In this chapter, I pay particular attention to the development of conservatism in the inland northwest and Montana specifically and other versions of radical conservatism found in extremist groups such as the Ku Klux Klan, the Christian Identity and the Montana Freeman movements. Understanding these movements is key to understanding the historical context and the development of a culture of protest in the region.

In chapter four I explain my philosophical orientation and research methodologies. Understanding the orientation of the researcher is essential before introducing primary data. I therefore describe my methodological decisions that I felt best suited the primary research questions of this study. I begin with a discussion of my epistemological, ontological and axiological approaches to social science research. I then describe my methodological decision to use a grounded theory research design, and the processes involved in a grounded theory project. I detail the data collection procedures including participant observation and intensive interviews using a grounded theoretical approach. I conclude by explaining the analytical process of research notes and interview transcripts.

Chapter five examines the Montana social context specifically, which provides a contextual frame for the emergence of the Tea Party in the twenty first century. I provide a brief history and overview of the emergence of the Tea Party affiliates in the region, the structure of the movement, and the typical program schedule of a Tea Party meeting. I then take the reader into a Tea Party meeting to better understand the processes and organization that occurs beyond media depiction. In this chapter, I also examine the effect dramaturgical strategies have on establishing group solidarity looking primarily at the utility biography and narratives. I rely on the conceptual framework of movement culture to begin to identify cultural components employed within the movement.

In chapter six I delve into the discussion of culture in movements. I examine social movement resources such as collective active frames to analyze the construction of Tea Party culture. Here I look particularly the role of religion as a providing structural and cultural resources for Tea Partiers to frame their arguments in the sacred. Framing is a concerted effort on the role of organizers to diagnose the problem, define movement goals and strategies, identify the enemy, provide motivation for participation, and provide an alternative solution to the grievance (Snow and Benford 2000). Therefore, providing ideal-type images of what is “American” the Tea Party utilizes civil religion (Bellah 2006) as an essential cultural resource to create unity and solidarity within the group.

In chapter seven, I discuss the Tea Party’s attempt to construct a collective identity. It is in this chapter that I describe the complications and ultimate failure of a particular Tea Party affiliated group due to their nuanced identity. I highlight four Tea Partiers that are actively involved in the Tea Party that serve as typologies, or archetypes, for a system of classification for conservatism in the twenty first century. These typologies are important for recognizing the way conservative Americans may inhabit particular aspects of conservative culture, while not inhabiting others, indicating a challenge to traditional ideals of one “conservative ideology”.

Chapter eight examines Tea Party culture’s influences on strategies of collective action. Having already identified key elements of Tea Party frames and features of their collective identity, I demonstrate how this is reflected in their approaches to politics. I consider what issues the MTP is contesting, their strategic choices for mobilization, and who is involved in strategic decision-making? Moreover, I examine how Tea Partiers establish a

community of contentious political actors by reinforcing one another's conservative perspectives, thereby reconceptualizing the term "conservative" for the 21st century.

I conclude by suggesting that the Tea Party movement is indeed a break from other conservative social movements. The Tea Party highly criticizes the social, political and economic systems currently in place in the American context as a way of engaging in contentious politics. Yet its halted progress is not out of lack of ambition, but lack of engagement with the public. Through discourse and dialogue in the free spaces available in Tea Party venues, members believe that they are capable restructure the United States, by establishing the American society the founding fathers envisioned in the American revolutionary period. This serves as an example for how we might understand conservative political culture and the human desire for social inclusion in the twenty first century.

CHAPTER 2 – REVIEWING THE LITERATURE

The Tea Party as a Social Movement

The United States Tea Party movement has triggered a political debate, dividing conservatives in the United States by presenting an oft unwelcomed extremism to the right wing. The Tea Party has also sparked a polemical debate among the academic community creating a point of contention within political sociologists, political scientists, journalists, historians and other disciplines over whether the contemporary Tea Party qualifies as a *social movement*. I hold that the Tea Party qualifies as a social movement, given the definition provided by Charles Tilly (1978) and David Snow (2004) and therefore approach my study of the Tea Party as a social movement by examining its characteristics and structures which enables economic, political and social reform.

I acknowledge how the Tea Party's culture repertoire fits into the social movement literature. Therefore, the purpose of this chapter is threefold: I first present the basic argument over the conceptualization of the Tea Party as a "social movement" followed by an argument for why the Tea Party is indeed a social movement, contrary to the opinions of some social scientists. Secondly, I review the social movements and collective behavior literature that provides the conceptual framework for this study. Moreover, by sharing this information, the reader may have a point of reference for my conjectures. Finally, I briefly review the literature on mobilization from an analytical perspective where I explain the various ways previous scholars have identified and defined "conservatism." From here, my

argument continues by providing a broad conceptual frame to setup my argument that the Tea Party represents a new form of radical mobilization in contemporary American society.

What is a social movement?

What is a social movement? The standard definition provided originally by Charles Tilly states that a social movement is:

a sustained, organized public effort, making collective claims on target authorities,” if it employs political actions for the creation of “special-purpose associations and coalition, public meetings, solemn processions, vigils, rallies, demonstrations, petition drives, statements to and in public media and pamphleteers,” and when “participants’ concerned public representations of worthiness, unity, numbers and commitment on the party of themselves and their constituencies (Tilly & Wood 2009: 3-4).

Indeed, the infrastructure of the Tea Party fits within the contentious politics social movement perspective defined by Tilly: The presence of collective organizing, clear targeting of political authorities, public contestation, public meetings, and the various levels commitment among individual members (1978). Narrowly defining social movements strictly as contentious politics, however, does not include some of the most impactful movements of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries that have occurred outside the political arena. For example, animal rights movements, religious movements, movements directed at identity construction within the civil sphere, and so on. As Snow (2004) indicates, the

restrictive nature of a purely contentious politics definition of a social movement limits social movement investigation and empirical research. For social scientists that examine the level of cultural changes, a contentious politics conceptual frame would not provide the proper tools for investigation (Snow 2004). As a result, Snow suggests a “new”, more inclusive conceptualization of social movements which includes the components of the definition provided by Tilly (1978) as well as:

- a. Collective challenges within or to other institutional and cultural domains.
- b. Collective efforts to affect change at various levels of social life: individual, state, and international organizational levels.
- c. Acknowledges the organizational *form* of social movements (Snow 2004: 11).

Therefore, the more culturally inclusive definition of a social movement, provided by Snow, reads:

A social movement is a *collective challenge to systems or structures of authority...as collectivities acting with some degree of organization* (formal, hierarchical, networked, etc.) *and continuity...primarily outside of institutional organizational channels for the purpose of challenging extant systems of authority, or resisting change in such systems, in the organization, society, culture or world order of which they are a part*” (Snow 2004: 11, italics in original).

Challenging other social scientific interpretations of the modern day Tea Party, I argue that Tea Party is a social movement, as defined by Tilly (1978) and Snow (2004). Throughout this dissertation I will demonstrate the ways in which the Tea Party mobilizes and engages in collective efforts to “change various levels of social life” (Snow 2004: 11). While the Tea Party does clearly target the government, it is also challenging the cultural practices of modern society which give into the – allegedly – illegitimate authority of the powers that be. Given that I frame my argument in the social movement literature, I must therefore give recognition to the literature and conceptual framework from the collective behavior and social movement fields. Doing so frames the conceptual framework I propose in the study in the current literature on social movement and contentious politics.

In forthcoming chapters, I will demonstrate how the Tea Party encompasses a culture of conservatism not unlike movements of the past, but its manifestation of culture may very well distinguish it from conservatism in the past. Some scholars argue that the contemporary Tea Party is not an actual movement, but rather a divergence from traditional conservative Republican Party politics as a reaction to the progressive policies and governance of President Barack Obama. However, as suggested by DiMaggio, the Tea Party’s main value is its power (or force), not in its substantial political contributions to the American social or political arena. Rather it has the power, ability and aspiration to “rebrand the Republican Party” (2011: 218). Moreover, the Tea Party may be categorized more as a social movement *organization* – “a complex, or formal, organization which identifies its goals with the preferences of a social movement or a countermovement and attempts to implement those goals” – or a social movement *industry* - the organizational analogue of a social movement that is not fully dependent upon participation numbers or organizations is to mobilize

(McCarthy and Zald 1977: 1218). Nonetheless, the characteristics that require mobilization – collective action, resources, collective identities, and motives to inspire social change – are evident within the Montana Tea Party movement, and conceivably in the national Tea Party movement as well. Hence, I will use the conceptual models presented in the social movement/collective behavior literature to discuss the cultural repositories of the Montana Tea Party movement specifically, its construction of a collective identity, and the types of collective activities that occur among Tea Party participants.

The Tea Party *is* a Social Movement

The social scientific studies that have examined Tea Party mobilization directly, rather than just reporting on the political ideologies of the Tea Party, have come from scholars of communication or media studies (Boykoff and Lashever 2011; DiMaggio 2011), political science (Skocpol & Williamson 2011; Williamson et al 2011) and journalism (Zernike 2010). Each of these studies has explored the Tea Party movement from a social science position, or takes on an academic perspective used to classify the structures, organization and/or resource management among collective actors. Often times framed in political science, theories of collective action as contentious politics argues that activities can be interpreted as a social movement if interaction among individuals occurs while making demands at a directed target. Tarrow (1994) has limited the definition to refer to contentious actions against the state. Moreover, movements are “episodic”; that is, they are not programmed with a specific political agenda. They are public, excluding claim making “that

occurs entirely within well-bounded organizations, including churches and firms” (McAdam, Tarrow & Tilly 2001: 5).

Communications scholar Anthony DiMaggio (2011) argues that early reporting on the Tea Party as a social movement, “ignored the consistent findings that the group exhibits little to no sustained activism at the grassroots level, and was an extension of the Republican Party politics from the beginning” (37). While he might not label the Tea Party as a social movement per se, DiMaggio continues by arguing that the Tea Party is merely a conservative diversion from the already conservative GOP; a form of propaganda. He argues that it is another iteration of party politics, rather than a social movement. Nonetheless, DiMaggio contends that the Tea Party’s lack of clear-cut party politics “allows it to benefit from a low threshold set for what constitutes a social movement” (171). That is to say, it holds potential for rampant political change, ultimately undermining the very foundations that shape traditional conservative politics in the United States. Given the social movement definitions I have outlined above, I argue that DiMaggio’s stance, while perhaps not acknowledged, actually falls within the realm of contentious politics as a social movement. His conceptualization of the Tea Party is important, yet does not recognize the cultural impact (as recognized by Snow, for example).

From another academic perspective, political scientists Theda Skocpol and Vanessa Williamson have developed a broad-based report on the current Tea Party movement in the United States, clearly differentiating its impact on American society from traditional forms of social movements or contentious politics. Indeed, in the preface of their book, Skocpol and Williams argue that “the Tea Party as a whole could not be plopped into available conceptualizations about third parties, social movements, or popular protests during sharp

economic downturns" (2011: ix). While I agree with their stipulation that the Tea Party is something beyond a traditional movement – from a structuralist standpoint – its foundation is rooted in contentious political collective behavior, which is quite similar to the Tilly definition of social movements above. Again, their argument that the Tea Party movement is not a contentious politics type of movement is valuable, yet perhaps insufficient. One must incorporate the components suggested by Snow (2004) to understand the value of the Tea Party on social movement scholarship.

The academic ideals of what the Tea Party is, holds theoretical significance, and provides a point of departure for future debates on the conceptualization of the Tea Party. However, social scientists are trained to allow the data to speak to the researcher, rather than to impose our own sociological concepts, theoretical underpinnings or research philosophies on our data to manipulate the results. Therefore, it is imperative for social scientists to ask the Tea Party itself, whether they would consider the Tea Party an actual *movement*. Thus, below is an excerpt from a conversation with Tea Party individuals who also serve as chair people on the local county Republican Central Committee. When asked what the Tea Party is, in their own words, members of the Montana Tea Party group itself indicated involvement in a *movement*:

Respondent 1: There is a strong movement - and I use the word movement I think that is probably better - in the Stevensville area – to use on the Tea Party people. But they're not really...uh... I think there are more or less two groups of the Tea Party people, but I think you'd have to talk to them because of some of them know more

of the story... I'm trying to keep it out of a political party; it's more a group of people that come together with some like-mindedness.

Researcher: So would you also qualify them as a “movement”]

Respondent 1: A movement? Yeah. I would

Researcher: And so you would describe the Tea Party as a party?...A movement?

Respondent 2: [nods] I would, yes. And it's just like [city] to have to have another movement [laughs]

Respondent 3: It's a new movement from the right. Barack Obama himself created it!³

Given that actual participants in the Montana Tea Party identify their mobilization or political organizing as a “social movement,” I accept the interpretation of Tea Party members. I will demonstrate throughout the dissertation the ways in which Tea Partiers interpret various levels of political contestation. However, it is imperative for the researcher to understand the perspective of the research subjects, rather than imposing rigid conceptual definitions to a phenomenon that may be beyond the theoretical stipulations identified by sociologists.

³ Indicating that President Obama's progressive policies triggered a backlash from the far right.

The research field on social movements has developed enormously since scholars first began theorizing the dynamics of collective behavior. While this project attempts to construct a new “grounded theory”, I must first describe the progression of social movement theory so it becomes possible to frame the sociological significance of the Tea Party movement in the broader social movement literature. The following section reviews the literature on the development of social movement theories. Rather than introducing the entirety of literature on collective behavior and social movements, I limit my scope to a discussion of social movement and culture, as this will be the primary conceptual framework utilized throughout my dissertation.

Social Movements Frameworks

Up until the early 1970s, scholar had examined the having only the theory of Karl Marx to build on, scholars (Olson 1965; Davies’ 1972; Kornhauser 1959; 1969; Geschwender 1962), built upon a general model of social movements known as the “Classical Model” (McAdam 1982). This model followed the simple progression that strain produces a disrupted psychological state which therefore leads to collective action. However, as a number of social movements made significant political advances in the 1960s and 70s (e.g. the civil rights movement, women’s movement, peace movement, etc.), scholars began to approach the field with a new perspective. When McCarthy and Zald presented their “partial theory” of resource mobilization in 1977, they listed dozens of hypotheses and presented a system of classifications of social movement terminology (i.e. social movement organizations, social movement industries, social movement sectors, constituents, adherents,

benefactors, etc.). In general, the theory argues that movements must have some sort of organization. Social movement actors are rational, and so calculate participation based on cost/benefit terms. Resources such as money, time, location, political and elite support were all necessarily to maintain the movement. Movements therefore became something that could be empirically measured, rather than assumed psychologically discontent as implied in the classical model (Jenkins 1983).

Building upon the resource mobilization foundation, Doug McAdam presented the “Political Process Model” in his 1982 classic work on black insurgency in the civil rights period. Here, McAdam argues that there are three essential components to movement emergence in harsh socioeconomic settings: indigenous organizations, collective consciousness, and an opening in the political system, which provided an opportunity for movement success known as “political opportunity structures” (ibid). Simply stated, the model argues that a movement will emerge if constituents sense that the political structure is weak or malleable to the changes outlined by the movement, or if it senses that, the political structure will support the movement’s goals.

Still, scholars began to question whether all movements could be summarized as rational action and the availability of resources “New Social Movement” (NSM) theorists explored the cultural foundations of collective behavior, arguing that *collective identity* and *cultural agency* are useful to explicate social movement emergence. NSM theory also suggests that movement success depends largely on the framing of grievances. In Ann Swidler’s (1986) “Culture in Action” provided scholars with a new framework with which they could look at culture as a fluid, rather than static force.

Culture in Social Movements

Culture is a force that comes with a toolkit of words, phrases, symbols, beliefs and rituals that lead to a strategy of action. By using culture to instill a personal dimension of responsibility to adherents of the movement, social movements thrive. Collective identity, framing, narratives, and biographies, all incorporate important *cultural* elements in social movements (Goodwin, Jasper and Poletta 2001). Yet, how an individual connects to the non-material resources of a movement cannot be explained without an analysis of the emotional responses within the social movement community. For example, Nepstad (2004) has written on how the strategy employed by social movement organizations to capitalize on religious culture has contributed to the appeal to many left-of-center religious groups and individuals. This religious ritual and emotion is fully incorporated in a peace protest particularly; liturgy becomes protest mantra, solidarity is a spiritual “baptismal” and the appeal of strong celebrity support reframes the movement to appeal to non-Christian anti-war or just plain supportive Americans.

Before a group of collective actors fully develops into a social movement, prior to even the initial stages of mobilization, the social movement must first develop a strategy to attract, recruit, and identify the grievances and goals of a particular movement. Social movement scholars have incorporated the utility of understanding “collective action frames” in a movement. Identifiable frames allow movement participants to “negotiate a shared understanding of some problematic condition or situation they define as in need of change, make attributions regarding who or what is to blame, articulate an alternative set of arrangements, and urge others to act in concert to affect change” (Benford and Snow 2000:

162). *Master frames* - which “implies both new ways of interpreting a situation as well as a novel means of dealing with or confronting it” (Snow and Benford 1992: 146) - effect the cyclical nature and clustering of social movement activity. Their fundamental argument is that “framing activity and the result and ideational webs that some movements spin or that emerge from the coalescence of collective action can also be crucial to the emergence and course of a cycle of protest” (142). The level at which movement organizers are able to keep the master frame of the movement and movement participants in-line determines rates of mobilization. In chapter six elaborates on the three steps of the frame alignment processes as identified originally by Snow, Rochford, Worden and Benford (1986), and framing tasks as suggested by Benford and Snow (2000) – namely, diagnosing, recognizing injustices as a prognosis for courses of action, and providing motivation. Thus, as in Nepstad’s (2004) study, utilizing the resources – culturally and structurally - as a framing strategy for recruiting and maintaining social movement participation is key to understanding the culture of the Tea Party. I return to this discussion in chapter five.

Evoking Emotions: Narratives, Biography and Rituals

Cultural approaches to social movements may examine the narratives used by movement organizers, biographies, symbols, rituals, rhetoric and other qualitative forms of collective organizing to evoke emotions among participants. Emotions permeate each level of the social movement level of development: emergence, recruitment, retention, rise/decline, and outcomes. I will argue that the Montana Tea Party leaders tap into the emotions of participants to sustain participation and to instigate collective action. Goodwin, Jasper and Polletta (2001) list alternative ways in which emotions are important in understanding

mobilization including the following: recruitment (guilt, love or obligation stemming from a personal contact directly affected by the proposed goal or outcome of a movement). The interpretation of the political situation in their social context (individuals may abstain from mobilizing out of fear). The development of tactics, strategies of and methods of protest, which may be catalyzed by anger, may lead to violent tactics. Finally, out of sadness which may provoke more peaceful, somber methods of mobilizing as can be seen in the School of the America's protest (Nepstad 2004).

Emotions are far more complex than mere biological or psychological responses to phenomena. Rather, emotions are context specific. What a culture determines as abnormal or rare can evoke culturally relative reactions that are essential for individual and group survival (Thoits 1989). The various components that evoke emotions in a particular person in a given social situations is of particular importance to sociologists. Kemper (2001) argues that *power* is the generative source of emotions in social movement activity. Since social movements may rise in response to individual status discontent (McAdam 1982), one could assume that loss of power instigates mobilization. For, as Kemper writes, "When one's own power falls, this gives rise to *fear* or *anxiety*, since it warrants that one is more vulnerable to the power moves of the other actor" (2001: 63-64; italics in original).

Narratives includes stories or biographies, but according to Poletta (1998) must include a plot, a protagonist and an audience. Stories give the audience interpretive freedom, and allow them to pick and choose which elements of the narratives they wish to connect with, evoking an array of emotional responses.. Indeed, other movements have utilized this dramaturgical approach to recruiting and retaining members including the Central American solidarity movements of the 1980s (Nepstad 2004) and contemporary faith-based community

organizations in the United States (Wood 2002). "‘Narrativity’ is what grips us, what keeps us listening or reading. A story whose end was immediately apparent would be no story at all; it would be the moral without the story” (Poletta 1998: 423). Social movement scholars have suggested that social movement actors may use narratives particularly as a strategy to strengthen a collectivity by focusing on three points of view: those of narrator, protagonist(s)/antagonist(s), and the audience. ‘The role of the narrator is incredibly important in making sense of unintelligible situations, circumstances or threats. The audience gives authority to the narrator due to the severity and reality of his or her personal account. Therefore, the audience interprets the narrator as having expertise or rational authority on the general political perspective. We are socialized to respect rational authority and not to challenge the perspective they present.

In addition to the role of narratives, the utility of personal narratives can play an equally fascinating role in establishing solidarity within social groups. While some movements may not directly employ personal histories into the framing of grievances, it can be extremely important in framing the movement. There are a few research examples of note that build upon this idea. For example, Poletta discusses the use of MLK’s biography in congressional sessions. A couple of empirical results from this study: first, more African American congressmen/women utilize MLK to express their political sentiments than whites. Secondly, MLK’s biography up more often when issues of civil liberties are being discussed. According to these findings, we can conclude that MLK represents a powerful individual whose pursuit of justice demonstrates what is best about America’s open democratic society. Moreover, Goldstone (2001) argues that many of the revolutions that occurred in the twentieth century were built on the legacy of on an individual representing justice and

equality in society (e.g. Zapata in the Mexican Zapatista movement, Sandino in the Nicaraguan Sandinista Movement, etc.).

Another example comes from Nepstad's (2004) study on the Central American solidarity movements. She argues that the "martyr stories" of the Jesuits in Central America (El Salvador specifically) tragically told the stories of religious individuals fighting for social justice amidst oppressive political regimes. By capitalizing on the murder and rape of four innocent Catholic nuns, the relentless assassination of Archbishop Oscar Romero, and the massacre of Jesuit professors at the University of Central America transcended national boundaries and created solidarity movements overseas, especially among religious individuals. By framing the movement to reflect that the Central American fight for justice was really a fight for all religious individuals around the world, helped gain support for the movement.

Collective identity

Understanding the role of culture in social movements requires an examination of the movement participants' a pre-established, permanent identity (e.g. national, ethnic or religious identities) that make the organization and imperatives of a social movement reliable (Tarrow 1998). Constructing a common purpose around a group's identity is essential for maintain a cohesive social movement. Social movement scholars identify this process as the construction of a *collective identity*: "the shared definition of a group that derives from members' common interests, experiences, and solidarity" (Taylor and Whittier 1992: 105). If a common identity is found in the group organism (as opposed to an aggregate of individual identities) then the group will more easily come to a consensus on common

grievances and seek to mobilize in order to fulfill that need and strengthen their sense of “oneness” and social capital (Polletta and Jasper 2010).

Melucci (1996: 39) writes, “Collective identity is a learning process that leads to the formation and maintenance of a unified empirical actor that we can call a social movement.” Collective identity is not just a shared ideology - there are different reasons why a person could be drawn to a particular idea, but there may be different means by which others in the movement came to that conclusion – not a cohesive frame of mind. Nor is collective identity merely a shared social status, but it is essential in social movement to foster a common understanding of those who are in the “in-group” and those in the “out-group”. For example, Taylor and Whittier’s (1992) work on the Women’s Rights movement argues that the creation of boundaries established greater power among women and even established physical places (such as a feminist coffee houses) where women could build relationships with other group members. For the women’s movement, identifying the enemy was easy: the enemy was the (typically male)⁴ dominant group that was “oppressing” all women in society. When boundaries are not clear, other places or “free spaces” may be established to discuss a movement’s collective identity. Futrell and Simi’s work on the white power movements demonstrated that the free spaces created online allowed for white males to collectively discuss what is was they believed so they could foster the identity⁵ (2002). Clearly, recognizing the common unifying factor between movement participants is crucial to

⁴ I put male in parenthesis because it is conceivable that men were also committed to achieving equal rights for women in society.

⁵ For example, in this study an individual confessed knowing that he was now “allowed” to date black women, but was it within the group’s guidelines for him to date a Latina woman? This demonstrates the desire among group members to uphold the collective interests in the group.

understanding the movement's ideology, purpose and motives as a whole and will be a salient analytic frame throughout the dissertation.

Radical Mobilization

Despite the extensive and growing literature on social movement construction, strategies and outcomes, scholars have nearly exhausted studies regarding the dynamics of left wing movements pertaining to minority rights, animal rights, political and economic revolutions that translate into discussions of international and transnational movement dynamics. Scholars have spent less time, however, exploring the mechanisms of radical social movements from the right wing of the political spectrum. Though the Tea Party is often framed as a shift to the far right, the incorporation of libertarian and moderate independents, I will discuss the dynamics of the Tea Party in terms of a new form of radical mobilization; for if it is certainly agreed upon the Tea Party represents a counter-cultural radical movement. However, because many studies on the Tea Party do consider the Tea Party a political faction strongly affiliated with the right-wing Republican Party, here I acknowledge the variations of conservatism in the United States and conceptualize the term 'conservative', as employed throughout this project.

Identifying general points of contention against the American political system has not been a problem for conservatives throughout history. From the abolition to McCarthyism, conservative mobilization tends to be an organized political reaction to the changing cultural repertoire of society. Some social groups may perceive social progress to be a threat to conservative groups whose primary concern is the preservation of the status quo. Therefore,

when social change presents a challenge to dominant groups, some groups may respond defensively by attacking those progressive social forces. Sociologists have noted that conservative movements consistently fight against big government whose policies conservatives accused to be limiting the economic and political freedom of the individual who are capable of self-governance and self-provision (McVeigh 1999; 2004; Minkoff 2001; Van Dyke and Soule 2002). Wright (2006: 48) suggests, “It is individuals, not the government, who are seen as responsible for protecting their well-being and status... individualism and exceptionalism. Then, stand at the core of right-wing populist thought.”

Lipset and Raab (1978) suggest that conservative movements are not so much a matter of resolving issues or posing alternative solutions to social progress; rather, conservatism presents a set of procedures and behaviors developed by a group to create a political subculture. Constructing said subculture provides a safe place in a society for those unwilling to conform to the changing social norms and standards. Those hesitant to accept social progress unite around a relatively simple idea that American people ought to govern themselves. It is this basic political perspective that attracts and excites America’s working class. The fact that working classes can actually *get* what politics is at their level, empowers them, as they feel intellectually superior to the government politicians who “just can’t seem to get it right.” How one interprets what is “right”, varies even within the conservative classification. However given the dominant identification of “conservative” in the Montana Tea Party movement, it is important to conceptualize the term as it relates to field of political sociology.

Defining ‘Conservatism’

Given the breadth in American ideologies, a comprehensive typology of conservative ideology is virtually impossible. Dictionary definitions of conservative ideology define it as “tendency to preserve what is established; opposition to change” (Neilson, 1958: 568); or traditionalism and hostility to social innovation and progress (Mannheim 1986) or the fear of change (Huntington 1957). Giddens (1998) argues that a major factor “distinguishing left from right are attitudes toward equality. The left favours greater equality, while the right sees society as inevitably hierarchical” (40). Therefore, resisting change implies encouraging the preservation of the status quo and resisting efforts at to create a more egalitarian society, thereby allowing the dominant figures of authority in the past to continue to control and dominate social policies in the future (Jost et al 2003: 343).

Throughout history, individuals have interpreted conservatism in a number of ways with many variations. “Conservative” literally means, “to preserve” yet the variety of expressions on social, political and economic “preservation” pervades strict classification, I identified three types of conservatism: *liberal conservatism*, *libertarianism*, and *cultural conservatism*. Each of these terms specifies a particular conservative ideology. *Liberal conservatism* combines traditional social and religious values while preserving laissez-faire economic policies. As opposed to *fiscal conservatism* – which focuses primarily on government spending and the national debt – liberal conservatism opposes social and economic policies that do not necessarily dissuade politics from interfering with personal issues. This is unique form *libertarianism* - from the Latin *libertas*, liberty, which believes fundamentally that every person is the owner of his own life, and that no one is the owner of anyone else’s life; including the United States government. It is combined with economic conservatism and advocates non-aggression social polices (e.g. pro-life) and free-trade

policies. Libertarians oppose any government regulation of the economy be it in the form of a federal currency, or though government welfare, subsidies, international warfare, or any other form of political intervention.

In the United States, the term *cultural conservative* resembles a conservative position in the culture war based on religious or traditional social values. James Davison Hunter's book, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*, argues that American culture is polarized between two fundamentally different ways of interpreting ultimate reality: *orthodoxy* which assumes external ontological authority over all society, and *progressivism* which asserts internal autonomy over normative expectations. Hunter's theory contends that conservative values flow from a basic assumption that order is intrinsic to reality and comes from God or natural laws. Cultural conservatives interpret religious, political, and social traditionalism as the good, and right and worthy of preservation. People are thus called to conform to longstanding societal patterns rather than promote change. He writes that the culture war is "rooted in an ongoing realignment of American public culture and has become institutionalized chiefly through special-purpose organizations, denominations, political parties, and the branches of government" (Hunter 1991: 290). Therefore, cultural conservatives - as opposed to the fiscal conservatives - are motivated primarily and influenced by what they consider moral values. They frame their deals in "traditional" ways of thinking even in the face of monumental change. They believe strongly in traditional values and traditional politics, and often have an urgent sense of nationalism; taking back the nation from the progressive liberals that are threatening the values on which the United States' rests. Moreover, cultural conservatives believe that the government has a role in encouraging or enforcing what they consider traditional values or behaviors and they want to

preserve traditional morality and social mores, often through civil law or regulation. Essentially, establishing the government as a moral authority governing "fundamental assumptions that guide our perceptions of the world" (Hunter 1991: 119).

The politics of cultural conservatives should be not undermined, however. Cultural conservatives have established a unique place in American society. They have become deeply embedded in religious institutions, having formed a coalition commonly known as the "religious-right." Religious conservatives encourage the preservation of the religious heritage of traditional cultural values in addition to traditional American values as outlined by the Constitution. Religious conservatives in the United States seek to apply the teachings of western Christianity to politics, by merely proclaiming the value of those teachings, at other times by having those teachings influence laws. There are a number of individuals in the Montana Tea Party whose involvement in religious organizations are indicative of cultural conservatism, and have thereby adopted the fiscal or political conservative ideologies, as a result. I will return to this point in later chapters.

While each of these dimensions of conservatism varies slightly in their primary focus, they all fall within the broad definition of conservative ideology of "resistance to change." Historical and cultural factors change the way in which a society experiences conservatism. Conservatism in the United States during the 1960s supported the Vietnam War and opposition to civil rights, while conservatism in the 1990s had more to do with supporting traditional moral and religious values (Miller 1994). I argue that for the contemporary Tea Party, conservatism is interpreted more economically or culturally, where grievances lie primarily in the preservation individual rights, liberties, and free enterprise, and the rejection of socialist policies. Therefore, after determining which factors are important for identifying

a conservative movement, I utilize a definition provided by Blee and Creasap that suggests that conservative movements are those which, “*support patriotism, free enterprise capitalism, and/or a traditional moral order*” (2010: 270). While they imply that violence is not a frequent goal of conservative movement, the following chapter demonstrates the way in which strong political convictions can stimulate violence, in the name of political freedom.

In the United States, conservative movements tend to support anti-collectivist economic policies, fervent patriotism, traditionalism and conventional morality (Blee and Creasap 2010). Ironically, however, not all conservative or right-wing movements contain members purely from that end of the political spectrum. Indeed, present-day conservative movements include white supremacists groups, neo-Nazi movements, anti-immigration, anti-gay, and anti-abortion movements (Blee 1991; 2002; Bob 2012; Durham 2007; McVeigh 1999; 2004; Minkoff 2001; Van Dyke and Soule 2002). As a result, movements are difficult to label as either right-wing or conservative as single movement is likely to have conservative and right-wing aspects (Blee and Creasap 2010: 271). The following chapter explores the dynamics of conservative mobilization in depth, providing the contextual and conceptual foundations for the discussion that follows.

Conclusion

Two important points emerge from this chapter. First, is that the Tea Party is, in fact, a social movement, based on the definition provided by Snow (2004: 11):

A social movement is a *collective challenge to systems or structures of authority...as collectivities acting with some degree of organization* (formal, hierarchical, networked, etc.) *and continuity...primarily outside of institutional organizational channels for the purpose of challenging extant systems of authority, or resisting change in such systems, in the organization, society, culture or world order of which they are a part*" (italics in original).

Montana Tea Party participants resonate with the idea that it is indeed a movement, which diverges from previous scholarship whose interpretation of the Tea Party as a political group or party – rather than movement. These arguments have been mostly theoretical, rather than empirical.

The second important conceptual point is that the Tea Party movement is a movement rooted in conservative values, economically, politically and culturally, while simultaneously attracting members from various points in the political spectrum. The majority of this research project will contribute to previous perspectives on social movements in three ways: First, the Montana Tea Party specifically falls within the realm of economic conservatism while simultaneously relying on culture and identity to attract members. Second, the way in which it mobilizes is an innovative method of contentious politics that previous frameworks have not yet documented.

The term “conservative” may have various meanings as we approach a new neo-conservatism in the twenty-first century. Therefore, understanding the historical foundations of conservatism in the United States. The following chapter reviews the various conservative movements that have appeared in the United States in the last century.

CHAPTER 3 – HISTORICAL AND SOCIAL CONTEXT

The Rise of Right Wing Movements

The Tea Party cannot be fully understood without properly identifying the movement's place in the broader social and historical context. Blee and Creasap (2010) argue that the rise of the right in the United States was the result of two historical factors; the rise of free-market advocates and the increasing numbers of cultural conservatives that accompanied the rise of American evangelical Protestantism. In the past, conservative movements arose as a response to progressive social policies, threatening the status quo of the past and challenging the dominant ideology that preserved tradition (Berlet and Lyons 2000). Williamson, Skocpol and Coggin believe that the Tea Party should be interpreted “as a new variant of conservative mobilization and intra-Republican party factionalism, a dynamic, loosely-knit, and not easily controlled formation of activists, funders, and media personalities that draws upon and refocuses longstanding social attitudes about federal social programs, spending, and taxation” (2011: 36). While these scholars have valid reasons to suggest that the Tea Party is just another conservative reactive movement, no studies to date have directly tackled the question of whether the Tea Party follows historical trends, or if it represents a unique style of conservative mobilization.

In terms of the global shift of right-wing politics, Bob (2012) argues that these new movements are ideologically diverse and conflictive (5). This is not unique to global movements; in fact it resonates highly with Tea Party ideology as I will flesh out in chapters six and seven. While this research project doesn't address that questions of transnational right-wing directly, it does, however imply that the Tea Party is a new form of conservative

mobilization that requires a new analytical frame of reference. In order to approach that issue, it is imperative to first examine conservative organizing in the U.S. leading up to the present.

In this chapter, I review the literature on conservative mobilization and describe how conservative movements have developed in the United States concluding with an overview of the origins of the United States Tea Party, its demographic characteristics, and the implications of a new conservative movement at this point in history. I selected conservative movements whose far right ideologies and mobilization strategies may resemble those of the modern Tea Party movement. The chapter concludes by exploring how each of these movements have affected Montana's political climate and how previous efforts of radical, typically right-wing, mobilization may have provided the groundwork for conservative activity emerging in the Bitterroot Valley in the twenty-first century.

Right Wing Mobilization in the United States

At the turn of the twentieth century, American society underwent significant economic and social change during the Reconstruction period, following the Civil War. During this time, political economists tried to rationalize the market-economy, improve working-class conditions and preserve a productive labor force in order to stave off more radical change after economists restructured the capitalist system (Berlet and Lyons 2000: 73). Yet for the conservative members of society, government was a conspiratorial institution that had destroyed the social superiority of white Americans, and halting economic enterprise in the South. These suspicions were raised by the government becoming

more progressive and loosening the reins on traditional American social policies. The “average” citizen of the United States was idealized by populists as being fundamentally honest and just, therefore representing a moral and political force in society. As a result, each individual should be in control of his or her personal decision making processes.

Political and economic elites, on the other hand, were demonized as being power hungry and selfish, establishing new policies that would benefit the dominant class. Reflecting the most basic conflict theoretical prospective, the populists promoted a form of class-consciousness that pitted an evil bourgeoisie against the goodness of the proletarian masses. For them, the people needed to fight back and be protected from the dangerous, destructive tendencies of the elite (Berlet and Lyons 2000).

One of most famous reactionary movements against the increasing lenient progressive American government – though perhaps not an exemplary case – is the white supremacist organization known as the Ku Klux Klan, or KKK. Established to preserve the social positioning of White Anglo-Saxon Protestants, the first KKK organizations rose during the Reconstruction period, following the Civil War. The southerners claimed to be economic victims of the northerners, who dissuaded the slave system. The group quickly became a vociferous racist organization as opposed to its original intention of preserving the social order of the Confederacy. Xenophobia and the growing minority groups in the United States threatened the status quo of white, working class “American” whom the populist party attracted (Crothers 2003). The KKK's adherence to republican, right-wing ideology came a poignant time in American history, given its populist themes and focus on developing the supremacy of the threatened middle class (Blee 1991). The KKK's populist goals was interwoven with its appeals to white supremacy and religious exclusivity as a way to cover

up its xenophobia (MacLean 1995). Thus, scapegoating and perpetuating social inequalities was prevalent in conservative groups at the turn of the twentieth century (McVeigh 2009).

Some scholars have compared the construction of the KKK to the development of fascism rising simultaneously in Europe during the 1910s and 1920s (Berlet and Lyons 2000: 103). Both conservative groups resisted the era of industrial change with a combination of nostalgia and forward-looking appeals. Both the KKK and European fascism used propaganda to recruit and mobilize constituents; both developed largely as a backlash against the left and against supposed moral and cultural decay within society at large; both promoted social oppression and, in some cases, violence. Indeed, both movements sought to seize government control from minority groups and then use institutional power to marginalize their enemies in society. It would seem the catalyst behind mobilization was the fear to incorporate minority groups into mainstream society, thereby challenging the position of the white dominant class, and resisting social equity.

Beyond the social constraints facing society in the 1920s and 30s, the United States was in an economic depression. The New Deal programs established by President Franklin D. Roosevelt were created to give more jobs to Americans, and boost the economy. From a socio-historical perspective, the development of these programs was a positive solution to the social and economic crisis of the day. However, conservatives condemned the New Deal programs as illegitimate the expansion of government power since Roosevelt took on many of the big business elites also condemned by the right, while also accusing corporations of being greedy and contributing to the Great Depression. Roosevelt also sponsored numerous federal initiatives designed to protect labor interests, including various employment rights, freedom to organize into unions and wage limits (Crothers 2003). However, the

government's expanding intervention in individual economic liberties threatened private entrepreneurialship and conservative political ideologies. To conservatives, the nation seemed to be taking steps toward communism. Some populist groups, such as Liberty League and the KKK, also professed that Jews and Communists were responsible for the stark economic state of affairs, finding a new group to ostracize based on economics in the mid-twentieth century. And yet still, scapegoating any minority group in the United States was a way for status quo white Americans to maintain their socio-economic placement in society.

1950s – 1980s: The 'Old Right' and the Politics of Fear

The new right had constructed a politics of fear. Following World War I and II, right-wing populists adopted more than just white supremacy or anti-Semitism to their ideological platform, they also include anti-communist, anti-immigration and anti-civil rights components to their ideologies (Crothers 2003: 44). In an age of fear, uncertainty and political ambivalence, the populist organizations found its niche and were able to establish a constituent base in American extreme conservatism.

Following the World Wars, the U.S. gained further international notoriety as a super-power both politically and economically. Indeed the aftermath of World War II left anything but a feeling of peace and trust in the political system. Fears of the usage of nuclear weapons rose rapidly as did the threat to international security, a global holocaust, and essentially global destruction. People became suspicious of the political and economic institutions, generating a growing fear in the United States against the threat of an expanding, oppressive government. Conservatives constructed conspiracies that contended that the government would slowly infiltrate the private lives of averages citizens leading to global communism, or

a “New World Order” (NWO). The NWO was an alleged conspiracy developed by conservative extremists to brand what they saw as a growing threat to a single, authoritarian world government. This culture of fear became a popular tactic for right-wingers; they were in many ways valorized as heroes for “sounding the alarm” that the State was part of a sinister plot against the common good (Berlet and Lyons 2000: 9). However, such a tactic quickly turned into illegitimate bigotry and targeted individuals such as Jewish Bankers as being the carriers for a communistic world order. The New World Order conspiracy enacted by the State was understood to be communistic, anti-Christian, and challenged the cultural supremacy of white America. As I will demonstrate in future chapters, fear of the NWO is still very much prevalent in the Montana Tea Party today.

Rejecting the New World Order and protecting the rights and liberties of the Constitution were the primary goals for the conservative movements. In the Cold War era, fears mounted, as some conservative mobilizing took a sharp turn even farther right and began to take up radical qualities arguing that American citizens had just cause to be skeptical about the political intentions of the federal government. As a result, political extremism in the United States during the Cold War rose from both ends of the ideological spectrum: Communism and McCarthyism became the polar opposition to Americans lost in the middle as the fight between radicals permeated the political and social world with fear driving both sides. The rise of communism around the world became a viable option for those opposed to government control in the United States. Right-wing parties (Nazism) and totalitarian governments (Fascism) had nearly destroyed world order for the last time. Extreme leftists appealed government control and referred back to the Marxist motive to allow the proletariat control of society. The increasing interest in this radical political

ideology caused an ultra-conservative backlash, as communism became the biggest threat to national security.

Senator Joseph McCarthy was the most vociferous oppositional leader to speak out against communism in the United States. A right-wing radical, he instigated a global conspiracy theory against radical leftists infiltrating the American political system. McCarthyism soon became the extremist conservative movement of the era. Individuals feared both the communist threat as well as the infamous interrogation system of rooted in McCarthy's line of questioning. Moreover, McCarthy's targeting the State Department as an "enemy", an alcove for communists, it gave other conservative extremists permission to question new political incentives (Wright 2007: 48). The U.S. government was not only seen as a potential threat to American freedom, radical right-wingers also portrayed it as the perpetrator of social unrest. From the perspective of the populists, the State had not been an advocate for the average American: From the abolition of slavery, to the tolerance of communist spies in government positions, every government action and policy initiative had to be questioned.

This paranoia extended beyond political and economic liberties as some populists began to question the civil rights of some American citizens. According to a 1954 study, Americans believed communists were more likely to be "Negro" than any other American demographic group (see Stouffer 1954). The growing fear among xenophobes was that black's threatened American security could be traced back to the violent rebellions in the period of slavery and following under Reconstruction and the Jim Crow legislative battles. Despite the growing economy, blacks were still perceived as threats to social progress to many conservative Americans. For example, in 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court case, *Brown*

versus Board of Education allowed for desegregation of whites and blacks in public schools. To radical conservatives, this demonstrated yet another profoundly viable threat to southern whites. In response, populist groups such as Christian Identity and Catholic Marians emerged, arguing that the biblical lineage of blacks could be traced back to the tribe of Ham, which, according to Old Testament literature, was cursed by God and told they, would be enslaved to other tribes. The suspicion achieve social equality, as indicative of all conservative movements, increased the divide between the radically conservative Christians developed so-called survivalist groups that aimed to protect the “survival” of the superior, white race.

With the rising fear associated with the Negro Revolution and the New World Order, populist sects emerged with a more directed focus of preventing global communism. One of these movements is the “Minutemen”. The group was founded in 1960 by a man named Robert DePugh, who went on to form the Patriotic Party in 1966. Founded on fear-based survivalist ideology, the original coterie of Minutemen joined to be trained to protect them should communism consume the country. While the guerilla groups remained relatively secretive and small-scale (approximately 200 individuals organized in units of 5-25 individuals to remain covert) they achieved notoriety by their extreme fascination in weaponry (Wright 2006). In 1967, nineteen Minutemen were arrested for an alleged plot to bomb New York summer camps they claimed were under control of communist subversives. The group eventually disbanded when, in 1969, DePugh and one other Minuteman were sent to prison on firearms charges (Wright 2006). While the Minutemen dissolved as an organizational tie, other populist groups emerged though not necessarily as militant as the previous populist offshoots.

Some right-wing groups disbanded and took a different approach to attracting constituents though arguable still mobilizing on a culture root in fear through the cultural tactics provided in fundamental or religious (mostly Christian) conservatism. Like most right-wing populist ideology, these far-right groups were often anti-Semitic, anti-Communist, racist and ethnocentric, reacting to the rise of rationality, modernism, liberalism and most secular humanist politics (Wright 2006: 46). Their ideology was similar to most right-wing groups and their platform came from fundamentalist Christianity. At this time, fundamentalist Christianity became a prominent political force in the 1960s and 1970s with the foundation of the Moral Majority (a conservative movement spearheaded by Jerry Falwell to return to traditional social values), and quickly became labeled as the “religious right.” The religious right entered the political arena making public claims on the basis of private truths (Casanova 1994). The integrity of politics and American commitment to keep religious values outside the public sphere, demanded resistance (Nehaus 1984). Nonetheless, Christian fundamentalist groups emerged around the country, rejecting social progress, equity, and demanding Christian ethics be reinstated into American politics. One of the most prominent, and extremely conservative groups to emerge as a result of the Moral Majority was the Christian Identity movement. Based on a racialized view of history, Christian Identity believes that that United States is the real chosen land and that all those outside the western European roots of American tradition (e.g. Jews, African Americans and other people of color) are the anti-Christ.

Another conservative group that emerged in the 1970s that challenged social progress was a militant group that empowered the theological underpinnings of the Christian Identity movement known as the Posse Comitatus (Latin for “to empower the citizenry”). Founded

by Henry L. Beach in 1969 (a member of the neo-Nazi movement), he claimed that the Constitution legitimated legal authority only at the county level and that all federal law officials were part of a conspiracy to hasten the coming of the New World Order. The Posse focused heavily on the farm crisis, which arose in the 1980s when the government encouraged debt loans as a way to cover their diminishing returns. As a result sharp increase of debt on farmlands led to the potential loss of millions of farms across the country. In effect, nearly 700,000 medium to small farmers were forced to foreclose. Left without much of an annual income, agricultural areas were threatened by another depression brought on by an untrusting government, big business and globalization. Since the largest Posse groups were found in rural areas - the Midwest, Mountain and Pacific Northwest, Texas and Pennsylvania - many of the constituents were directly affected. Posse leaders began to encourage public protest against the Internal Revenue Service as well as the Federal Reserve, both of which were allegedly controlled by Jews as a conspiracy to establish a global economy. The Posse also mobilized around issues of tax resistance, conspiracies against federal law officials, social conservatism and fear of the NWO. By the mid-1980s, the Posse had established a white, racist alliance with the Klan and other white supremacist groups. However, not all racial groups associated with the Posse or Christian Identity due to its overwhelmingly religious undertones.

During the 1970s and 1980s, we see a variety of conservative movements emerge, based on economics, politics and social progress: The anti-tax network of right-wing groups provided the foundation for the economic conservatives. The KKK provided organizing space for racists, rejecting social equity. The Minutemen provided a place for anti-communist, ethnocentric, xenophobic individuals, fearful of a socialized or communist

government. The cultural and religious fundamentalists found a way to preserve their beliefs through the Christian Identity and other far right religious orders. Yet despite the rise and fall of numerous guerilla organizations around the country, the patriot and militia movements of the late twentieth century were the most offensive, violent and politically impactful to date.

1990s: Militia movements

The militia movement emerged from a conservative portion of a fearful American population who believed strongly in defending second amendment rights to bear arms, and very openly encourages the use of violent force. Also called the American Resistance Movement (ARM), the ARM is comprised of independent defensive (citizen militias), political cells and individuals that operate in cooperation or independently of one another, which includes patriots from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds that are dedicated to the defense of the Constitution. According to the Texas Militia, the duty of the citizen's militia is to “protect and defend the Constitution and that is where our loyalty is rooted.” Including the protection of the country against invasion or occupation by a foreign government; serving the Constitution of the United States and protecting the citizenry against domestic tyranny suppressing insurrection and hostile insurgency; and supporting families, neighbors, and fellow citizens in times of natural disaster or emergency (americanmilitiamovement). The emergence of the militia movement and the defense of Constitutional liberties is a foreshadowing of what would emerge in the Tea Party two decades later.

The militia movement identified itself with racist movements that are organized, for violent resistance to the operations of the federal government (Crothers 2003: 7). For the Patriot movement the farm crisis helped solidify its foothold in rural America (Wright 2007: 70). Born in anger after the showdown at a militia hideout in Ruby Ridge, Idaho and fully incited following invasion and destruction of the Branch Davidian community in Waco, Texas, the movement gained national recognition and interest with every state having at least one patriot group, and some having dozens by the early 1990s (Dees 1996).

The militia movement itself did not remain an official organized movement for long, however. On April 19, 2005, militia member Timothy McVeigh planted a bomb in a vehicle outside the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City. The explosion killed 168 people, including 19 children. Shortly thereafter, many militia groups disbanded after witnessing which resulted in the decentralization of division of the organization. That is not to say, however, that other groups did not emerge; advocacy for the right to bear arms and to protect citizens' freedoms and liberties was all but dead. It did change its form and its name, however. The Freemen of Montana, for example are an example of a conservative movement that emerged from the ashes of the Militia of Montana movement.

Conservative Mobilization in Montana

Just as in the nation-wide U.S. Patriot movement, the Montana branches of patriotism are rooted in agriculture, the farming crisis helped challenge the economic livelihood in rural Montana. Born in anger after the showdown at a militia hideout in Ruby Ridge, Idaho and fully incited following invasion and destruction of the Branch Davidian community in Waco, Texas, the patriot movement gained national recognition and interest with every state having

at least one patriot group, and some having dozens by the early 1990s (Dees 1996). The national militia movement varies from the patriot movement in that its primary objective is to defend second amendment rights to bear arms. The militia openly encourages the use of violent force to protect itself against government intervention in these matters. The defense aspect of the militia movement is called the American Resistance Movement (ARM). The ARM is comprised of independent citizen militias, political cells and individuals that operate in cooperation or independently of one another, which includes patriots from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds that are dedicated to the defense of the Constitution. According to the website, the duty of the citizen's militia is to “protect and defend the Constitution and that is where our loyalty is rooted... which includes the protection of the country against invasion or occupation by a foreign government; serving the Constitution of the United States and protecting the citizenry against domestic tyranny suppressing insurrection and hostile insurgency; and supporting families, neighbors, and fellow citizens in times of natural disaster or emergency” (“American Militia Movement”).

The Militia of Montana (MOM) is an active paramilitary patriot militia led by John, David and Randy Trochmann of Noxon, Montana. The group formed in 1994 and gained instantaneous strength due to its ideological continuity with the United Citizens for Justice.⁶ Its goals, as stated in its mission, were to return the government to a position of “service to the people and to defender of individual rights as our forefathers had intended.” Their statement of purpose reads as follows:

⁶ The United Citizens for Justice formed in late 1992 in response to public criticism of the government's tactics during the siege at Ruby Ridge, Idaho.

We, at the Militia of Montana, are dedicated to ensuring that all Americans are educated to make an informed decision as to which direction America should go. Along with being physically prepared to withstand the onslaught which will erupt no matter where we end up, we must at all costs, keep reaching those who have not had the opportunity to decide for themselves. The Militia of Montana has been, and continues to be, a national focal point for assisting Americans in forming their own grass roots organization dedicated to America's sovereignty and status as an independent nation among the nations of the world (“Militia of Montana”).

Though geographically isolated, it maintained a relative public profile as it was orientated more toward informing other militia movements rather than participating in paramilitary training directly (ideological appeal, and recruitment at gun shows. Due to Montana’s strict laws, MOM did not engage in paramilitary training and as a result, MOM was able to maintain a high public profile and avoid the wave of arrests that occurred in most other militia movements around the country at that time (“Militia of Montana”).

The Montana Freemen emerged from this group but with a more Constitutionalist perspective than the MOM. For instance, they did not trust government currency and went on a rampage of trying to cash fake checks at banks all over the west. The group had a ranch outside of Jordan, Montana where the conservative group of “Freemen” lived; that is, individuals refusing to pay taxes. In the spring of 1996, a Freeman threatened a county judge following what he claimed to be an unjust sentencing to a traffic violation in a common law court. Afraid for her life, and the lives of her family members, the judge fled the area, as officers entered the scene. For three months, federal officers surrounded the ranch, awaiting

the surrender of the Freemen. Careful not to ignite more fire to the disquiet militia community by creating another situation like Ruby Ridge or Waco, the negotiators waited patiently until a peaceful surrender finally emerged in the summer of 1996. Managing to avoid another disaster, however, the Freemen surrendered – just a week before the planned citizen invasion of Jordan Ranch.

As loyal as some conservatives in Montana may have been at this time, the general population was not as sympathetic to the cry of the Freemen. In Missoula, for example, petitions circled to recruit members of a citizen’s army against the Freemen during the standoff. Carpenters, railroaders and ranchers were among those quick to fight for justice...even if that meant ending the standoff with violence. Those who signed the petition understood that the government had to be extremely careful when handling the Freemen, but also believed that it was time to take action.

2000s: A New Millennium, a New ‘New’ Right

America’s transition into a new millennium did not come without societal concerns and reservations. The fear behind a nation-wide computer shutdown predicted when systems would roll over from 1999 into 2000 gave many conservative religious groups a reason to believe we were living in the End Times, Armageddon had arrived, and the end of the world was nigh. When the calendar changed, and the world did in fact *not* end, the religious individuals provoking the fear around Y2K (for “year 2000”) received international infamy. However, this did not stop the ‘prophets’ from believing that they had “miscalculated” the timing and that the world was on the brink of complete destruction. These predictions were validated by some when the terrorist attacks on U.S. soil on September 11, 2001, killing

nearly three thousand American citizens. Surely, such an attack on a Christian soil meant the final battles were imminent, only perpetuated the fear that lay in the aforementioned conservatives and further encouraged other social fatalists to consider the warning signs that society was about to collapse. The aftermath of the terrorists activities ironically produced variegated responses among the conservative population. Durham (2007) notes that some activists valorized Islamic terrorists, while others engaged in conspiracy theories and rejected any political demonizing.

Since 2001, the direction of conservative politics on a national level has shifted from focusing on citizen rights to government intervention and its place in the private lives of Americans. Studies have indicated that the election of conservative Christian President George W. Bush in 2000 was largely due to the mobilization among the religious right (Regenery 2008). However, once the U.S. engaged in the War on Terror overseas in Afghanistan, and later in Iraq in 2003, the concept of having a conservative political ideology changed drastically. When the country went to war in the Middle East, most conservatives supported Bush as an act of patriotism; but when the war escalated and political truths became revealed, a rift grew between conservatives, traditionalists, and neoconservatives. Moreover the allegedly conservative government seemed more traditional and socially conservative than economically conservative, as demonstrated by the big-spending activities by the George W. Bush administration (Regenery 2008: 353). At this time, the populists did not abandon their desire to restrict government intervention in their own lives, but rather lay in abeyance until catalyzed into another wave of protests.

By the end of George W. Bush's two-term presidency, American voters made their voice heard: they were ready for something new. This "newness" was more than just a

liberal government; it was a completely new way of looking at politics. The democratic nomination was Illinois Senator, Barack Obama, a half-black man with a very short resume, but carried Hope that his experiences would bring something new the American way of life; a message that attempts to cut across party lines. After winning the election in 2008, the initial stirrings of a reactive right-wing populace began. As Blee and Creasap note, reactive politics can “emerge in response to threat and competition posed by the changing racial composition of a population” (2010: 276).

There is no question that the election of Barack Obama triggered a new wave of fear in the restless American population. Indeed, President Obama’s legitimacy was questioned not only due to this liberal agenda, but by his very character. Being a minority, some say his identity was questioned, as conservative groups rallied for the new President to disclose his birth certificate, to demonstrate his commitment to the Christian faith, and to prove to the American population that he was not in collaboration with terrorists in the Middle East. Once each of these demands were met, some conservatives still questioned the government’s legitimacy as a rational/legal authority over them. By April 2009, the United States Tea Party became known with their greatest public display of government disapproval to date.

The Historical Context of Tea Party

The historical background from which the Tea Party emerges represents a continuation of the fight for conservative political and economic values expressed by American citizens throughout history. Indeed, the contemporary United States Tea Party is reminiscent of the Boston Tea Party of 1773. This historical moment that some say was the

first act of revolution against the British monarch, was ignited by over-taxed American colonists angered by tea tariffs imposed by an off-shore imperial ruler. The purpose of throwing the tea bags from England into the Boston harbor was to protest the government, calling for independence and liberty from imperial governance. These same ideas can be found in the contemporary Tea Party movement. In 2009, American citizens angered by, what was allegedly, irresponsible governmental practices rallied against a government they feared was stripping Americans of their freedoms and liberties. The contemporary government - that promoted federally funded bailouts, handouts and unjust policy initiatives such as universal health-care – had to be restructured, so Americans could regain control of their political and economic lives, or so was thought by the Tea Partiers.

This project examines a contemporary Tea Party movement in Montana, though my conclusions may be generalized more broadly to the United States Tea Party, and potentially conservative mobilization in the 21st century. The bureaucratic and organizational dimensions are not as salient to the development of my theses, as are the cultural dynamics, collective identities and political implications of conservative mobilization. However, it is nonetheless important to frame the movement at the national level to understand the broader organizational umbrella under which the Montana Tea Party movement mobilizes. The argument that follows reviews the basic ideas of the United States Tea Party.

Tea Party Principles

Tea Party leader Dick Armey argues that “The spark that ignited the modern Tea Party movement was not just a question of bad economics – it cut to the core of basic American values of individual choice and individual accountability” (Armey 2010: 29). The

underlying principle guiding United States Tea Party (USTP) activists is the restoration of a democratic nation where the voices of the people are heard. Three principles guide the Tea Party movement: Constitutionally limited government, free markets, and fiscal responsibility. According to the Tea Party Patriots website (“Tea Party Patriots”):

FISCAL RESPONSIBILITY means not overspending, and not burdening our children and grandchildren with our bills. In the words of Thomas Jefferson: “the principle of spending money to be paid by posterity [is] swindling futurity on a large scale.” A more fiscally responsible government will take fewer taxes from our paychecks.

CONSTITUTIONALLY LIMITED GOVERNMENT means power resides with the people and not with the government. Governing should be done at the most local level possible where it can be held accountable. America’s founders believed that government power should be limited, enumerated, and constrained by our Constitution. Tea Party Patriots agree. The American people make this country great, not our government.

FREE MARKET ECONOMICS made America an economic superpower that for at least two centuries provided subsequent generations of Americans more opportunities and higher standards of living. An erosion of our free markets through government intervention is at the heart of America’s current economic decline, stagnating jobs, and spiraling debt and deficits. Failures in government programs and

government-controlled financial markets helped spark the worst financial crisis since the Great Depression. Further government interventions and takeovers have made this Great Recession longer and deeper. A renewed focus on free markets will lead to a more vibrant economy creating jobs and higher standards of living for future generations.

Understanding the USTP requires analysis that extends beyond the traditional Left versus Right debate that is typical of political discourse. Instead, is a more productive way to understand the USTP is to start by examining their ideological orientation relative to other right-wing political groups group. Generally antagonistic and critical of the government, Tea Partiers often frame their grievances in populist terms of the grassroots. They claim to be “100% grassroots, 100% of the time” (“Tea Party Patriots”), despite the economic elites that have sponsored many nation-wide activities. Tea Partiers seem to withhold from the bureaucratic structure of the government and its economic assistance to large corporations diminishes the value of the average, hard-working American. Again, this is somewhat contradictory given the involvement of some strong political and economic leaders (e.g. Rick Santelli and the Koch brothers).

The Tea Party clearly seeks to disprove this government condescension by directly challenging its authority in the everyday lives of American citizens. In 2010, a *Tea Party Manifesto* was written in which Armev and Kibbe stated that there are four principles that guide the modern Tea Party movement. The first is that the Constitution is the blueprint for good government. All the actions taken by the government need to recognize the laws established by our founding fathers without manipulating the legal system to accrue more

kickbacks for government employees. Second, capitalists ought to reap their own economic consequences through fiscal responsibility: Credit card over-spending and government bailouts provide special, unjustified treatment to less-than-economically-savvy capitalists and instead allow each American to earn their place in the free marketplace. Third, the federal government is too liberal in their spending of taxpayer dollars. The sharp downturn in the economy in 2007 triggered government involvement in the *lassaiz -faire* market economy. The implementation of the government program TARP (Troubled Asset Relief Program) attempted to curb the financial crisis by assisting major corporations to create liquid assets and revamp the stock market. The program was enacted in 2008 under the jurisdiction of President George W. Bush. Finally, the fourth principle of the Tea Party is that big-government feeds only the government, not the people of the republic. Armev and Kibbe write: “The bloated public sector robs the private sector of much-needed capital investment. Capital is like fertilizer: when it’s spread on the private sector it grows the economy; when it’s fed to the government it grows more government” (2010: 70).

The size and scope of the USTP is difficult to measure, largely because there is no single Tea Party federation that monitors the various chapters that emerge in various cities around the country (Barstow 2010). As a result, it has been a challenge for investigators of the USTP to acquire exact numbers for movement support and participation. What we do know is that since 2009, about 30 percent of American adults reported having a somewhat positive impression of the Tea Party (Caren 2012; Skocpol & Williamson 2011). Obviously, this indicates that there did exist some large-scale support for the Tea Party, when only a smaller number of people who actually attend Tea Party rallies and organizations. Public polling has shown that those who identify with the USTP are generally older, relatively well

educated and white (Gallup, Pew Forum, ABC & CBS public opinion polls). Not surprisingly, Tea Partiers are overwhelmingly affiliated with the Republican Party, whose voters share similar demographic characteristics (Skocpol & Williamson 2011). Although the USTP is closely aligned with and through the Republican Party, the movement is ultimately much more radical than the GOP. A public opinion survey conducted by Reason-Rupe, for example, found that while 32% of non-Tea Party Republicans consider themselves conservative and 28% are libertarian, 46% of Tea Partiers self-identify as conservative and 31% as libertarian (Reason 2011).

Empirically, the Tea Party movement seemingly embodies social characteristics of both the religious right and of the Libertarian movement; all three tend to be white, well-educated, middle or upper middle class parents, and are more likely to live in the southern or middle regions of the United States. The Libertarians, however, tend to be more socially inclusive than the religious right. Religious conservatives, on the other hand, are typically founded in moral and ethical conviction, and are guided by religious principles of asceticism. An August 2010 poll by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press and the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life found that most people who agree with the religious right also support the Tea Party. However, support for the Tea Party does not necessarily determine support for the religious right. Nearly half of Tea Party supporters had not heard of or did not have an opinion about conservative Christian movement (Pew Forum 2-11-2011), indicating that we cannot assume that conservative politics coincide with conservative religion. In fact, only 65 percent of Tea Partiers claim to be pro-life, which may imply a shift away from traditional right-wing movements grounded in conservative forms of religion (McKenna 2010: 45). In fact, as I will demonstrate in chapter five, the majority of

individuals active in the Tea Party do not claim to be actively religious individuals. Still, according to a study published by a psychographic opinion research firm called MyType, devoutly religious conservatives comprise 22.5 percent of the Tea Party and are its fastest growing segment (Koelkebeck 2010). In sum, the “Tea Party” is not necessarily related to “religious conservative” label, though about one-fourth of religious conservatives may be sympathetic to Tea Party politics. This suggests that while they hold politically conservative views, the Tea Party’s social conservatism is not strictly held in the hands of the religious right, as has been the case since the Reagan administration. Hence, as I argue in this dissertation, it is a new form of political rebellion against the government that represents fiscal conservatism, nuanced individualism, and limited government absolutely.

In October 2010, Karl Denninger, a conservative market-blogger and forerunner of early Tea Party development, publically denounced the new face of the Tea Party withdrawing his participation. He wrote in his blog, "Sarah Palin, Newt Gingrich, Bob Barr, and douchebag groups such as the Tea Party Patriots" are to blame for the degeneration of a capable movement that began to focus primarily on "Guns, gays, God," (Koelkebeck 2010). Not unlike other politically driven movements, the Tea Party Movement represents a unity among fiscal conservatives in America as a reaction to the political, economic and social progress.

Some commentators have taken an oppositional approach to discussing the effects of Tea Party mobilization in the United States without first examining the organization in depth. Take the liberal perspective of Sargis (2010) for example, in the online *Journal of Inclusive Democracy*, he writes:

The tea party is a dangerous pseudo-libertarian movement who portray themselves as advocates for liberty, but they really are opponents to liberty. Their deeply reactionary platform intends that there will be no government to promote the general welfare of its citizens, which, in a market economy, just ensures destabilization, guarantees inequity and asphyxiates liberty.

This subjective understanding of the Tea Party is limiting, and therefore potentially providing a misrepresentation of the actual dynamics and intention of the USTP. Contrary to Sargis's statements, Tea Partiers aim to defend the rights of individual Americans to achieve liberty, though their policies or behaviors may sometimes contradict this ideological stance. The anti-abortion campaign waged by some Tea Partiers is one example: they promote individual privacy and freedom from government intervention, yet aim to impose laws that prohibit women's rights over her own body. Moreover, the Tea Partier's reactions to the liberal press (Sargis 2010) and to individuals represented state institutions⁷, indicates an intolerance of anyone wishing to advance a progressive social agenda. While this may be the case, one should be cautious of making such broad theoretical statements without proper investigation of the Tea Party itself. This study will investigate what drives the Tea Party movement among individuals at the grassroots level, attempting to provide a proper depiction of the movement at present.

Overview: Dynamics of Conservative Mobilization

⁷ As indicative of the interactions between me, the researcher and representative of state sponsored institution. Inherently suspicious of institutional behavior, they questioned my motives and near the end of my research dissuaded me from engaging in public forums as well as discouraged me from pursuing relationships with Tea Party individuals themselves.

When reviewing the literature on conservative mobilization throughout American history, one could very broadly define conservatism as an ideology that represents resistance to real or perceived loss of social power or moral status due to some societal change while rejecting facets of social equality or justice. However, as scholars have suggested, right wing movements may represent conflicting or even divisive ideologies internally (Bob 2012). Clearly there are various facets of conservatism however: from economic conservatism and fiscal responsibility to social conservatism rejecting challenges to traditional morality. Drawing this back to the Tea Party movement, the emerging literature has not quite framed the cultural dynamics of conservative mobilization attributed to this new movement specifically. Some studies have successfully explored the various structural dynamics of the Tea Party (see Skocpol and Williamson 2011), yet this approach is somewhat limited in grasping what the Tea Party indicates for conservative mobilization in the twentieth century. Structuralist approaches to social movements argue that the mobilization of resources and political processes are essential for collective action and it is recognition of these materials and structures that constitute collective action (McAdam 1982). Indeed, without the organizational infrastructure and political opportunities available to a social movement, mobilization would be stifled. Equally important, however, are the cultural forces, which motivate, catalyze and sustain collective action. Furthermore, by recognizing the cultural dynamics of social movement participation, we can further understand the development, trajectory and goals of the Tea Party.

The conservative militia movements of the twentieth century seemed to be anti-government, while the religious right emerged in the 1970s as a reaction to the liberalizing of

social norms in the 1960s. Representing a new form of conservatism, in a new political age, the Tea Party seems to be reacting to something different. Williamson et al Skocpol and Coggin (2011), suggest that the Tea Party movement can be identified as *reactive* movement, responding to the shift to the left in U.S. politics in recent years. Some scholars have argued that the social networking provided by media sources such as Fox News have been the primary instigators of the conservative Tea Party ideology and fosters a political collective identity (DiMaggio 2011; Skocpol and Williamson 2011; Williamson, Skocpol and Coggin 2011). Given that some conservative movements in U.S. history rose in response to progressive social policies, threatening the status quo of the past (McVeigh 1999; 2004; Minkoff 2001; Van Dyke and Soule 2002), rather than promoting a new political agenda, some argue that the Tea Party is not a continuation of the past. For example, Williamson, Skocpol and Coggin (2011: 36) write:

We should regard the Tea Party as a new variant of conservative mobilization and intra-Republican party factionalism, a dynamic, loosely knit, and not easily controlled formation of activists, funders, and media personalities that draws upon and refocuses longstanding social attitudes about federal social programs, spending, and taxation.

In fact, the distinguishing factors that may differentiate the United States Tea Party movement from other social movements have not been explored culturally as of yet. Hence, I will attempt to generate a new cultural understanding of the Tea Party as understood sociologically from the Montana social and political context.

Thus far, I have laid the foundation for my project by providing the historical and social contexts, as well as framing my argument in the broader sociological literature in political sociology and social movements. The following chapter describes my methodological approach in my attempt to understand the culture, politics and trajectory of the Tea Party. I continue by contending that the Tea Party represents a new form of conservative organizing that may demonstrate sociological principles about the changing face of American politics.

CHAPTER 4 - METHODS

Research Design and Epistemological Principles

By analyzing the pieces of culture within a movement, scholars may better understand how collective actors interpret their social surroundings and arrive at courses of action (Klandermans and Johnston 1996). The process of defining cultural tools does not come without challenges, however. As a social science researcher, I must identify important components of social movement culture while also recognizing my limitations as cultural outsider. The outsider perspective is restricting, preventing full understanding of motivational thought processes. Indeed, understanding the relationship between culture and action requires a greater understanding of the phenomenon, its sense of reality both to the social movement participants and in the greater social context. As a result, the researcher must focus primarily on what the movement says it is, and how its self-awareness translates into strategies that affect collective action (Melucci 1995). The methodological approaches and precautions I undertook throughout this study are described in detail below.

This research project examines the cultural dynamics and identity construction of the contemporary Montana Tea Party (MTP). The purpose of this project is to investigate the cultural dynamics of the MTP, how they construct a collective identity, and to understand the ideological construction of a contemporary social movement. I utilize qualitative methods research to design my data collection process. Qualitative methods include “participant observation, intensive interviewing, and focus groups that are designed to capture social life as participants experience it rather than categories the researcher predetermines. These

methods typically involve exploratory research questions, inductive reasoning, an orientation to social context, and a focus on human subjectivity and the meanings participants attach to events and to their lives” (Chambliss and Schutt 2012: 286). Moreover, given the exploratory nature of this research I chose qualitative data methods and analysis to develop a conceptual frame. This approach also helps researchers understand the meanings behind social action, as well as making sense of the interaction and relationships among Montana Tea Party participants (Maxwell 2005), which is the intention of this research project.

The data I acquired to answer my research questions relies on two primary forms of data collection: observation as a participant in Montana Tea Party meetings, and interviews with Tea Partiers. Observation provides a direct way of learning behavioral patterns of a group or individual, it is insufficient in singling out individual interpretation of the situation: a key component to my research question on identity construction. The majority of my data comes from this step in the data collection process. Interviews with participants in Tea Party meetings helped me understand the cultural dynamics of the movement as a whole through hearing personal histories and perspectives from group members individually. By utilizing multiple forms of qualitative methods, this increases the validity and reliability of my research conclusions and reduces the risk of bias. Moreover, it not only helps to prevent selectivity on the part of the researcher, but is also provides a more accurate and thorough understanding of the topic under investigation (Maxwell 2005: 93-94).

I use grounded theory as my guiding research strategy. According to Corbin and Strauss, “grounded theory seeks not only to uncover relevant conditions but also to determine how the actors under investigation actively respond to those conditions and to the consequences of their actions” (1990: 419). Grounded theory approaches research subjects as

active individuals who may control their environment based on their responses to their social conditions. Throughout my research, I will refer to the Tea Party as a collective group, but also as individual actors whose ideological constructions and interactions with social and political institution determine their social behavior. This will contribute to the literature on the interplay between cultural tactics and the dynamics of conservative social movements.

Research Philosophy

As a qualitative sociologist, my research philosophy is *interpretivist*, rather than *positivist*. By acknowledging a researcher's philosophical paradigm - that is, her commitments and ideas on how knowledge is generated - the reader may appreciate the methodological structure and theoretical development of her research project. For an interpretive sociologist, the primary objective in sociological research is to understand human behavior, rather than explaining it or predicting human behavior as would a positivist. This research project seeks to understand the ideological and cultural aspects of movement organizations that are actively constructed through the social behaviors of Tea Party activists.

Three interrelated domains make-up the philosophy of social science research: ontology, axiology, and epistemology. Epistemology refers to the methods, limits, and nature of human knowledge (Patterson & Williams 1998). This includes one's view of causality and the researcher's relationship to his or her cases or subjects. (I speak to this relationship in more detail below). From an interpretivist perspective, I contend that knowledge is time-bound and context-dependent, based on multiple variables that may shape the outcomes. Therefore, I will describe in-depth the social conditions which may shape the construction of

the MTP. In order to identify those significant causal factors, I must have an interactive, cooperative relationship with my research subjects (Hudson and Ozanne 1988). The way in which I engaged with my research subjects is described in detail below in the data collection section.

My ontological perspective – that is, how reality and the nature of social beings are perceived – is socially constructed and contextual. In regards to human nature, the constructionist, interpretivist social scientist believes that individuals are actively engaged in the construction of meaning (Mick and Buhl 1992). This perspective guided me toward a grounded theory approach. While some theoretical paradigms might explain various elements of collective behavior, individual participants in groups also contribute to the development of group culture and to group decision-making processes.

My axiological approach – the overriding goal of my methodological structure – is rooted in Weber’s concept of *verstehen*, full comprehension or understanding of a sociological phenomenon. Weber (1967) writes that reaching a point of *verstehen* involves active processing since “meaning is dynamically created in the act of living” (Hudson and Ozanne 1988: 511). That is, understanding the group through language, customs, and culture that are continuously restructured by individuals. This explains my methodological decision to include of participant observation in my data collection process; it is only through observation and quality time immersed in Tea Party functions that the sociologist becomes aware of the cultural that make this particular group unique.

Berger and Luckmann argue in *The Social Construction of Reality* that, “human knowledge is developed, transmitted and maintained in social situations” (1967: 3) and that through internal and external relationships, individuals objectify reality. I will present the

information then, as socially generated principle constructed by research participants and their ideologies (internalizations), customs (externalizations) and notions (objectivation) of reality. This process is resolved both through participant observation to observe the customs, and through personal interviews to understand the internalization of these realities. I describe my data collection process in detail below.

Data Collection

In grounded theory, analysis begins as soon as the data collection process begins by consistently and systematically identifying concepts salient for the construction of theory. These concepts are then categorized, further explored, and developed as the data collection process continues (Corbin and Strauss 1990). In the final stages of the data collection process, a new theoretical perspective grounded in the data emerges. Here, I describe how my concepts emerged and how I explored them through qualitative research methods.

The central methodological approach is to discover new concepts, rather than utilize those identified in the technical literature - that is, studies and theoretical projects relevant to the topic. However, literature *is* utilized to stimulate what Strauss and Corbin call “theoretical sensitivity” in which the researcher brings to the field a watchful eye of whether the concepts and relationships identified in previous studies apply to the situation currently under investigation and if so, in what form (1990: 50-51). In this dissertation, I argue that the Tea Party is, in fact a social movement given as defined by Snow (2004: 11). Three important concepts emerge from this definition: (1) organization, (2) challenges to authority, (3) resisting change, and (4) cultural or world order. The organization of this dissertation follows

the conceptualization of this definition. In chapters five and six I describe the organizational infrastructure of the Tea Party movement of Montana and how it questions the legitimacy of the rational/legal authority of the United States government. In chapter six, I explore the cultural dynamics of the movement utilizing the cultural movement framework to identify how cultural is created within the group. The remainder of the dissertation attempts to interpret these concepts by understanding how Tea Partiers reify their cultural perspectives and worldviews through the construction of a collective identity, and how cultural dynamics within the movement determine levels of collective action. These elements combined thereby constitute the Tea Party a notable conservative movement in the twenty-first century.

Participant Observation

In order to measure the concepts mentioned above, I participated in the monthly meetings of the Montana Tea Party (MTP) for ten months from August 2011 to May 2012. Participant observations allow the researcher to document events and action in real time, provides contextual support for theoretical conclusions, and provides insightful, interpersonal behaviors to the overall examination of the study (Yin 1994:80). According to Kathy Charmaz grounded theory ethnography focuses on the studied phenomenon or process – rather than to the setting itself (2006: 22). Grounded theory then moves those concepts into categories to develop a theoretical model for explaining the phenomenon.

Meetings took place at a local K-12 Christian school and occurred once to twice monthly. During these meetings, I took field notes to document my observations, which included the information such as the number and demographics of individuals present, seating arrangements, body language, themes and topics discussed, tone in which issues are

discussed, who carried most of the conversation, and how people in the meeting responded to the leaders and other Tea Partiers. I assumed the role of an *observer-as-participant* at the local MTP chapter. This is the best approach for gaining knowledge on the organization while also maintaining some personal anonymity and distance from the participants. According to Adler and Adler (1994), this position provides opportunity for involvement with the insiders to be gradual. Unlike the covert activity that is typical of the complete observer, in this role my identity may become more overt as it becomes known to more insiders. In this position, the researcher, may remain “strongly research oriented” (380) due to his or her limited involvement with participants, but may also prevent “opportunities for gaining knowledge of total situations” (342). Furthermore, this approach provides a personal buffer between the researcher and the subjects, which will limit my own political views and attitudes toward the Tea Party, and allow me to remain objective.

Sampling

This study explores individuals who participate in and/or find ideological congruence with the principles presented by the Montana Tea Party. This research project is inductive; generating theory from data, the first step of the project design is exploratory. As in any research design, in the grounded theory approach, the researcher must also determine the dimensions and trajectory of the project (Morse 2007: 235). In this study, the target population under investigation - that is, the population to which I will generalize my results - is conservative political organizations that may resonate with Tea Party principles. Therefore, I sought out individuals who participated in Tea Party activities, or who self-identified as sympathetic with Tea Party ideals. As a result, part of this study explores what the MTP

ideological boundaries are, which may extend beyond those actively participating. The sampling frame for this study includes individuals both who attend MTP meetings, either past or present, or those who claim to hold similar political values of the group, but may not be an active participant in an official Tea Party organization.

In any social science research, the investigator should generate a sample that is best representative of the target population (Chambliss and Schutt 2013). Given the general homogeneity of the United States Tea Party (white, middle class, conservative Americans [Skocpol and Williamson 2011]), I utilize non-probability sampling designs with more confidence that my sample would likely be representative of the Montana Tea Party population. Therefore, the first step on the sampling process is *convenience* sampling whereby the researcher locates individuals who experience the phenomenon. Given my location in the western Montana, the most convenient sample of Tea Party groups were those within a fifty mile radius of my current location in the Bitterroot Valley. Following my convenience sampling at various conservative organizations in the Bitterroot Valley where I expected to find individuals self-identifying as “Tea Partiers”, I then used purposive sampling, relying on my sampling frame guidelines, to elect eligible members to participate in the study as being “typical” of the population (Singleton & Straights 2005: 133). To find individuals representative of my sampling frame, I attended a variety of conservative political groups around the Missoula area as identified public advertisements in local newspapers and flyers. These groups included the Republican Central Committee, the John Birch Society, University of Montana College Libertarians and College Republicans and the Missoula Patriots.

The second phase of my sample design involved *purposive sampling*. Purposive sampling is utilized with the researcher collects data she deems representative of the topic of investigation; that is, the sample is chosen with the *purpose* of accurately representing the phenomenon and to “maximize the variation of meaning” (Morse 2007: 236). Therefore, I attempted to interview individuals who seemed particularly active within the organization or who showed a stake in the movement. I adopted this design to ensure I was discussing Tea Party issues with key informants who were most knowledgeable about the issues under investigation. Unfortunately, however, some of the local organizers declined participation in the study. Therefore, I asked previous informants to suggest other informants who may be interested in speaking with me who are also active in the movement. This second phase of the project is called *snowball sampling*. Snowball sampling or nominated sampling selected is based on the suggestion of previous informants. Those informants may suggest another respondent who may be capable of providing pertinent information to the researcher.

Interviews

Interviews provide qualitative researchers with an interpersonal, in-depth examination of individual motives, behaviors, patterns of belief and context for interpreting their responses. All interviews were semi-structured as directed by grounded theory guidelines (see Bryan and Charmaz 2007). Interviews were mostly conversational, though I had a list of interview questions for my referral to be sure all topics were covered in the span of the interview. Subjects included both men and women over the age of 18 and self-identified residents of Montana. I conducted sixteen interviews– about thirty-seven percent of the local members of the movement - I conducted between January and May 2012. I conducted sixteen

interviews— about thirty-seven percent of the local members of the movement. Of these sixteen, nine were audio recorded (contingent upon the permission of the respondent) to allow for total recall of the conversation and limiting researcher selectivity when reviewing interview notes.

Of these sixteen, only nine were audio recorded (contingent upon the permission of the respondent) to allow for total recall of the conversation and limiting researcher selectivity when reviewing interview notes.

Risks to participation in this study were minimal and highly unlikely. There were no physical, psychological, social, economic, or legal, threats due to a breach of confidentiality. Subjects were only asked questions regarding their recruitment to the organization, their level of involvement, their goals and motivations, and their vision for the organization. Research materials were locked in a secured location. In the research report, all identities are nuanced and covered by the use of pseudonyms in order to insure confidentiality. Prior to each interview, respondents signed a signed form of consent to participate in this study. If follow-up with my respondents was necessary, I accessed their stored contact information (names only as provided on the consent form) and ask if they would be willing to volunteer more time as a participant in the study.

My strategies for recruitment of research participants varied, depending on the stage in the data collection process. Throughout the course of ten months, individuals would approach me with an interest in speaking with me about their involvement. From there, snowball sampling occurred in which respondents suggested other individuals I speak with whom they were well acquainted. Interviews will help answer the research questions pertaining to identity construction, and the development of a culture of conservatism. I asked

participants to explain Tea Party ideology in their own words, their motivations for participation, and their interpretations of the social world about the participant's social relationships with fellow Tea Partiers, as well as with those outside the Tea Party. The interview guide served as a *guide*; in that it was a reference page for assurance that all questions were answered by the respondent, I relied on an interview guide for all respondents that asked questions regarding involvement, identity and perspective on the goals of the Tea Party movement. Please see Appendix 1 for a copy of the Interview Guide.

My interview approach was casual, semi-structured, and informal, allowing the interviewee to begin the conversation on whatever topic they felt most comfortable approaching. This typically began by my asking a broad question about participation in the MTP (e.g. "Tell me about your participation in Montana politics"). From there, I probed the respondent to expound upon any ideas or comments that may be unclear or that I felt may elucidate their Tea Party experiences more fully. In most cases, Tea Partiers took charge of the conversation and discussed various elements of politics, the economy or their individual participation in the Tea Party that was of particular interest to him or her. Interviews lasted from ninety minutes to two and a half hours.

Field research could potentially be never ending, as the data production from the unit of analysis (in my case, Tea Party collective behavior) can often be endless. The moment when I "graduated from the field" is based on three separate factors, following the guidelines established by Tewksbury (2006). First, as in Tewksbury's case, I had surpassed 50 hours of complete observation. Second, I had become accustomed to the Tea Party activities, and I may have been losing my analytic edge. Indeed, it was becoming increasingly difficult to identify aspects of culture or inflammatory language after having grown accustomed to the

culture of the Tea Party. Third, ten months into my fieldwork, I received a letter from the Montana Tea Party coalition questioning my participation in the group, despite most subjects' willing participation in the study. Suspicious of my role as a representative of a "liberal", state-sponsored university, they requested that I not follow up with Tea Party individuals related to my research. Despite the approval I received from the Institutional Review Board at the University of New Mexico, and despite the fact that as a free citizen I am able to engage in conversation with any individual that approaches me, I chose to respect the wishes of the Tea Party to insure their protection as a social organization. I chose to conclude participation in Tea Party meetings after June 2012. At this time, some participants reneged on their commitments to meet with me, and Tea Party individuals had become passive aggressive in "welcoming" me to organizational activities. As a result, I felt that further data collection could potentially result in invalid or unreliable observations and conclusions.

Validity

Interviewing as a qualitative research method faces a number of challenges in itself, including: research bias due to poorly constructed questions, response bias from participants, inaccuracies due to poor recall and reflexivity – that is, when the interviewee provides information assuming it to be what interviewer wants to hear (Maxwell 2005). In order to limit biases of research question, my interview guide was theoretically driven so that the questions posed regarding identity construction and participation were based on research conducted by previous social studies on these topics. Furthermore, whenever possible I audio-recorded the interview and transcribed the conversation shortly thereafter in order to

prevent poor recall or biased research reporting. Using multiple sources of evidence (participant observation and interviews) increases construct validity. That is, because multiple sources of evidence are demonstrating the dynamics of the movement, there is more validity in the conclusions made.

Researcher Orientation and Theoretical Development

The primary research instrument in qualitative methods is the researcher herself. Just as with any social science project, the aim is to maintain an objective stance when analyzing data. However, as Max Weber accurately indicated, we are never fully free from subjectivity. We – as sociologists – come to the project with our own prejudices and experiences that may indirectly misconstrue the data calculation, analysis and theoretical development. This is especially true in grounded theory when the researcher herself is responsible for presenting a valid theory to the field. Charmaz writes that the theoretical development from a grounded theory approach “*depends* on the researcher’s view; it does not and cannot stand outside of it” (2006: 130). Therefore, below I reveal my researcher biases that may – though determinedly not – effect my perception of my research subjects, the organization, or the trajectory of the Tea Party movement.

As a sociologist, a professional critic of social processes, I am inclined to hold a more progressive or “liberal” political perspective. My objective is to document and demonstrate indicators of social change while simultaneously analyzing social structures. This is not a foreign concept for any educated individual familiar with the field of sociology, including

members of the Tea Party. As a result, my first few months with the group were somewhat difficult. Having been labeled a ‘socialist’, ‘infiltrator’, been ignored, hissed at and kept at a distance, it took some time for me to establish positive rapport within the group and even longer to be trusted to conduct interviews with selected individuals. Over time, I believe my place as a reputable sociologist and a non-judgmental person became apparent as a number of my interview respondents followed up with me to ask if they could treat me to coffee in exchange for good conversation.

Another possible complication that could emerge from my personal political biases is accurately portraying the sentiments, passion, and courage of conviction demonstrated by Tea Party activists. However, recognizing my own stance or opinions about Tea Party politics is the first step in acknowledging possible inconsistencies between data and interpretation. Moreover, the more time I spend with Tea Party participants, the more I have come to know their personal stories and histories which allows me to see the individuals as acquaintances, rather than research subjects which provides me with a more comprehensive picture of group dynamics and identity construction.

Finally, my personal demographic profile may have hindered my access to the group. During the data collection process, I was relatively young (late twenties), unmarried and labeled as an affiliate of a government-funded institution (a student/professor at a state university). While I never felt discriminated against because of the aforementioned characteristics, some research participants may have had personal prejudices against my age or gender. In order to remain objective and to ensure the validity of my interactions with the group, I noted my relationship with the insiders versus their relationship me as an “outsider”. As previously mentioned, over time - three to four months into my data collection process –

my access to the group improved as I became recognized as an individual, rather than an investigator. This was made apparent when at a Christmas potluck in December 2011, I was accepted warmly and was gifted the poinsettias used to decorate the tables. Upon the leaving the party, the leader of the group hugged me and told me she was I happy I celebrated with them that evening.

Analysis

Analysis of the field notes and interviews were both descriptive and theoretically based. All notes processed from participant observation were based on descriptive observations, and coded for cultural content. Theory building, as described by Corbin and Strauss (2008) delineates concepts from raw data, then draws statements of the relationships between concepts linking them all together into a theoretical argument. Therefore, the conceptualization of data is the foundation of grounded theory development (Holton 2007: 266). Moreover, in grounded theory, concepts are identified through field notes. Those concepts are identified above. The analysis of data begins in the first stages of the data collection process by asking analytic questions of the data itself. This allows the researcher to delve deeper into the material, identify concepts that emerge from the data, and therefore direct future research.

Coding began at the initial data collection stage following my participation in Tea Party meetings. Coding is the process of examining the qualitative data during which the researcher assigns words, phrases, sentences or paragraphs or *codes* as labels to represent a particular concept or theme in the data. Following the first three months of data collection, I

identified two primary concepts or themes that merited further investigation. The first was the utility of religious culture as a way to create solidarity within the group. In my field notes, I recognized the ubiquity of Christian scripture, references to Christian figures, such as Jesus and Saint Paul, as well as more ritualistic forms of group engagement through prayer and the singing of hymns. Awareness of these themes led me to pursue questions regarding religion and morality in my interviews later on.

The second concept I identified was “individuals in a collective”. Here, I noted the ideological diversity represented in the group. Some individuals seemed to support the pro-life advocacy of one of the members, while others did not. Some individuals mocked a guest presentation by a local republican politician, while others were fully engaged and affirming to the speaker. Finally, the manner in which Tea Partiers responded to me, an outsider, in the meetings was polar opposite. There were those members eager to engage in conversation with me to tell me more about their respective conservative beliefs, while others questioned my authenticity and regarded me as a threat to their insular conservative gatherings. These observations and experiences stimulated me to explore the unique dynamics that unified these conservatives as a group, when they seemingly had little in common other than their disapproval of a progressive government. Neither of these two concepts were obvious from the literature review, but were clearly revealed through that data and initial coding process.

After the first round of coding is completed, the researcher then returns to the coding program for a second time to engage in *focused coding*. When I reached this phase in March 2012, I had begun my interviews and reviewed the documents for the concepts identified in the first round of coding. I acknowledged the themes and concepts that developed from my observations, which clarified the research questions of this project. When the initial

substantive codes are sifted and reexamined, they become substantive, and are then compared to other data and data codes in a process that leads to *theoretical coding*. “Theoretical codes conceptualize how the substantive codes relate to each other as hypotheses to be integrated into a theory” (Glaser and Strauss 1978: 72). This is where grounded theory develops.

Following the completion of my tenth interview, I began to search for the themes, topics were most apparent in the discussions, and what topics my respondents spent the most time discussing. From here, I included those concepts in additional questions in my interview guide. Some of these concepts included: news sources, biographical information prior to political involvement, factors contributing to initial participation. From here, I began theoretical coding, the final stage of the coding process to determine relationships between concepts, variables, behavioral determinants and other potentially significant components to Tea Party culture. The results of the theoretical coding process will be apparent in coming chapters.

Grounded theory is designed to produce theories from data that researches may identify as “conceptually dense” – that is, a phenomenon with many interrelated concepts. Therefore, “grounded theories are not just another set of phrases; rather they are systematic statements of plausible relationships” (Strauss and Corbin 1998: 170). Many of the theoretical conjectures I posit are based on plausible relationships identified among the concepts and variables extracted from my field notes. Grounded theory methodology also encourages the researcher to investigate *patterns* of action and interaction among social actors and the *process*, which define these (Strauss and Corbin 1998: 169). In chapter five I describe in detail the primary patterns and processes identified in my field notes. Chapters

six, seven and eight then present the material used to construct the grounded theory generated from this study.

Limitations and Challenges

A challenge facing all social science qualitative researchers is managing a positive rapport with his or her research subjects. In ethnographic and interview-based research, the power dynamic can be intimidating for those individuals spotlighted in the research. Not only must the researcher maintain a professional distance from his or her respondents (thereby highlighting the differences in status and social role between the researcher and the respondents), but the researchers also exercise the “power of representation” when disseminating findings of the data collection process (Kauffman 1992). Navigating the grey area between researcher, trusted friend, and “liberal infiltrator”, I faced a number of challenges in gaining access to the Montana Tea Party: a group inherently suspicious of institutional activity.

Having disclosed my identity as a sociologist at the start of my ethnographic research, some individuals in the group aware of the political orientation of sociological research, labeled me as an “intruder” into their organization. While I was never asked to leave a meeting, some individuals may have been uncomfortable with my presence. Conversely, however, some individuals welcomed my perspective and my honesty about the intentional objective nature of my research and spoke openly about their involvement in and with the group in recent years. Once I did gain access to this information, it was at times challenging to prevent selectivity or research bias due to my personal encounters with some fringe

members of the Tea Party groups. Moreover, because of my “outsider” status in the group, that I may have been prohibited from access to email list serves, events or parties because of my role as an outsider in the group.

While attending meetings, I was often suspiciously observed by some MTP participants despite the fact that I disclosed my identity as a sociologist to the group a number of times. Nonetheless, I jotted notes in a lined notebook during the meetings as often as possible without drawing attention to my note taking or myself. Then, when I returned to my computer later that night, I filled in the gaps based on my own recollection. Therefore, some details of the gathering may have been forgotten or lost in translation since I was recopying the notes away from the research setting.

Another limitation was with interviews with individuals in the local Tea Party organization. While my previous interviews were quite amicable, informative and professional, the Tea Party organizers grew increasingly suspicious as my ongoing interaction with group members outside the public meetings became more frequent. Nonetheless, my interview sample size represents about thirty-five percent of the local population of Tea Partiers active in the local meetings.

Telling the Story

In the chapters that follow, I lay out the cultural dynamics, approaches to identity formation, structural innovation, and levels of collective action in the Tea Party movement. I then take the reader inside a typical Tea Party meeting to demonstrate the complex matrix of conservative culture practiced by Tea Partiers and demonstrate how it has managed to foster

a new social identity by weaving together the various ideological perspectives of Tea Party participants. I then recall stories, and conversations, and identify concepts and themes relevant to the sociological literature and to the broader public understanding of the Tea Party. By doing so, I am attempting to achieve a level of *verstehen*, in-depth comprehension, whereby also incorporating a human element to a vociferous, vibrant movement that up until now has only been identified demographically or by their political ideology exclusively.

CHAPTER 5 – MONTANA TEA PARTY MOVEMENT EMERGENCE

The (Re)birth of a Right-Wing Politics

On April 14th and 15th, 2009, hundreds of protesters exercised their right of assembly in front of the Montana Federal Building in Helena, the Montana state capital. This assembly was a self-professed “tea party” protest to decry corporate bailouts, tax increases and rampant government spending. The protest signs being waved on site told Montana government what the right-wing conservatives demanded: “Say No to Socialism”; “Free Markets, Not Freeloaders”; “I’ll Keep My Guns and Money – You Keep the Change” (Kelly 2009). Thus was the commencement of the Montana Tea Party movement.

The spark that ignited the Montana Tea Party is the same that inspired the other Tea Party groups protesting around the United States on that day in April 2009. In fact, the conception of the Tea Party in Montana is not unlike its conservative predecessors in the past. Previous conservative movements, such as those mentioned in chapter three, also formed coalitions to protest government activity in the region as a response to new policies. Contrary to movements of the past, however, the Montana Tea Party has learned to structure itself with as a recognizable political force despite the absence of a specific political party platform. This chapter describes the social and political context for the emergence of the Montana Tea Party and the dynamics of the various conservative organizations from which the Tea Party generates support. I then take the reader inside a typical Tea Party meeting to demonstrate the complex matrix of conservative culture practiced by Tea Partiers. I also observe the movement’s rhetoric, narratives, utility of Tea Party biographies, rituals, and

ideologies as a way to identify these cultural strategies and begin to introduce the cultural dynamics of Tea Party mobilization, which will be explored at length in coming chapters.

Montana's Social and Political Context

Since the turn of the twentieth century, the state of Montana has maintained a political history characterized by weak party loyalty, a fickle population of political constituents quick to switch party allegiance. Montana's political history is also somewhat of an anomaly in that it while it is generally considered to be a red state, voting for conservative Republican representatives in the state government, liberal Democrats are often elected as governors or as senators to represent Montana in the federal government (Malone, Roeder & Lang 1991). Throughout most of the twentieth century, Montana has maintained a politically and economically conservative government. This may be attributed to Anaconda Mining Company (AMC), whose economic power in the twentieth century gave them the power to influence voting behaviors by endorsing the candidate (typically conservative) that shared the conservative economic policies beneficial to the company (Malone, Roeder & Lang 1991). In 1976, the company was bought out by Arco, which was then sold into parts in 1981, therefore separating the centralization of coal, oil, agricultural, and industrial production in the state. The division of economic resources decreased the political power of a single business, therefore disbanding the strong conservative government that held the state together for nearly one hundred years.

By the 1980s, Montana had a more liberal government with Democratic representation at both the state and national levels, with democratic governors (Malone,

Roeder & Lang 1991). There are three reasons that may explain this shift in politics: First, the reapportionment of districts in Montana divided voting areas by population as opposed to counties or land space. This resulted in the inclusion of more cities at various district levels, which contributed to more liberal, democratic ideals of governance (such as economic spending, environmental policies and the promotion of progressive social rights). The second explanation for the swing to the left may be due to the pushed initiative on taxation that directed affect Montana's natural resource tax revenues. This hit big business hard, and by the end of the 1980s, revenues had fallen fifty-seven percent, devastating Republican economic policies. Third, the progressive movements rising up in other regions of the United States may have influenced the ideologies of the moderate Montanans, pushing them to the left side of the political spectrum (Malone, Roeder & Lang 1991). Meanwhile, the increasing economic stratification among native Montanans (due to the shutdown of large industrial corporations such as the AMC) split Montanan ideology with divided political agendas and social and economic interests.

The polarization of political thought continues to pervade the state today. The social and economic contrast among residents in twenty-first century Montana makes it a politically diverse location for a sociological study of the conservative Tea Party movement, and a sociologically significant context for the discussion of reactive political mobilization. This is not unlike other contexts around the country with political diversity, which may make some of the theoretical projections applicable to other regions. However in the Montana context, the divisive social and political context raises questions as to how a divisive political community (as in the Bitterroot Valley) finds a collective identity around one particular movement. As Blee (2002) notes, people can often adopt right-wing ideologies simply by

taking part in right-wing activities. Given the history of unconventional politics in Montana (as discussed in chapter three), I argue that the culture of political contention in Montana ignited the MTP party, rather than the specific principles which mobilizes the national Tea Party.

What is the Montana Tea Party?

When the Tea Party began to make national news, frustrated Montanans in the Bitterroot Valley began to stir. Following the national trend of Tea Party gatherings in April 2009, anti-liberal Montana groups from all over the region, including the Republican Central Committee meetings, John Birch Society members, and militia supporters gathered to collectively stand against another policy that would contribute to their vacillating socioeconomic position in society. Archival media sources show images of Montanans protesting on the steps of the State Capital Building that fateful tax day in Helena (“Rehberg Listens” 2009). Individuals dressed up in Uncle Sam costumes, waiting out an infamous Montana spring storm stood with conviction holding signs that read:

With my Taxes: You “Disrespected” my Trust. From: Taxpayer of the United States

Stop reckless government spending!

Stop Tyranny! Fire Congress!

Keep your bailouts, I'll keep my freedom.

3 simple words: We The People

Too much government is dangerous to your wealth.

Stop spending our money. And save our guns.

Congress, if you want socialism, move to Cuba.

Oh, now I see... "Change" means Socialism.

The energy from the protests quickly expanded to the far corners of the large state and formed two dozen Tea Party chapters in the state, which would eventually create the Montana Tea Party Coalition. The MTPC is an umbrella organization of Tea Party organizations from around the state including Big Timber, Billings, Bozeman, Glendive, Great Falls, Helena, Kalispell, Lewistown, Livingston, Ravalli County and Sanders County. While maintaining autonomy, individual Tea Party and Patriot organizations formed the Montana Tea Party Coalition (MTPC) to share resources and to pursue the common principles of Constitutionally limited government, reduced government spending and free markets ("Bozeman Tea Party"). In August 2011, the MTPC made official the Tea Party Declaration of Independence. In this one-page document, the MTPC declares the Tea Party as a grassroots movement, independent of any political party and assumes loyalty first to the

country and the Constitution of the United States of America and to the state of Montana specifically. In July 2010, Republican U.S. Congressional Representative Denny Rehberg joined the United States national Tea Party caucus, though claims not to be a member of any Montana Tea Party groups⁸ (Johnson 2010a).

Despite its newness, the methods of mobilization employed by the MTP are refreshingly conventional. That is, they mobilize their extremely conservative ideologies through a structured system of political organizing. Tea Party participants described their perception of the MTP in a number of ways. Below are the responses of five of my interviewees in reply to my prompt, *what is the Tea Party?*:

Respondent 1: When the Tea Party started, it was a grassroots reaction to what was going on. People could see that the country was headed down the wrong road. Especially economically and the level of debt and the inability to manage resources and finances by government at many levels was terrifying to all of us. And there was a reaction.

Respondent 2: Tea Party is all about being a concerned citizen. We are Americans working on American problems. We are nonpartisan. We promote limited government, Constitution and fiscal responsibility.

Respondent 3: Well it's made up of quite a few people. Conservative. Mostly my age and service members [points to his "Veterans United" hat]. Yeah, I spent 8 years in

⁸ As of the time of this writing (February 2013), Representative Rehberg is still the unofficial political representative for the Montana Tea Party and ran unsuccessfully for United States Senate.

the Navy: naval air. They are just so dissatisfied with Obama and his unkept promises. That's when it was formed.

Respondent 4: I think it's a group of individuals that are loosely tied together generally under the precept of a local makeup. But of course it varies across the United States. But I mean it varies across the United States.

Respondent 5: Well...It's interesting. I was just looking at the national – well not quite a national organization – but there's the MT tea party groups go they're kind of an independent group that work like a franchise. Where you have like Arby's or Pizza Hut where, yeah, you see a lot of same things at particular restaurants. That's how I see the Tea parties organize.

Reviewing the above statements, it appears as though no two responses resemble one another; that is, the perceptions of MTP organizing varies among respondents. I have argued that the Tea Party may represent a new movement where contentious politics pervades all organizational activity, albeit with somewhat unconventional dramaturgical approaches. What makes it distinctive, however, is the way in which Tea Party individuals, representing a variety of conservative ideological tendencies, can come together and reinforce one another's beliefs by participating in civic dialogue. I will provide evidence of this claim in coming chapters.

The Construction of the Montana Tea Party

As demonstrated in the current study, the Tea Party is a self-proclaimed conservative critic of the current American political system, challenging the economic and social institutions in new ways. The allegations the Tea Party holds against the government is that it has infiltrated the ongoing struggle of “freedom” in the American context. From the Moral Majority and religious right’s attempt to restore traditional social values in America in the 1960s, to the John Birch Society’s anti-communist campaign in the late twentieth century, to the recent conflict in the 1990s with Freemen of Montana’s struggle, conservatism has manifested itself in various contexts and in various ways.

Knowing the context in which the Tea Party emerged in history helps us better understand why this type of conservatism has emerged at this point in history. Recall, the term conservatism, broadly defined is a resistance to real or perceived loss of social power or moral status due to some societal change while rejecting political notions of social equality. While there are variations of “conservatism”, I contend that the Tea Party is represents a mix of three different types of conservatism in American society: politically, fiscally, and cultural, and First, the Tea Party publically expressed their frustration to the loss of social power only three months after the inauguration of our first racial minority President Barack Obama, hence rejecting social progress that does not satisfy the *status quo*. This perceived loss of status among white, middle and upper class Americans is precisely the demographic group identified within the Tea Party; both in the Montana context, and in other studies presented in Skocpol and Williamson’s (2011) comprehensive nation-wide description.

Tea Partiers are not ignorant of their social reputation. Indeed, members of the Montana Tea Party spoke directly to the accusations they were charged with (such as, the

accusation that the Tea Party has racist undertones). Indeed, during my interviews some MTP members raised issues of sexism, racism and xenophobia voluntarily. Eliot, a man rallying support from outside the Bitterroot responded voluntarily to the claim that society has pinned the racist label on Tea Partiers. When asked when the light bulb went on for Montana conservatives to formulate their own chapter of the Tea Party, he replied:

It sounds partisan and extreme to say this, but most of us in the Tea Party were very concerned when Barack Obama rose through the ranks rapidly through the Democrat party. And he was going to be first the candidate, and second, the President of the United States. And Stacy, it is NOT NOT NOT a racial issue at all. It is *not* racial. Tea Party people are not racist people. In fact, you'll find them to be the most ... *accepting* group of people you'll ever run into. Our favorite candidate for president this year was a black man, Herman Cain. We tend to favor, often times, female candidates: Michelle Bachman, Sarah Palin. You know we are not racist, and we're not anti-women, and for the most part are not anti-gay. Some Christian groups are but we're not...

Clearly Eliot was adamant that the Tea Party is not a prejudicial political group. He in fact volunteered information on who he and his fellow Tea Partiers support politically, as an indication that they may reject some progressive policies, but are not necessarily racist, sexist, or, "for the most part", homophobic. He instead commented on the timing of the emergence of Tea Party stating:

When we saw first of all that Obama.... I mean, nobody knew who he was, where he came from and what he stood for. He offered a lot of very vague ideas of hope and change and when we started to learn his background, his associations through college, um, who his friends are and who he's going to be, the leaders of the country – if he's to be elected – it was terrifying to us. We hoped for the best, feared the worst, and when Obama was elected and we could immediately what his direction was, it was terrifying to us! That's when people really got up in arms. I mean we have children, grandchildren, we're worried about them having kind of a future in a nation that becomes – you know – purely socialist. From a social standpoint and especially an economic standpoint. You don't hear [future] from the democrats. ..

From Eliot's explanation, it appears that what the MTP "feared the worst" was an unfamiliar individual being elected as leader of the white population. Implicating the government as an enemy for condoning social change is an important element for conservatism. For example, the misperception of Obama's religious affiliation, his country-of-origin, and the intentions of his policy initiatives are indicative of the suspicion held by right-wing conservatives. The grievances presented by the Montana Tea Party have less to do with the policies in place; rather, they may be better explained by the culture of fear perpetuated by a fear of change in American governance; not unlike the national Tea Party movement, who prefer to limit the reach of the federal government.

The slightly xenophobic perspective driving the fear behind the so-called "War on Terror" is that it is a non-Christian, non-white, non-English speaking political ideology. These ideas are not dissimilar from the ideological perspective of many Tea Partiers. In fact,

the conservative politicians forging the War on Terror, relying on citizens' fears to stimulate their conservative agenda, has been adopted by Tea Partiers. As a result, it allowed the Tea Party to mobilize a constituency of politically discontent individuals without seeming as racist; rather cautious or skeptical of any potential terrorist. Often a feature of right-wing or conservative movements use similar strategies by enacting rhetoric of vulnerability, fear, and threat (Blee and Creasap 2010; Durham 2007). After all, for this group of conservatives, wasn't it better to oppose terrorist suspects than to blindly accept and incorporate them into society? This xenophobia provided a platform for the Tea Party to mobilize an agenda with strict immigration laws, for example. Not unlike the KKK, the Tea Party was able to attract members based on their threatened social positions and used religious exclusivity, for example, as a way to represent what is truly "American" (Blee 1991; MacLean 1995; McVeigh; 2009). Moreover, through rhetorical strategies, the Tea Party has innovatively succeeded in selecting particular issues that may attack their social and moral foundations, and legitimate them as conservative, traditional, American values. Thus, it is a conservative ideology that does not fully embrace social equality.

Eliot, who was determinedly not a racist, represents just one man's perspective claiming to represent the ideological orientation of the group, though he does have insider status who knows how Tea Party individuals interact with one another colloquially - a luxury to which most social scientists are not privy. The intention of this research project is not to undermine or question the veracity behind the claims of Tea Partiers. Suffice it to say, the question of racism and sexism in the Tea Party I leave to more directed research on these issues for future sociological studies.

Tea Party Individuals

While the Montana Tea Party may be very generally defined as a conservative movement, the individuals in any group represent a variety of perspectives, as I will demonstrate in coming chapters. The Montana Tea Party is filled with characters with various levels of political participation and interest. The fanatical individuals represented in the media (as being fanatical, eccentric and mostly uneducated) may not represent the quintessential image of the Montana Tea Party, though may share some common characteristics: politically passionate, opposed to liberalism and antagonistic toward the government. The media does not highlight the ‘average’ Tea Party individual because of their lack of eccentricity or charisma; that is, those who do not wear elaborate patriotic costumes or have public displays of political aggression. On the contrary, the average Tea Partiers are the semi-complacent, politically disgruntled, and often bored individuals. From observational data, the forty to fifty people that attended most Montana Tea Party meetings were nothing beyond the ordinary American citizen. While their political leanings may be considered extreme by some American political standards, their demographic makeup as a whole did not seem much different from a conservative mainline church in rural America. I was not authorized to conduct surveys at the local Patriot meetings to generate exact statistics; however, I approximated the following numbers based on observational data collected during my ten months of field research.

The average age of individuals attending MTP meetings was approximately sixty years old. About forty percent of attendees were women, about sixty percent male. All were racially classified as Caucasian, and I did not hear any one speak with a non-English accent (implying racial/ethnic homogeneity). Most arrived by themselves (that is, not with a spouse

or other family member). Judging from physical appearance, clothing, style of dress and cars, I approximate about fifty percent represented the lower/working class while fifty percent represented middle-upper class.

Given that this dissertation research explores primarily the cultural framework and examines the utility of culture in the Montana Tea Party, I provide descriptions of Tea Party individuals both from face to face interviews and in participant observation at Montana Tea Party meetings. Below I describe my experience of that I consider to be a typical Montana Tea Party meeting. This particular meeting comes from field notes from an October 2011 meeting. The names and places have been replaced with more nuanced pro-nouns to protect the privacy of the primary organization researched in this study. I continue my examination of culture and collective action following this illustration.

Inside the Tea Party

At 7:00 pm individuals saunter into the assembly hall at Community Christian School, a small K-8 private school. Someone has arranged red, white and blue flowers at the entrance with an American flag strapped onto a small white cross at the door. On the wall in front of the auditorium is a large banner reading “Montana Patriots.” Upon entering the hall, I notice a number of brochures and poster board displays for the Montana pro-life organization / right-to-life organizations, and information on the elections.

The room is noisy and people are mingling, laughing and sharing pats on the back and cordial handshakes. Scanning the room, people are dressed casually; some wearing color coordinated ensembles of red, white and blue. Two individuals are wearing colonial inspired outfits including bloomers, ruffled blouses and tri-corner hats. About forty people are in

attendance. About half are women, and nearly all are over the age of fifty. I settle in the back row trying to blend in as much as possible. Unfortunately, however, my big cloth bag apparently labels me as an outsider as a man points to it and says, “You don’t look like you belong here.” I chuckle and say, “I’m visiting again today.” He nods and asserts, “You’re a reporter.” I shake my head, “No, I’m a student studying political groups. Just here to observe!” He looks suspicious and turns back to his seat while eyeing my notebook and pencil I try to conceal under my bag.

At about ten minutes past seven o’clock, the monthly Montana Tea Party meeting opens with a prayer from a local pastor at a small Pentecostal Christian Church. While the theme of the prayer is about the “awakening of this city”, his rhetoric is not unlike a prayer you would hear in any other religious setting, save the quotes by early Roman philosopher and Constitutionalist Marcus Tullius Cicero, Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln. Taking a quick glance around the room, about half of the people in the room appeared to be in a meditative state: heads bowed and eyes closed.

After a hearty amen, everyone stood unprompted to recite the Pledge of Allegiance to the flag, followed by a collective singing of National Anthem. A very small woman in her forties plays along on an old wooden piano hidden from plain sight in the auditorium. Many men saluted the flag, indicating that nearly half of the Patriots were veterans. Someone then begins to sing “America, the Beautiful” as some close their eyes, some remain in salute and some raising their hands to the sky as if worshiping the country in which we live.

After paying reverence to God and country, a woman stands up and with pure conviction and states: “I believe in both the Bible and the Constitution. And in both we trust.

We can believe the Constitution because we believe in God and truth so we can trust the Constitution.” She then recites the mission statement of the Montana Patriots:

The mission of the Montana Patriots is to inform, educate, and empower all American Citizens with information necessary to restore the original intent of the republican principles contained in the founding documents, particularly The Declaration of Independence and the United States Constitution.

Demonstrably moved by the words, one of the Patriot organizers (they avoid the term “leader” to keep the organization directly about the “people), Gabrielle, a sixty-year-old woman and native Montanan, introduces the speaker for the evening. The guest of honor is an internal medicine physician who operates the Christian-based Hosanna HealthCare clinic a town of 20,000 people about 180 miles north of Missoula. What sets her practice apart, other than its Christian tenets, is that she makes a point of spending an entire hour with each patient. The FBI investigated her seven times for allegedly misusing government subsidized health care costs, and was in danger of imprisonment for fraud.

During her hour-long presentation, Dr. Bemis continually incorporated quotes by Sun Tzu’s “Art of War” (pertaining to how to fight the government). She also relied heavily on the Constitution for referral to inalienable rights, citing the founding fathers and recent Republican Presidents George W. Bush and Ronald Reagan. Her biblical literacy was quite impressive, as she quoted Luke 6:33, Romans 12:14-41, Proverbs 25, Psalms 20: 7, Joshua 1:9, 1 Corinthians 16:58 all from the top of her head. Throughout the pseudo-sermon, Dr. Bemis encouraged the Patriots to continue to fight for what is right; namely, private health care (not Obamacare), against the “homosexual agenda,” and “the evils of pro-choice

heathens.” Capitalizing on the terror evoked from her horrific auditing by the government, she concluded her presentation with a trite warning to those of us in attendance: “It wasn’t the first time I was attacked by the government and, won’t be the last. And you could be next, so watch out!” Finally, after a long pause and an exasperated sigh, Dr. Bemis addressed the captivated audience: “I don’t serve The Man, I serve God.” At this, the crowd went wild with cheers, applause, and “hallelujahs”, much like something one might expect at a religious revival or Billy Graham convention.

Transitioning from citizen empowerment and the Christian calling, another woman approached the podium with a large glass jar. Her determined glance at the audience led me to believe that another diatribe explicating government demolition of private enterprise was pending. This equally vociferous middle aged woman dressed entirely in red white and blue (flag pin included) began to speak. It was a petition for monetary support for the creation of radio advertisements to tell the “truth” about places like Planned Parenthood. “They have air time, so we should get air time too!” The goal was to raise \$740 dollars...per month. One zealous Patriot raised a twenty-dollar bill in the air and ran to the front of the room to place the first donation in the empty jar. The audience erupted in applause and she personally walked around the room for donations as the patriotic woman in front described the advertisements currently on the radio supported by the pro-choice advocates. As the woman and her jar approached the back aisle – where I was sitting – I leaned over and politely asked, “Now, what is this money for? Advertisements for what?” The woman with the jar seemed stunned and confused at my question, her face blank and her lips murmuring. After a moment, she composed herself and said, “To fulfill our mission as American citizens.” I smiled politely and waved the jar pass me. I did not offer up a donation.

Trailing the now-full jar of cash donations for the ambiguous radio advertisements was a petition for the recall of pro-choice laws. The goal for the petition was 2,000 signatures. A middle-aged man seated near me in the back row shouts out, “Let’s take these to the churches, we can get signatures there!” Another brusque male voice resounds from the front: “Forget the churches. We pamper the churches with these ideas. And now they won’t even talk about [policies] in church.” The volume decibel in the room lifted as people chattered with their neighbors about how true this statement was. This unorganized conversation lasted nearly five minutes. I shifted in my seat nervous that I was the only person in the room not upset, not engaged in some fervent conversation with the people around me. I sat patiently waiting for something to happen; someone to intervene, or facilitate this apparently controversial subject. Finally, Gabrielle approached the podium and introduced the next speaker. I discretely looked at the clock on the wall. It was nearly nine o’clock.

A disheveled, overweight, woman of about sixty-five years of age walks to the front of the room with a clipboard and a folder. This time, the topic was about election fraud. This woman, Peggy, accused the city council of election fraud in 2010 that included pre-selected officials to serve on the city council. Evidently, Peggy believes that malfunctioning machines counting the ballots corrupted the voting. While the argument was somewhat farfetched, it was presented in a very academic, articulate fashion. Clearly, this woman had received higher education in a field such as political science, or training in some higher education institution. She had participated in a life-long pursuit to derail government control over civil society. With that thought in mind, she responded, “I’ve been fighting the IRS for 25 years and haven’t stopped taking to the top... When you have a corrupt executive office, it trickles

all the way down. Our democracy is being degraded.” The resolution that came from this discussion was decision among the Tea Party Patriots to build a Constitutional court.

Gabrielle politely moved the meeting forward by taking the microphone and introducing the last – and assuredly final – presenter. This man was from the far south end of the Bitterroot Valley and was invited to speak on physician-assisted suicide. That could explain the right to life posters I noted as I entered the meeting. I later discovered that this man was not a Tea Party sympathizer, but rather, was asked to speak at the meeting to complete the theme of the evening on the “right” approaches to healthcare. Moreover, he had met one of the organizers at a conservative convention and because of his attendance; they assumed his sympathy with the Tea Partiers. He later assured me that this was not entirely true.

After the talk on physician-assisted suicide, a small, very well kept woman in her late seventies takes over control of the meeting. I later discovered that Patricia was a local co-leader with Gabrielle. At near-tears, Patricia praised God offering affirmation to the Patriots now attentively waiting for their leader’s words. She assured us that while the government had imposed such intrusive policies on us as citizens, “even on our holy bodies”, that Patriots should have faith in the God that has gotten them thus far. As long as God’s citizens remain faithful on earth, we will keep Satan (presumably, the evil American empire) from implementing the “New World Order.” She closes with the reading of scripture from the book of Isaiah chapter 41 verse 13 “For I, the Lord your God, will hold your right hand, saying to you, ‘Fear not, I will help you.’”

The meeting ended about a quarter past ten; lasting a total of three hours, fifteen minutes.

Emotions, Narratives and Biographical Utility in the Tea Party

The Montana Tea Party meetings clearly stirred emotional responses from participants. The utility of emotions, often triggered by dramaturgical reenactments of a hyper-reality through narratives and biographies, stimulated a lively conversation about the controversial role of the government in society. Once emotions are triggered and shared among social movement populations, it is equally important if not more so, to understand the implications or consequences of these emotions. Most cultural theorists stop before reaching a theoretical understanding of the relationship between emotions and action. For as Jasper notes, “In many cases the causal impact of the factors depends heavily on emotional dimensions that have rarely been recognized or theorized” (1998: 408). Jasper furthermore draws attention to the dearth of literature addressing the direct relationship between emotions and action. He writes:

Not only are emotions part of our responses to events, but they also—in the form of deep affective attachments—shape the goals of our actions. There are positive emotions and negative ones, admirable and despicable ones, public and hidden ones. Without them, there might be no social action at all (Jasper 1998: 398).

Determining which emotions lead to which tactical strategies is an ambitious task, even more so when attempting to construct a grounded theory from a single case study to generalize across social movements in general. Therefore, the following observation attempts

only to contribute to the current discussions much as can be expected given the limitations of this research project.⁹ Jasper (1998) conceptualizes various types of emotional responses classified as affective, reactive, or a mood. Below I suggest to consequences of these emotional triggers. These responses pervaded movement culture, as emotions transmuted into identifiable characteristics of the Tea Party culture, and of Tea Partiers themselves.

Narratives

The use of narratives and biographies is not unique to the Tea Party movement. Each week the Missoula Patriots invites a guest speaker to share about his or her political experiences, perspective and/or involvement political activities. In each case, the speaker tells their personal life story to dramatize the severity of government involvement in the private sphere. Not only does the dramaturgical approach captivate the audience by sheer engagement in the story, but it also embeds the political ideology of the speaker into a real-life situation with real people and real outcomes. The reality of that person then becomes a threat to the reality of those in the audience, instilling a culture of fear and a pressing war against American citizens and the government that must be combated through political legislation.

Tea Party audience members have confidence in the story of Dr. Bemis and her unfortunate account with the federal agents. Not only is she accepted as an “expert” in political victimization, government wrongdoings her personal narrative thereby reinforces the Tea Partier’s beliefs that the federal government is conspiratorial reinforcing the cultural of fear and suspicion already prevalent among the Tea Party. Her story cannot be challenged,

⁹ Doing an in-depth analysis of emotional responses to rhetoric was not the primary object of this study, but it would be an insufficient project to surpass this invaluable topic without at least given initial exploratory information on the observations of the utility of emotions in the Montana Tea Party.

for it is her truth. Moreover, her designation as a medical doctor further validates her account due to her high social status, making her story more legitimate and reasonable.

Dr. Bemis is also the protagonist of her own story, having won her battle against “the evil feds” and doing so in the name of a Higher Being - that is, the Christian God – constituting the a sense of *pride*. I conceptualize pride as, “a feeling or deep pleasure or satisfaction derived from one's own achievements, the achievements of those with whom one is closely associated, or from qualities or possessions that are widely admired.”¹⁰ Dr. Bemis’s story represents a triumph of good over evil, drawing clear boundaries on what – or *who* – is against “innocent” members of society. In this case, of course, the antagonist is clearly the federal government. Once the enemy is identified, boundaries are established. Any person or organization that represents the government or a government affiliated institution (such as a University, for example), then that person or group is labeled as being an enemy, and therefore against Constitutional principles of freedom and liberty.¹¹

The role of the audience is equally important; the personal stories told by the narrator resonate with the personal stories of audience members and therefore suggests that there is a connection between the narrator and the audience, and that the protagonist serves as an example of how to overcome the enemy. This decreases the power of the opponent, and restores the status of the power of the group, thus instilling pride. Building pride therefore empowers the audience and builds efficacy by strengthening movement morale and encouraging further political action as individuals develop a growing desire to be heroes of their own life story.

¹⁰ Definition from Google Dictionary

¹¹ I experienced this discrimination as a researcher. Once identified as a student and instructor at a state University, I was labeled as an enemy, and therefore denied access to interview some individuals in the group for suspicion that I would undermine the very principles they were fighting for.

The fact that at each Tea Party meeting, participants share personal testimonies about government intervention, demonstrates the group's efficacy building strategies; as one storyteller narrates his or her fight against the "enemy" the group becomes empowered, validating their involvement in the movement.

Biography

The incorporation of emotions in protest activity is the essential for explaining how the Montana Tea Party capitalized on the biography of one individual whose terrorizing childhood can provoke terror in any sympathetic person compliant to hear her story. For months, the MTP vociferously advertised the event "Socialism versus Freedom." Program coordinators promised that the presentation would reshape America's perception of "freedom" by shedding light on the "true intentions" of the American government. The big event featured guest speaker, Kitty Werthmann, a woman in her eighties who has made a sustainable living by traveling around the United States sharing her autobiography with conservative groups. Raised in Austria under Hitler's regime, Kitty compared the Austrian Nazi government, social structure, and policies to those of the United States. For example, the "death panels" mistakenly understood to be a part of President Obama's proposed government health care plan was compared to Nazi experiments of the mentally disabled in the 1930s and 40s. Gun control policies, according to Werthmann, were in place only so the government could control all self-defense weapons so they would remain more powerful than American citizens. In addition, the expansion of the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Central Intelligence Agency was comparable to that of the Nazi Secret Service (SS). The "conspiracy" of social security and other number-based identifiable factors she traced to

numbers tattooed on Nazi prisoners by the SS in Germany and Austria in the early twentieth century.

Werthmann, an individual claiming to “cherish American liberty” despite her concerns about the veracity of government claims, sought United States citizenship after having lived in the U.S. for fifty years. Yet she remained skeptical on how free the American people were in reality. This fear was prompted by ever leftward-leaning tendencies of the government. This fear led her to want to warn the American people of the dangers we were about to undergo if we continue to allow a large, liberal government take control over every aspect of our lives.

Kitty’s biography undoubtedly resonated with the audience that night. In fact, Kitty has made a sustainable living standard on her dramatic life history. Conservative groups from around the country invite her to speak at their events with the intention of generating community support for the conservative attention and to attract public attention to the alleged danger of a progressive government. Indeed during the meeting, Gabrielle, the local organizer, said, “I invited individuals from the university newspapers, journals, and television stations to cover this important information and nobody’s here. I think that says something about the government not wanting the public to know that we know what they’re up to.”¹²

Upon further examination of Kitty’s speech, the most prevalent emotion her story triggered – within her personal life and that seemed to resonate with the audience – is *fear*: panic, anxiety, confusion, “an unpleasant emotion caused by the belief that someone or

¹² I later mentioned to Gabrielle that I was in attendance that evening, attempting to make known what was being discussed at the meeting. I was quickly dismissed as not being a legitimate public representative.

something is dangerous, likely to cause pain, or a threat.”¹³ All of these emotions were triggered as a response to the pseudo-reality that the government could parallel the Nazi regime, thus putting one’s own position of power (individual liberties) in jeopardy. This translates into holocaust, death, destruction and disappearance of personal freedoms and liberties. Moreover, the allegedly deceptive government assumed a hidden agenda, covered up by seemingly positive efforts at social progress. “The Green is the new Red,” she said. According to her perspective, saving the environment, and establishing government protected forest areas (known by the United Nations as Agenda 21) was a way for the government to occupy most of geographic area of the United States, preventing private ownership. The Environmental or Green movement is, for many, rooted in morality yet was stripped of its moral significance as soon as it was compared to communism, the ultimate enemy of the Tea Party, according to MTP participants.

After fear is established, a number of subsequent emotions follow. For one, fear feeds anger, “strong emotion; a feeling that is oriented toward some real or supposed grievance.”¹⁴ Kemper indicates that when one withdraws status, it causes anger (2001: 66). Vehement anger drives Tea Party actions and gives reason to attack the government, for allegedly trying to take away the liberties identified by the Constitution. Anger at the enemy government cannot be undermined, so it will always been there; anger at the policies that are taking away the rights and liberties granted to all American citizens, such as the alleged repeal of the second amendment (the right to bear arms). Repealing laws and stripping people of their rights changes the structure of society. How an individual approaches everyday living hence evoking fear of the unknown.

¹³ Definition provided by Google Dictionary

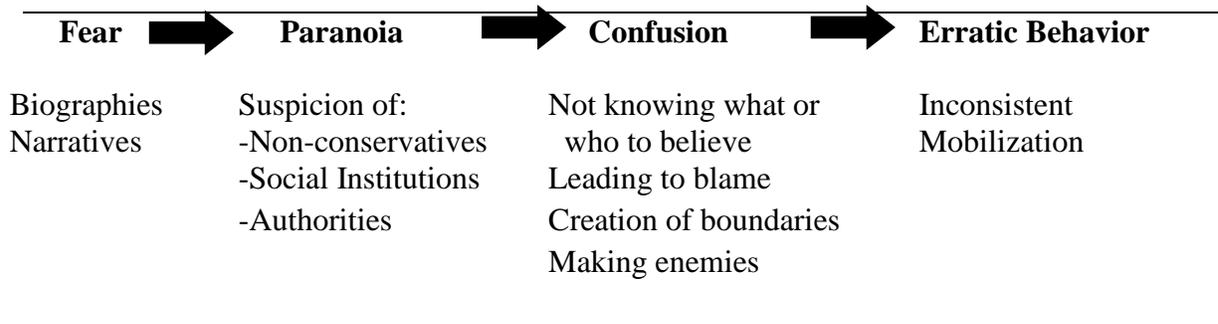
¹⁴ Definition provided by Google Dictionary

While the sources of fearful or angry emotions may be illegitimate, Tea Party grievances become personal due to the evocative emotional responses stemming from personal narratives and biographies. The emotional responses that emerge from Tea Party meetings – pride, fear, anger reverence – provide the foundation for the movement, which influences individual participation. For example, Dr. Bemis’s story of a seemingly irrational government coming to inspect her medical practice can make the audience suspicious of all government activity, and protective of his or her personal rights. This therefore confuses the American citizen, leading them to question the rational/legal authority that was set in place by the founding fathers. Again, a recall to the Constitution is the undercurrent that gives the Tea Party its course of action.

Emotions

Tea Party grievances become personal due to the evocative emotional responses stemming from personal narratives and biographies. The emotional responses that emerge from Tea Party meetings – pride, fear, anger reverence – provide the foundation for the movement, which influences individual participation. From my initial observations, I conclude that how fear or anxiety spread may not only through the power religious language in the Tea Party meetings, it is also through narratives and biographies offered by Tea Party participants and speakers at each meeting. The fear instilled in these stories generates a cultural of paranoia, which in turn confuses Tea Party participants, leading to erratic patterns of collective action (see Figure 5.1).

Figure 5.1 Emotional Responses and Outcomes in the Montana Tea Party



Dr. Bemis’s story of a seemingly irrational government coming to inspect her medical practice can make the audience suspicious of all government activity, and protective of his or her personal rights. This therefore confuses the American citizen, leading them to question the rational/legal authority that was set in place by the founding fathers. Again, a recall to the constitution is the undercurrent that gives the Tea Party its course of action. Not being a structured political party, nor a clearly defined social movement (leading to scholastic debates about the labeling of this social phenomenon), it seems as though the Tea Party itself is stuck in a cycle of unclear objectives, purposes or identities. I discuss the problem with identity construction further in chapter seven.

Identifying Culture: What Lies Ahead

The above description illustrates not only the progression of events across one MTP meeting, but also illustrates the importance of cultural dynamics in this group. That is, we can begin to see examples of rituals - including the incorporation of religious symbols and rituals, - shared assumptions, and beliefs. Indeed, action in the Tea Party becomes

legitimated by emotions such as moral outrage, fear, and pride instigate a reaction against the social and political structures that are preventing them from achieving their ideals. Each of these characteristics contribute to a better understanding the Tea Party as a collective.

This investigation of the development of Tea Party culture, therefore, is a unique contribution to the academic research previously on the Tea Party, which is restricted to broad-based nation-wide analysis of movement trends, resources and incentives. I argue that the Tea Party does incorporate various elements of conservative culture to artificially construct a movement representing the rejection of modern social change or progress, rather than being rooted in “contentious politics” (as argued in chapter one). The task for this social movement scholar then is to examine how culture is incorporated, utilized and constructed in the Tea Party. How one goes about doing this first requires familiarity with the culture and collective action frames.

Following the direction of cultural analysis suggested by Taylor and Whittier (1996), this project explores Tea Party culture on three levels: the framing of movement grievances to constitute collective action through personal narratives and biographies, which provide efficacy for the Tea Party (as described in the following chapter). Secondly, I review the construction of collective identity and how the dramaturgical strategies adopted by the Tea Party were developed from the provocative emotions perpetuated by the culture they have adapted (chapter seven). Finally, I discuss how the Montana Tea Party participates in collective action (in chapter eight), what this may tell us about the culture of the Tea Party, and possibly the culture of a new type of movement in the twenty-first century; one that incorporates conservative cultures, traditional values, but that can attract supporters across party lines.

As indicated in chapter three, the role of a researcher is to explore the data as it is made available based on the so-called “substantial reality” (Melucci 1995). Consequently, my analysis of culture is restricted to the observations that occurred while I was present in the “natural environment” of the Tea Partiers; that is, their meetings and subsequently in follow-up interviews. While the data may be somewhat biased, I nonetheless provide a thick description of movement culture will provide a glimpse at the development and conceptualization of culture within the contemporary Tea Party.

CHAPTER 6 – COLLECTIVE ACTION FRAMES

Framing the Montana Tea Party

Sociological research on the Tea Party movement has failed to fully recognize the cultural dynamics that influence its collective behavior, evading *sociological* questions regarding culture, social impact, political progress and the historical impact of that Tea Party as a conservative movement in the twenty-first century. Structuralist approaches to social movements contend that the mobilization of resources and political processes are essential components for collective action. Indeed, without the organizational infrastructure and political opportunities available to a social movement, mobilization would be stifled. Equally important, however, are the cultural forces, which motivate, catalyze and sustain collective action. Furthermore, by recognizing the cultural dynamics of social movement participation, we can further understand the development, trajectory and goals of the Tea Party. Thus, this research project attempts to address this gap in the literature by complementing previous studies that have explored the Tea Party from alternative perspectives.

This chapter investigates Tea Party's cultural strategies.¹⁵ I focus primarily how the framing mechanisms of the movement, and how that translates into strategies of collective action. I then begin to theorize how the Montana Tea Party has managed to create a new niche for American conservatives by weaving together the various ideologies and interests of Tea Party participants.

¹⁵ Wood defines cultural strategies as a “conscious decision to construct an organizational political culture by drawing cultural elements from a particular segment of their potential participants’ social terrain” (1999: 310).

Collective Action Frames

Collective action frames clarify the group's political orientation, providing list of grievances while also keeping the group motivated, stimulated and connected by sustaining "emotional energy" (Collins 2001). As can be seen from the description of the Tea Party (see chapter five), religion and religious culture is a major component of Montana Tea Party meetings; a supposedly non-partisan political group. Therefore, we cannot dismiss the salience of religion in the Tea Party as a "motivational frame" (by Snow, Rochford, Worden and Benford 1986; Benford and Snow 2000).

Benford and Snow (2000) contend that there are three stages in the framing process: The first is to **diagnose** an event or aspect of social life as problematic and needs to be addressed. Essentially, this process elucidates the grievances of the group, which provides legitimacy to collection action. As described in previous chapters, the Tea Party is vociferously clear about their disdain for liberal politics and government intervention on personal matters of liberty and freedom. During the interviews, respondents would compare the American political system as a step toward a socialist nation that would end in economic failure. Participants would express their opinions on how imperative they felt it was to repair the economic and political state before we put the obligations on our grandchildren. By consistently reciting the fundamental problems with contemporary society and politics – and utilizing examples to demonstrate these problems – collective action against the government is not only legitimated, it is portrayed as necessary to survival as an American citizen.

The second step in the framing process **recognizes the injustices** of those grievances framing proposes a solution to the diagnosed problem that specifies what needs to be done or alternatively, suggests a “prognosis” or solutions to the problem and identifies strategies, tactics and targets. Recall the mission statement of the Montana Tea party, recited at the opening of each meeting:

The mission of the Missoula Patriots is to inform, educate, and empower all American Citizens with information necessary to restore the original intent of the republican principles contained in the founding documents, particularly The Declaration of Independence and the United States Constitution.

The outset of every gathering begins with a reminder of why the group is acting collectively to “restore the original intent, thereby implying the manipulation of the Constitution and other American principles by the current government. The Tea Party mission statement proposes no solution to these alleged problems. However, following the reading, individuals then announce their current or future activities that hold the government accountable for allegedly abusing the liberties American citizens have been granted.

Third, framing rationalizes or legitimates participation in corrective action by **providing motivation** and encouragement to constituents (Benford and Snow 2000; Snow and Benford 1988; Snow and Benford 1992). *How* this is accomplished goes beyond dictation, recitation or memorization of goals or ideologies within the group. The group must establish what Randall Collins (2005) calls *emotional energy*. This is generated among any group of people that shares some common focus of attention and routinized behavior which then generates positive feelings of security and comfort for the individual in that group. The

more often the same people successfully engage in these “interaction ritual chains” the greater the affinity they feel for one another. The result of this bond is a strong collective consciousness, which reinforces a spiritual and emotional connection to the group. For example, each meeting of the Montana Tea Party incorporated singing of church hymns, which may reinforce religious identity in a religious congregation; singing the fight song at a college football games may generate a stronger sense of solidarity among fans in the stands, who may be mostly strangers. For the Tea Party, ritual involves singing the national anthem, incorporating hymns and prayer, thereby reinforcing an American citizenship and spiritual interconnectedness.

Religion in the Tea Party

Collective action frames work to highlight and embed movement ideology through language, symbols and rituals that resonate with its constituents. If the Tea Party utilizes the means of religion to encapsulate the basic premises of the movement, as suggested above, the sociological question that then follows is: what connects the culture of Christianity to the culture of conservative politics such that it allows religious culture to provide it with resources to mobilize? I argue that the link is manifested in three ways: First, through religion’s structural resources (facilities, constituency, leadership, structure). Second, religion provides cultural resources, including scriptural references and Christian rhetoric, and through the sainthood and martyrdom of individual biographies (typically of the Founding Fathers) which easily merge traditional religious authorities with political authorities. The moral responsibilities and motivations that a religious culture pushes links the movement to

an ethical standard of what it means to be an American citizen. Each of these approaches is an attempt to evoke an emotional response among Tea Partiers who may or may not be particularly religious (recall, 65% claim to not be religious at all). I argue that religious affiliation is not as important as the MTP agreeing to adopt a morally conservative culture framed in black and white; right and wrong; good and evil.

Organizational Resources

The organizational operations of religious institutions have also been incorporated into Montana Tea Party meetings (See Table 6.1 below).

Table 6.1 Organizational Resources

Church Service	Tea Party Meeting
Invocation: Opening prayer	Invocation: Opening prayer
Worship (Hymns)	Singing of national anthem
Reading from scripture (Bible)	Reading from Preamble of the Constitution
Liturgy	Recite Tea Party Mission Statement
Offertory	Collection for MTP activities
Symbolic moral leader: Jesus	Symbolic moral Leaders: founding fathers
Sermon	Presentation/Speaker
Benediction: Closing Prayer	Benediction: Closing Prayer

Not only does the MTP occupy the facilities of a private Christian school to hold its monthly meetings, but occasionally students from the school would involve themselves in Tea Party activities. A trio of violinists from the school orchestra played the Star Spangled Banner as the prelude to individuals arriving. These students were also present at the

Christmas party playing carols for us throughout the celebration. In one case, a student from the school attended the meeting asking for donations to help him in his summer mission trip to spread the Gospel to Germany: a fallen country, destroyed by the evils of its leaders. The programming of Tea Party meetings mirrors that of a weekly church service, with Bibles and religious phrases setup on bulletin boards and having a local minister as one of its local organizers. The meetings officially begin with the Pledge of Allegiance to the American flag. There are individuals at each meeting (averaging to about one-third of those present) that salute the flag representing their military or former military status. Following the pledge, a local pastor of a small conservative charismatic church leads individuals in an invocation, which is generally a piece of Biblical scripture reading or a Christian prayer. The prayers begin with praise to God for the city, and for the individuals present followed by a petition for the “awakening” of the city to see the darkness around them. The group then collectively stands and worships American citizenship in the most poignant song that epitomizes our society: the National Anthem.

An offertory follows, in which Tea Party delegates pass money plates collecting donations for the organization, though the allocation of the donations is not entirely clear. This offertory system is much like that of church structures in which the congregation is given the option to tithe to the church. The orator for the evening then invites Tea Party individuals to stand and give their “testimonies” of government wrongdoings the previous month, what persecution they had to undergo, or any breakthroughs in the collective fight for freedom from oppression. Following the emotional stories of Tea Party testimonials, a guest speaker begins to share information on a controversial political subject, varying each week and depending on that individual’s particular interest or specialization. The perspective of the

speakers always is far from left, far from center, and often even farther right from that side of the political spectrum. Government is portrayed as the enemy, Barack Hussein Obama is vilified as its leader, and preservation of tradition “under God” is the ultimate story that is told week after week. Left emotionally energized or enervated (depending on the speakers tone), the pastor then approaches the podium again and leads the group in another prayer to close the meeting and mingling and reflection commences among Tea Party followers.

Acknowledging the structural parallels between Tea Party culture and religious culture is the foundation for future sociological inquiry. Of more interest, then, is why the Tea Party organizers would structure the meetings like a church service and what does this structure do for group culture? The first question is answerable by looking at the leadership of the MTP. While they would not call themselves leaders (to prevent oligarchy, which would make the group hypocritical when speaking against government hegemony over the lives of individuals in the United States), the two or three program organizers seem to be vehemently religious individuals.¹⁶

One man, Larry is a pastor of a very small conservative church; the other two organizers are women, Gabrielle and Patricia, who during the meetings speak incessantly and reverently to Jesus, the Bible and with scriptural authority. Gabrielle is open about her Catholic affiliation while Patricia has referred to speaking in tongues, so one can only assume her Pentecostal or charismatic Christian religious affiliation. If the local leaders are accustomed to programming meetings of a religious orientation, why not go with the cultural patterns of church settings to organize Tea Party meetings, also rooted in morality and justice?

¹⁶ I was not granted interviews with the local leaders to examine their respective levels of religiosity in depth.

The second question on how incorporating religious structures into MTP meeting contribute group culture is complex and requires a thicker theoretical lens. While the sacred is undoubtedly salient when framing a movement with moral boundaries, in this case, it is somewhat artificial. Tea Partiers may use religion as a unifying cultural force (through rhetoric, prayer, scripture, symbols) but many of them do not consider themselves particularly religious. They adopt the model the church provides to bring solidarity to the group or to establish collective identity as “Christians”, if only situational for some. In my interviews I found that only twelve percent of Tea Partiers consider themselves actively religious, twenty-three percent consider themselves religious, but do not attend church and sixty-five percent consider themselves non-religious. According to the Pew Forum on Religious Life, less than 17% percent of Americans as a whole claim to have no religious affiliation. While my respondents may not be affiliated with any congregation, they displayed tolerance, if not affinity, for the Christian tradition for what it represents in American traditional culture.

Clearly not all members of the Tea Party resemble the religious individuals that makeup the leadership on the both the local and national levels. But why religion? Furthermore, why does the Montana Tea Party use religious culture when sixty-five percent of its adherents are not religious? What could conservative Christianity supply to the movement that would constitute its incorporation in the mobilization process?

Cultural Resources

The MTP meetings are inundated with references to political conservatism and cultural traditionalism as demonstrated in my ethnographic field notes above and in the

previous chapter. Proclaiming themselves the only political organization in the group to uphold the principles of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, the group is inherently drawn to cultural influences tracing back to the American Founding Fathers. George Washington and Thomas Jefferson and quoted as sacred tokens of wisdom, just as one would recite biblical scripture for guidance. It also gives individuals an “ideal type” which stimulates their progression toward social and political change.

Social change, according to Max Weber, is prompted by non-rational forces which motivates and stimulates action. Weber saw religion as a cultural force, which pervades political and economic boundaries and was capable of producing social change; a catalyst for human ideas, motives and innovation, which can lead to social action. For example, the rise of capitalism in western nations was not merely a materialistic interpretation of progress, but rather revealed the clear correlation between the ascetic ethic of the Protestant religious ethics and its similarities to the enthusiastic spirit of capitalism. Weber writes:

The side of the problem which is generally most difficult to grasp [is] the influence of certain religious ideas on the development of an economic spirit, or the *ethos* of an economic system. In this case, we are dealing with the connection of the spirit of modern economic life with the rational ethics of ascetic Protestantism. Thus, we treat here only one side of the causal chain (1958: 27).

Weber argued that without understanding the power of values, culture and cultural inspiration (non-materialistic factors captured in religious belief) scholars could not truly appreciate the motivational dynamics of social action. Indeed, the blurring of lines between

patriotism, religion and so-called *civil religion*, generates the collective effervescence described by Durkheim, or the “emotional energy” (Collins 2001) to give individuals a sense of purpose, excitement and moral justification for their participation in collective action.

Civil Religion

By unambiguously framing the MTP principles of freedom and liberty to Christian principles of freedom, Tea Partiers construct “moral imperatives for love, justice, peace, freedom, equality” (Smith 1996). Individuals participate in collective action because they believe it is their moral, ethical, Christian obligation to do so, since being Christian is also part of being an American. Robert Bellah writes that there are certain religious elements (beliefs, symbols, rituals worship) that are often shared by the majority culture of a nation-state. These beliefs prove to be critical to the development of institutions and influential in the political sphere (Bellah 2006). The institutionalization of these religious commonalities, known as *civil religion*, “provides a transcendent goal for the political process” (229); that is, civil religion serves to help legitimate political actions and provides a “motivating spirit” by which collective action is carried out.

Civil religion permeates an entire society through its cultural rhetoric, symbols, practices and organization. Not to be confused with folk religion, however, civil religion does not have an official clerical leader, though the leaders are often practitioners of it (i.e. presidents and national icons). It is not inherently *spiritual* per se. Civil religion does not imply a reference to exclusively *religious* components. The concept of civil religion extends beyond a traditional religious perspective with a Godhead deity representing the sacred. Rather, civil religion takes a Durkheimian approach to religion by identifying

institutionalized elements of the sacred that become instruments of social cohesion (Durkheim in Bellah 1973). Civil religion provides a sacred aura to the political infrastructure, which forges a new moral authority and which is based upon modern society, and national citizenship.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau established the concept of civil religion in *The Social Contract in Discourses* in 1762 to describe what he regarded as the source of civic virtue, sovereignty and spiritual foundation that is essential for any modern society (1984). For Rousseau, civil religion was a sacred social force used to endorse French nationalism in the post-revolutionary era. Recognition of the sacred element is what bound society together, and instilled national unity despite its divisive past. In the 20th century, American sociologist Robert Bellah revisited the term to describe the religious elements used to legitimate political actions. He determined civil religion to be a social device that provides a “motivating spirit” by which collective action is carried out. Bellah writes that there are certain religious elements - beliefs, symbols, rituals worship - which the majority culture of a nation-state may share. These beliefs prove to be critical to the development of institutions, influences political behavior and “provides a transcendent goal for the political process” (Bellah 2006: 229). John A. Coleman (1970) later defined civil religion as “the set of beliefs, rites and symbols which relates a man’s role as a citizen and his society’s place in space, time and history to the condition of ultimate existence and meaning” (76), and that ““in America we find almost a unique case of civil religion differentiated from both church and state” (74) Civil religion therefore is not only capable of providing a common ideology, and group solidarity, but grants moral significance to those individuals joined by the bond of citizenship.

In more recent years, civil religion has become nearly synonymous with patriotism. Not to imply country-worship, but rather, the nation represents the source of empowerment and the source of individual sovereignty. The national leader becomes the prophet, speaking on behalf of the deity and emitting its power to the citizens. His or her speeches and written works become the new sacred texts and eventually attract a coterie of disciples. In the United States, democracy, freedom and justice are core values rooted in American culture and coincide with those of Christianity. Former President George W. Bush often relied on Christian interpretations of God to legitimate his political decision and actions. This appeal to the religious-minded in America contributed to his political appeal and reelection in 2004. Finally, national celebrations of independence generate new rituals and sources of collective “worship” of the “divine”, in which symbols are used to represent the values shared by the citizens of that nation. Though secular, the function of nationalism serves as a “religion surrogate” reinforcing national identity and empowerment (Smith 2003: 17). *Civil religion* – or a source of sacred solidarity – is a powerful source for social cohesion that the Tea Party uses to effectively unite its members.

Durkheim argued that religion provides cultural unification and social solidarity by incorporating rituals and symbols into a community in order to unite individuals into an elated state of effervescence with other members of that community. This then instigates enthusiasm, confidence, and energy to transform collective behavior from emotions to reactions reaching a state of “collective effervescence” (Durkheim in Bellah 1973). When emotions are amplified, the group strengthens and, to hold with Durkheimian theory, the sense of the self is minimized as the group gains precedence over profane, material interests. When this happens, individuals sense a greater moral source. This supernatural force or,

“emotional energy” is what contributes to solidarity within the group (Collins 2001: 29). Therefore, by framing movement goals in religious rhetoric, and using symbols, people of faith feel compelled to participate through spiritual conviction (Nepstad 2005; 2008; Patillo-McCoy 1998; Smith 1994; 1996a; 1996b; Wood 2002). Tea Partiers therefore reinforce their morality into the movement by co-opting religious culture and strengthening that obligation into religious conviction, which translates into collective action.

‘Sacred’ Mobilization

Incorporating religion into social movement activity is a well-documented strategy for establishing in-group solidarity for collective actors. For example, Nepstad (2004) has written on a social movement’s strategy to capitalize on religious culture which has contributed to the appeal to many left-of-center religious groups and individuals. This religious ritual and the emotions fully incorporated in the anti-School of Americas protest particularly demonstrates how mobilizing emotions through rituals creates not only solidarity, but morally roots the movement in the sacred: Liturgy becomes protest mantra, solidarity is a spiritual “baptismal.” The use of strong celebrity support reframes the movement to appeal to non-Christian anti-war or just plain supportive Americans. Thus, constituting a sacred elements of Christianity as a master frame is a strong tactical strategy for recruiting and maintaining social movement participation. How the Tea Party forges this frame, however, is unique from prior social movements in that it broadcasts religious traditionalism as a core value yet many in group may not actually personally identify with the cultural ideals presented in evangelical Christianity. Still, it somehow works to motivate individuals.

Since the emergence of sociology, social thinkers have investigated religion as a structure that incorporates a sense of the sacred into collective action. For Karl Marx, religion was initially perceived as a social institution that preserved the inequality that pervaded social classes in society. There was an inherent parallel between religious and socioeconomic complacency. Both economics and religion were systems of social alienation that prevented society from recognizing the oppressive systems that dominated citizens. According to Marx, the capitalist economy robs an individual of his or her humanistic merit; religion likewise produces an illusory force stripping an individual of his or impulse to address their inhumane circumstances. Both are forms of alienation; by legitimizing religious institutions as authorities, society is blinded from reality inhibiting social change (Marx in Niebuhr 1964: 42). Marx never would have predicted the political implications of religious doctrine and how it – when properly choreographed – could actually prompt the revolution he called for, as seen in Latin American liberation theology in the twentieth century (see Smith 1991).

Émile Durkheim saw religion not as an intellectual political force like Karl Marx, but rather as a force whose primary function to serve as a representation of society. Religion carries communally agreed upon symbols and rituals embedded in emotions, creating community and social solidarity. Its purpose is not necessarily to make claims about the world, but protects the “soul” of society. Using rituals, symbols, and collective sentiments, religion, or that which was considered “sacred” binds a community together. The object of worship is not as central to theory as is the reason that the forces behind the worship create that social cohesion (Durkheim in Bellah 1973).

It is conventional to recognize movements that mobilize around religious beliefs. Smith writes that “the most potent motivational leverage that a social-movement can enjoy is

the alignment of its cause with ultimacy and sacredness associated with God's will, eternal truth, the absolute moral structure of the universe" (Smith 1996a: 9). Yet, despite the growing literature on religious influences on progressive social movements, previous studies have not noted how liberal and conservative political culture may influence conservative religious culture as a way to gain access to material and nonmaterial religious "resources". Studies have looked at the natural organizational bases for religious movements (Morris 1984; Hart 2001; Williams and Demerath 1991; Wood 2002), the religious culture that works as a toolkit for managing and maintaining identities (Patillo-McCoy 1998; Nepstad 2008; Swidler 1983; Wood 2002), and the expanding social resources and networks religion provides that establishes a broader constituent base (Nepstad 2005; 2008; Smith 1994a).

Smith (1996) provided a general outline for recognizing religion as force for change in a contemporary context. First, he argues, religion legitimates protest participation if it is rooted, or framed with what is sacred. Second, religion provides a moral standard adopted by a cultural majority. The adherents of the religious majority, therefore, may create a system of norms by which all other social members may follow, lest they be 'deviant' to the social norms established by the cultural elite. Third, the utility of religious culture in political change instills a sense of self-sacrifice and discipline for a supernatural cause that few other cultural frames can produce. Fourth, religion legitimates organizational, strategic, and tactical flexibility with or against the cultural counter-forces, they face. Understanding Smith's framework is critical to appreciating the use of religion in the Montana Tea Party Movement utilizes the resources provided by religious culture.

Discussion

Collective action frames and the role of religion in social movement research can help legitimize individuals' participation in a social movement. This is where *value* is placed on movement goals and motivations. The Tea Party utilizes the resources of religion to mobilize its constituents, despite the non-religious convictions of many Tea Partiers. This thereby creates a sense of solidarity by establishing a sacred element to the meetings is an attempt to evoke emotional appeal to the group. Not being a structured political party, nor a clearly defined social movement (leading to scholastic debates about the labeling of this social phenomenon), it seems as though the Tea Party is unable to articulate a clean set of objectives, purposes or identities.

How the Tea Party is able to establish a collective base, then, is salient for understanding the collective action strategies of the Tea Party itself. The following chapter depicts the variety of individuals who participate in the Montana Tea Party, the struggle to find a common collective identity, and the ways in which the group *does* reach a collective understanding, despite its diverse constituency. Recognizing the way in which a group self-identifies will allow us to better appreciate the way in which the social movement mobilizes.

CHAPTER 7: CONSTRUCTING A COLLECTIVE IDENTITY

Portraits of a Patriot: Identity Negotiations in the Montana Tea Party

The establishment of a collective identity is essential for solidarity and cohesion among group members which therefore reinforces commitment and leads to collective action. Not only does collective identity increase the level of commitment of individuals in the group, but it also connects them with the identity of a group, and contributes to the overall culture of the movement, thereby effecting strategies of collective action. Indeed, collective identities determine group dynamics, behaviors, strategies and tactics. Not to be confused with ideology, a collective identity is more than just a shared experience or perspective among group members, though those are important components. Rather, a collective identity acknowledges the group's mission, goals, in-group versus out-group awareness and a commitment that supersedes merely socially ascribed or attributed statuses. Polletta and Jasper define collective identity as:

[A]n individual's cognitive, moral, and emotional connection with a broader community, category, practice, or institution. It is a perception of a shared status or relation, which may be imagined rather than experienced directly, and it is distinct from personal identities, although it may form part of a personal identity (2001: 285).

In some cases, social movements establish solidarity by agreed-upon commonalities or cultural characteristics ascribed to them, such as gender, race, ethnicity, class, or sexual

orientation (Benford and Snow 1994; Bernstein 1997; Dietrich 2012; Futrell and Simi 2004; Goodwin, Jasper and Poletta 2001; Hunt, Benford and Snow 1994; Jasper and Poletta 2001; Larana Johnston, and Gusfield 1994; Melucci 1995; Rupp and Verta Taylor, 1987; Taylor and Whittier 1992; Taylor and Whittier 1995). In other cases, groups may cohere around a narrative or figure that transcends ascribed statuses and penetrates the moral incentive of the movement (Fine 1995; Johnston and Klandermans 1995; Nepstad 2001; Poletta 1998). For example, the life and death of Archbishop Oscar Romero was used to establish a collective identity among individuals in the Central American peace movement with United States citizens. Romero's martyrdom transcended national boundaries and struck the heartstrings of religious individuals worldwide (Nepstad 2001).

Clearly, individuals have multiple identities that serve various functions in various social contexts. Therefore, we ought to recognize the diversity of these social roles at different times and in different ways, depending on the social context. For example, women in the women's movement were not only women and men, but also held other achieved and ascribed statuses white, black, heterosexual, homosexual, employed, unemployed, Christians, non-Christians, and so on (Taylor and Whittier 1992). Therefore, when it comes to establishing a collective identity within a group, an individual may tap into a particular sub-identity, choosing to relinquish or subordinate his or her other social roles or identities in order to establish unity around the group's commonalities.

Identifying a common, collective identity in the Montana Tea Party is difficult to determine from an outsider's perspective. Determining what the collective identity of a group is, however, can be a challenge even for movement participants. More easily identifiable are the groups and organizations that the Tea Party has identified as enemies – distinctive non-

members beyond the ideational boundaries constructed by Tea Partiers. Taylor and Whittier (1994) suggest that constructing boundaries helps authenticate group commitment. In the women's movement, feminist leaders met in coffee shops and held meetings to physically distance themselves from non-group members (namely, men or non-feminist social figures). By doing so, the movement established a target – an “enemy” – at which all contentious politics ought to be directed. Moreover, group commitment was solidified knowing what the feminist movement was, or was not. If an individual was involved in the movement, it was clear who and what they were for and whom and what they were against. This is also known as “border politics” where symbolic boundaries are set in place that indicate who is or is not a legitimate member (Bernstein 2005; Gamson 1997).

Scholarship on the national Tea Party itself clearly lays out the ideational constructs and interests of the Tea Partiers: limited government, United States sovereignty, and a fundamentalist incorporation of the Constitution into American legislation (DiMaggio 2011; Foley 2012; Meckler and Martin 2011; Skocpol and Williamson 2011; Zernicke 2011). However, sharing a collective identity, as mentioned above, extends beyond having a common interest, “that would merely be ‘ideology’” (Poletta and Jasper 2001: 285). Therefore, recognizing the distinction between movement ideology, interest and identity, is essential to understanding the cultural dynamics of the Tea Party.

This chapter explores these various dimensions by interpreting the construction and vitality of a collective identity in the Montana Tea Party movement. I explain how the Montana Tea Party generates a sense of *we*-ness and how that serves attempts at social solidarity and group cohesion. I also suggest four categories of ideal-types of Tea Partiers and how these different classifications contribute to the overall dynamic of the Montana Tea

Party. Negotiating between individual and group interests is essential for maintain a collective identity.

The Origins of Tea Party Identity

Answering the pervasive question, “Who are we?” in a social movement is the start of forming a collective identity. What we do know about the Montana Tea Party is that in addition to being anti-liberal, the MTP is pro-freedom, liberty, justice, and promotes Constitutional literacy. Indeed, these ideological foundations are among the most important aspects of the national movement as well (Foley 2012). The way in which MTP materialize these ideas is through deep patriotism. As stated in the Mission Statement, the purpose of the Tea Party is to “stand with our founders, as heirs to the republic, to claim our rights and duties which preserve their legacy and our own.” This is similar to what the founding fathers wrote in the Constitution, and is recited throughout Tea Party meetings across the nation. Patriotism, to Tea Partiers, is more than just following a set of political principles, and demonstrating respect for American symbols; rather it is civil religion in the purest form, where rituals, symbols, figures, doctrine, sacred scriptures and songs become the centerpiece of all collective activity.

Recall from previous chapters that the origins of the Tea Party are founded in the same, classic ideology of the United States founding fathers that also drove the American Revolution. Those ideals are traced back to Thomas Jefferson, the Tea Party’s ideal type, or symbol, of an unadulterated government. The classical republicanism that drove the American Revolution is best described by historian Lance Banning (1986: 18):

The Jeffersonian Republicans undoubtedly attracted many individuals whose concerns were essentially private....American Revolutionaries and Jeffersonian Republicans attempted to combine (and probably confused) concepts of liberty deriving from a classical tradition-freedom *to* - with more modern or liberal concepts that associated liberty more exclusively with the private, pre-governmental realm - freedom *from*.

Indeed, I would argue that classical republicanism continues to be a primary ideology prevalent in the Montana Tea Party, as well as on the national level. Like conservative movements throughout American history, the contemporary Tea Party challenges government intervention in the private sphere, fears expansion, and aims to protect the rights granted to American citizens in the Constitution. To be certain, these ideals are the foundations for the Tea Party, and contribute to a common or shared ideology among anyone who participates in the meetings, discussions and activities. Therefore, subscribing to classical theories of Republicanism is impersonal; it fails to fully grasp the struggles, passions and motivations of individuals with the group. The clear connection as right-wing American citizens, under which all civil rights apply, is itself vague and nuanced to differentiate in-group versus out-group status. However, suffice it to say, being and American citizen is one, if not the *only*, identity around which all MTP members can relate.

Identity Construction

The construction of a collective identity, as described in Taylor and Whittier (1992) study of the lesbian-feminist movement, is threefold, (1) the construction of *boundaries*, which “refers to the social, psychological and physical structures” that differentiates between the challenging group from the dominant groups (2) the development of a *group consciousness* which occurs when a group defines its collective grievances and goals and realizes its interests (3) and a process of *negotiation* that subordinate groups use to “resist and restructure existing systems of domination” (Taylor and Whittier 1992: 104). Each step of the process helps to solidify a group’s cohesion thereby making them more effective and sustainable.

First, a discussion on establishing *boundaries*: Collective identity is essential in social movement to foster a common understanding of those who are in the “in-group” and those in the “out-group”. As Hirsch (1990) explains, polarizing the enemy can generate more support for the movement and can actually strengthen group commitment. It is possible, then, to generate a collective consciousness based on the boundaries the group has negotiated. Imagine, for example, a group of track athletes at University College decides to compete against their rival school, State School, merely because they do not wish their enemy to succeed at the national level. The athletes at University College all train for separate events, become self-determined, and on the day of the meet separately win their specified events. The team collectively defeats State School, which results in a win by University College. Whether or not they recognized it, the individuals representing University College became a team, a collective group, whose indirect organization led them to a win, despite their individual pursuits and interests. The only thing they shared in common prior to the competition was their affiliation with a school that rivaled State School.

Applying this analogy to the Tea Party, we can see the construction of an identity built on what the group is *not*, as opposed to who they *are*. While the stories and histories of the four Tea Party Portraits painted above appear to be dramatically dissimilar from one another, they actually share one commonality that is crucial to the movement: they are vehemently anti-liberal. In fact, we could say that liberal ideology for the Tea Party is virtually anything to the left of the far right end of the political spectrum. Members of the MTP even criticize some Republicans as being too heavily dependent on government officials. Liberalism is the enemy, or the “rival” of the Tea Partiers. Tea Party Patriots do not support Democratic President Barack Obama. They are not tolerant of most social programs including welfare, healthcare, or government bailout programs. They are not socially progressive, meaning that they, for the most part, do not support pro-choice campaigns, gay-marriage legislation, affirmative action, gun control, immigration, environmental protection, or legal clemency. Alternative solutions are rarely expressed in Tea Party meetings.

This is not unlike other right-wing movements who which tend to be more identifiable by what they are *against*, rather than what they are *for* (Durham 2007). Anti-liberal does not necessarily naturally direct a person into a particular form of conservatism, nor does it imply a specific political perspective or ideology. They are also Libertarians (who as described in chapter three are less interested in government and more interested in personal freedoms), Constitutionals (whose strict adherence to Constitutional governance nearly eradicates all subsequent policies), Independents, and so on. Even Skocpol and Williamson (2011) note that many Tea Partiers affiliate with the Republican Party, but not all¹⁷. An individual I met at the Tea Party meetings (a “Specialist”) is running for State Senate under the Republican ticket. Up to the point of our interview, he thought the Tea Party

¹⁷ Specific numbers or percentages were not provided.

was an actual political party. I told them they were not officially a party to which he replied, “I think they’d be a stronger force if they were. I mean to come up with a solid platform and goals stating what they want to accomplish.”¹⁸ This suggests that the MTP has established a vague set of principles, on which their entire organizational infrastructure rests.

Evidence of the variance of political ideas is demonstrated monthly during the Tea Party meetings. Each month a guest speaker presents a controversial issue in contemporary American society. The presenter is always thoroughly informed on the “errors” of government policies currently in place, yet solutions to the problem are rarely posited.¹⁹ This is likely due to the understanding that resolutions to those issues may differ widely among group members. For example, from participant observation, interviews, and public media, it is clear that most Tea Partiers are not pro-immigration. However, they do not all share similar perspectives on whether there should be a wall built on the border of the United States and Mexico, implying that for a political organization, the political orientation among group members is quite varied.

During the February meeting of the Patriots, a retired military officer presented his personal photos taken in southern New Mexico in the last ten years showing the rise of pollution, violence and sheer volume of illegal immigration into the country. Some members of the audience shouted, “Export them all! To the third generation!”²⁰ Others blamed the government for wasting military funding on a problem that could be resolved with the construction of the wall. Still others suggested we close our borders all together, since the United States was deemed overpopulated already with “colored immigrants”. All opinions

¹⁸ Note the use of third person

¹⁹ I discuss the absence of suggested resolutions to government problems in Tea Party meetings in subsequent chapters.

²⁰ That is, the third generation of Mexican American immigrants living in the United States.

expressed could be identified as “conservative” but on far different levels: socially conservative, versus religious conservative versus economically or politically conservative. As I identified in chapter three the breadth of interpretation of the word “conservative” varies with many participants in the Tea Party, making it difficult to generate or typify what a Tea Party individual really believes (Skocpol and Williamson 2001).²¹

The construction of a collective identity based on out-group features is unlikely a purposive attempt by the Tea Party to bring about *group consciousness* within the Tea Party. Collective identity not only provides an organizational purpose or an identity, which delineates insiders with outsiders, it also produces positive feelings for other members of the group smoothing over differences of perspectives between participants (Polletta and Jasper 2001). For example, some group members may accept the ideological diversity in the group, while others may not recognize it at all. Some may be receptive of the Christian rhetoric as a way to foster group unity, while others simply tolerate it. Nonetheless, the group sustains itself despite challenging traditional definitions of collective identity by negotiating identities: *If I am able to share my political beliefs and have them reaffirmed by group members, I will accept the political identities of others.*

I contend that a fraction of the Tea Party identity is rooted in mutual understanding of one another’s attempt to remain an individual in a cultural system where we are allegedly being dominated by authorities. Here, the group establishes a sense of *we-ness* that comes from the Tea Partiers efforts to be self-aware and aware of the differences of distinct individual biographies to be reframed in more collective and structural terms (Taylor and Whittier 1992; Taylor and Whittier 1995). This collective understanding or group

²¹ Dietrich (2012) found similar responses in a content analysis of webpages from Texas-based conservative groups.

consciousness among Tea Party members comes from the Tea Party's culture to preserve or restore individual freedom as rooted in the Constitution. This idealized goal is affirmed and reinforced through a range of cultural materials such as narratives, symbols, verbal styles and rituals (Polletta and Jasper 2001: 285).

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the religion practiced in the Tea Party is not necessarily spiritual in nature; rather it is deeply rooted in America's civil religion, generating a sense of solidarity by binding people to what they do have in common: United States citizenship. And since religious affiliation can immediately create a sense of ease, trust, loyalty (Smith 1996), which for a group as suspicious and conspiratorial as the Tea Party, is a sacred component essential for establishing trust with others in the group. Religion's capacity to establish a clearly defined set of cultural norms and rituals provides an interpretive framework for movement goals, deeply embedded in the sacred. In the previous chapter, I suggest that religious culture is the group's sacred cultural toolbox. Here, a master frame is used by Tea Partiers to create a shared identity through religious rhetoric and cultural and structural resources as a way to reinforce morality. Moreover, as mentioned in chapter five, utilizing the cultural toolbox that religious culture provides establishes a common sense of the sacred among MTP members. Without it, the Tea Party might not have found the emotional connection necessary for the group to reach collective effervescence.

While religion does provide the cultural tools to solidify group commitment, it does not cover the entirety of Tea Party identity, especially when only a small fraction of Montana Tea Partiers actually identifies themselves as Christians. Therefore, we must ask what other cultural characteristics Tea Partiers have in common. The demographic information provided by Skocpol and Williamson in their 2011 study of the Tea Party indicates that the individuals

who claim to be supporters and sympathizers of the Tea Party share some similarities, allowing sociologists to typecast a “typical Tea Partier” (see chapter one). Skocpol and Williamson cite an April 2010 survey completed by the *New York Times* and CBS News which states that, “Americans who identify themselves as Tea Party supporters tend to be Republican, white, male, married and older than 45” (as referenced in Skocpol and Williamson 2011: 23). While that is important information to note, it still does not tell the sociologist much about what contributes to group cohesion or commitment ideologically. For example, what do individuals believe about political involvement in the private sphere, strategies to decrease the deficit, the social ‘moral’ responsibilities of government and when and where regulation is permitted. Indeed, finding a common collective identity requires more investigative, analytical work than cannot be provided by close-ended survey questions. Therefore, I sought to discover the deeper meaning-constructions of collective identities by self-described Tea Partiers through interviews, discussion and participant observation in the Montana Tea Party.

Individuals in the Collective: Portraits of a Patriot

Before each MTP meeting, Patriots would engage in conversation with one another, in-between the rows of chairs and near the doorways greeting other members as they approached. As a participant observer in the MTP meetings, I noted ways in which the Patriots interacted with each other: Affirming one another’s grievances, and consenting with one another regarding their distaste for the elected officials in office. It was not until I began reviewing my field notes that I realized that not one conversation overheard in these meetings

was of a personal nature. Every spoken word was either politically or economically driven with a very antagonistic tone against the government, or, alternatively, an impersonal conversation about the duty of American Christians to claim back God's land. This religious discussion was so politically charged, it nearly surpassed civil religious discourse.

The content of these conversations is less important than is the more daunting idea that these individuals do not seem to have a stake in the personal lives of their fellow Tea Party members, with whom they were attempting to restore the American ideals of freedom and liberty. However, the Tea Party movement doesn't seem to require that participants be fully aware of the historical factors that led to the rise of the modern day movement. For as the data demonstrates, the multiplicity of motives among individuals was so variegated, that there may not be a collective or shared identity among members, beyond radical conservatism, libertarianism or, more accurately, anti-liberalism. Curious about the different categories of conservatives participating in the Tea Party, in my interviews, I asked respondents to tell me why and how they became involved in the local Tea Party Patriots movement. The variance of responses demonstrated variety, as each member expressed a different motive for their involvement. However, there were particular thematic codes I discovered that led me to categorize Tea Partiers into a quadripartite classification system: Label-Rejecter, the Philosopher, the Specialist, and the Nonconforming Idealist. Below I recount four individuals whose biographies, experiences and interactions with the Tea Party exemplify the each category and exemplify their commitments – or lack of commitment – to the Montana Tea Party. Each individual below is an actual Tea Party member, though they have been assigned pseudonyms to protect their identities.

The Label-Rejecter

The Label-Rejecter is a paradoxical classification or “label” for this person. The Label-Rejecter participates in Tea Party meetings, is vocal about their conservative beliefs, has no real history of political organizing, though demonstrate a concerted effort for restoring “true democracy” to America. Despite their very real presence in the local movement, they may directly deny any affiliation with the Tea Party. When asked why he or she participates, they might argue that they merely attend meetings to get information. When asked if they would agree with the ideals of the organization, they would hold that while they may agree with the fundamental Tea Party principles, they would not call themselves as such. When asked to self-identify, then, they might refer to themselves as a “free-thinker”. Fair enough, yet for citizens in an alleged oppressive government, the Label-Rejecter might fear association with a narrow-minded organization, which may eventually prohibit him from making his own reality.

Hal, for example, is a retired construction worker. I met him at the first Tea Party meeting I attended in September 2011. He approached me saying, “You don’t look like you belong here!” This sparked a conversation on the direction of my research, the purpose of my study, and my general interest in the culture and structure of the Tea Party. We exchanged emails and as of that day, I began receiving dozens of emails from Hal under a handle he uses to publish commentaries in newspapers and online blogs. I received a total of 59 emails in the first four months of contact. These emails included commentaries on cold fusion scandals, articles promoting the reintegration gold and silver standards as the United States currency, references to German textbooks on economic revitalization and the like. Needless to say, he was very eager to meet with me to help me with my project, and to share with me

his thoughts on the current economic situation of the United States, and to share his conspiracy theories about liberal (or “socialist”) domination of the American political system.

After cordial conversation at lunch in which we discussed what the group had been doing and whether the meeting that evening was going to be interesting, I steered the conversation toward my interview questions. His response shocked me, for if there were any individual in the group I would identify as the quintessential Tea Partier, it was Hal. When asked how long he had been a part of the group he replied:

Your presumption that I am a member of the Tea Party is generally incorrect. I have been criticized for presenting points of view that some of those people think are socialistic. For instance, I do not believe that money need be based on gold or silver, and I do believe that the banking system should be owned in a socialistic fashion with the banks in an agency relationship to the people.... I never join protests nor have I signed any petitions in the past ten years. I attend meetings of all types just for self-edification.

Hal did not attend the meeting that day in February, or any other meetings for the duration of my participant observation. His conservative economic perspective was clearly aligned with that of the Tea Party and from our informal conversations, I know of his disapproval of President Obama’s “socialist agenda.” He believes that the government is in a conspiracy to achieve the One World Order (see chapter three), and is attempting to eliminate all private industry so that it is placed in the hands of the government. I also know he agreed

with the conservative social opinions expressed at the meetings (from wolf relocation to government-sponsored programs to healthcare). Yet, he rejected membership. This seemed frivolous, yet by denying his very apparent active participation in the Montana Tea Party, he may have convinced himself that he was not part of the MTP organization. Perhaps due to his lack of active participation, perhaps because he did not want to be labeled as an actual Tea Partier. Unfortunately, I did not have the opportunity to inquire why commitment to the Tea Party may be disconcerting because I did not hear from Hal after that meeting, nor did I receive any more emails save an invitation to attend a local performance at the Children's Theater.

Hal's rejection of the Tea Party label may be interpreted in a number of ways. Among them, it may indicate that a) he truly did not feel connected to the group based on his understanding of what the group represents; b) he chose not to be pigeonholed into a particular political or social organization; or c) he interpreted his involvement as individual "self-edification", which seems to imply a personal ethical endeavor rather than a collective pursuit, thereby rejecting a collective identity that may or may not be discernible in the local Tea Party group.

The Philosopher

The Philosopher, as his or her name label etymologically suggests, is the lover of wisdom. They absorb every piece of information they are fed, internalize it, and then through the process of externalization objectify its reality. This process, as suggested by Luckman and Berger in 1967, is known as the phenomenology of knowledge. The social construction of ideas determines how an individual legitimizes their sense of reality; The Philosopher

adopts the ideologies of him or her around him so they feel connected with their social surroundings. When asked why he participates, he might answer education. When asked how she came across this group, she might answer that she did not want to be the only one believing what she believe to be true. She needed a social group to help reaffirm her conservative perspective. Their commitment to the group, therefore, is rooted in social responsibility to legitimize the reality of others who think – or philosophize – as they do, in order to maintain the social construction of their reality.

Phil is a retired forester. He lives with his wife and two dogs (no children) in a decent sized home with a large garden and plenty of acreage for entertaining guests. I know, because I was strongly encouraged to visit so Phil could show me the PowerPoint slide show he created to describe why a radically conservative ideology, rooted in free enterprise and small government, was the morally correct approach to politics. The title of the slideshow was called “The Quest for Civilization” implying his own personal quest for truth in the modern era. Phil’s search began following the election of President Barack Obama in 2008, “The entire country had turned liberal,” he said, “and I honestly couldn’t understand why anyone would vote for him.” He felt very alone in his ideas so began to pursue liberal politics: “I was on the quest to become liberal, but the more I read, the more it seemed to not make sense. No one could give me a reason on why liberalism was the moral answer.” The slideshow focuses on the contrast of communism and socialism versus conservatism and capitalism with morality being the central theme. Phil posed questions such as, “What is the natural state of man?”, “What is the role of the government?”, and “Are men inherently good or evil?” and the like.

In a later meeting with Phil, a fellow Patriot named Tom chose to join us. Phil monopolized the discussion, recounting this story of his “conversion” to conservatism. He said he was lucky he noticed the changing temperature of national politics that was leading America down the road to destruction. He saw this, he claims, only because of his intellectual pursuits. The Tea Party group was the only group he could find that “saw” what he saw. Below is an excerpt from our conversation:

Phil: It was a frog boil and I jumped out! That’s what it was! You know what the frog

boil analogy is? It slowly gets you. But [my ignorance of the situation] was because I was so confused. I didn’t know what was going on. Nobody could answer my questions. And if you can’t answer my question, why would you keep going and...yeah. So I thought, “Well, actually I thought I was going to become liberal. I mean that was my intent. I thought my logic was bad. So I thought I would to look into it [liberalism], but they have to answer my questions first [like is man a moral creature or not]. And as I looked into it, I realized I have to go down toward that ladder, toward a [political/social] reality which I did, but I knew what I was looking for, and I actually found it! So all that stuff...I think I’m a little bit different from everyone else, because I’m approaching it from a very core philosophy, a core philosophical foundation.

Tom: What’s your core foundation?

Phil: Do you believe man is who he is? Or do you think he can be improved on? Or the polar opposite of human nature?

Tom: I believe man can improve himself.

Phil: And that natural state of man is capitalism. And capitalism is private property.

Tom: That's where I come in... [discussion on land rights down the Bitterroot Valley]

Phil then describes his pursuit of a group or organization that stressed this natural state of man in their mission and found himself in the Tea Party. According to his story, he did not find himself in meetings necessarily join to change the way of American politics. He looks at the organization as a way to validate his moral perspective on the world. At one point I asked whether he was religious, assuming that his strong moral convictions would lead him to explore some sort of spiritual truth. After much thought, he admitted to not knowing much about religion. He does not believe in religion as an institution because he says it does not empower the people enough, but can respect the members of the Tea Party who are Christian. This seemed contradictory to me, so I asked him to describe how he interpreted what the Tea Party is. He replied, "The Tea Party is all about individuality. All

they want is to be left alone! To have people stop stealing from them (you know, through taxation), and let them live their own lives.”

In essence, it appears that Phil’s reason for joining the Tea Party was to find a community that shared his ideology and that shared his perspective on what is moral (human enterprise) and just (individualism) and what is not legitimate authority (government control of morality through legislation). However, he also recognized the variety of individuals in the group and even recognized the individual internalization of what it means to be a conservative, while maintaining that all the individuals in the Tea Party are disgruntled and have a list of grievances against the government. When asked what the goals were of the movement, he did not have a response, other than that his participation is due to mere interest in the values the Tea Party represents: liberty, economic freedom, and justice for all.

The Specialist

The Specialists were easily identifiable in the Montana Tea Party. These are individuals who are political zealots about one piece of legislation. I do not use the term “zealots” lightly here: the radical, sometimes extreme, measures they take to inform the public are vehement, vociferous, and at-times verbally violent. The specialists join the Tea Party because it is a social and political group that allows them to share their conservative convictions and expect to find a receptive, encouraging audience. The fact that the group is aiming to “restore democracy” through Constitutional renewal disinterests them. Rather, they participate to feel like they are part of a group of people who are working feverishly against social progress with their own particular political agendas.

Debbie is a passionate, zealous and goal-oriented conservative woman. She is a strong supporter of the pro-life movement in Montana and has dedicated her entire adult life to reversing the Roe versus Wade Supreme Court Decision of 1973. She landed in the Tea Party by asking to put up a poster board at the meetings promoting the pro-life campaign. Our interview was quite stifled to begin. When asked if she was a churchgoer she said yes, but did not connect her moral convictions with any spiritual convictions of note. When asked whom she voted for in the previous presidential election she said Ron Paul. After trying to figure out where she stood in terms of her perspective on economic, political, and social affairs, she finally retorted, “I don’t claim labels anymore. I do not identify at all. I only make decisions on my moral convictions.”

Debbie appeared to be another “Label-Rejecter”, but the interview then quickly turned when I asked the simple question about her current place of employment. She paused for a long time, sighed, then gave the following response: “Oh boy. You ask a hard question! [Long pause] It’s my life! It’s my life! It’s all I can tell you. I don’t have any other motive to do it other than it’s what I live to do!” The interview turned into a sixty minute conversation on what she does to promote pro-life in Montana. It was a captivating discussion with facts and figures to embellish the story. Some of these statistics I later researched to verify her allegations, many of them were exaggerated or based on false information. Despite her passion and courage of conviction in the interview, I attempted to redirect our conversation to political and economic matters. She had no interest in discussing those topics unless they referred to some facet of her pro-life campaign. She believes the Tea Party is a group that tries to bring individual freedom. When asked about her level of involvement with the

Patriots specifically, she responded: “I’m more focused more on this [the pro-life movement]. Which is a very specific angle of freedom.”

Debbie does identify as a Tea Partier, but her understanding of what that means is questionable. It appears that she participates in the meetings because she knows that those around her will sympathize with her pro-life perspectives. She distributed petitions at every meeting to change the wording in the state Constitution to allow personhood to “pre-born” or “un-born children.” She provides resources for people who want to take the information back to their churches to start a campaign at their church. She tries to recruit members to assist her with the “40 Days of Life” protest, which occurs twice a year and involves picketing outside abortion clinics. Her identity lies solely in this piece of political legislation.

Debbie’s primary identity lies in her role as the leader behind the pro-life movement in Montana, and nothing more. Her political perspectives, economic perspectives, social perspectives circumvent that very issue. She attends Tea Party meetings, but only to validate a socio-political perspective by which she lives. Recall that only 65 percent of tea partiers claim to be pro-life (McKenna 2010: 45) however what other organization in society will grant someone like Debbie the opportunity to present her political information to a group of individuals? It may be that Debbie’s involvement in the Tea Party is strictly a strategic effort to gain more public support for a cause that has enveloped her entire identity as an individual.

The Nonconformist

Nonconformist is the most common classification I gave to Tea Party individuals. These are individuals who have an aggressive, antagonistic perception of the American

economic and political system. Rather than searching for facts, these individuals make it clear that they are opposed to any and everything the government does. Whether it be the liberals or the conservatives, neither group does it right. Most of them are libertarians, but their perspective seems almost anarchical rather than libertarian. They hold an “ideal” of what the United States should look like, albeit an unrealistic ideal of pure individualism with limited governmental authority, which is nearly impossible in the complex modern world. However, their strong conviction in achieving these ideals is what led them to the Tea Party; a group opposed to government intervention and seeking social reform. The Nonconformist, therefore, is the member who embeds the ideological structure of the national Tea Party into the smaller chapters, always reminding others why they are there every week.

Mark is a twenty-five year old film and radio producer. He makes documentaries for groups such as the John Birch Society, the Calling all Conservatives organization in the Bitterroot Valley and the Montana Tea Party movement. I met Mark at a Tea Party sponsored event that he was hired to film and produce on his website. Following the presentation that evening, I approached the guest speaker and the local Tea Party organizer who was chatting with Mark as I approached. He contacted me the day following the event and we met for coffee shortly thereafter. He was adamant about not being recorded, which seemed ironic given that he is a radio/documentary producer and owns his own recording studio. However, after three or four coffee and beer meetings throughout the course of my data collection I realized why he would wish not to be recorded. Mark, like Hal, also uses an alias for his political activities as a way to protect and compartmentalize his personal interests from his professional pursuits.

Mark believes the world operates in black and white. He is quick to identify winners and losers, friends and enemies, and those in the right and those in the wrong in American society. Having completed only one year at the University of Montana, he claims he started as a liberal, but the more he became involved in local politics - as a consequence of his job - his viewpoint changed. He now attends the meetings of the conservative organizations he films as well as becoming an active member in the local Republican Central Committee (despite his true Libertarian loyalties) and has even recently volunteered to serve as a local precinct in the upcoming elections.

What is unique about Mark's description of his involvement in all of these groups is his use of the third person. "The Tea Party people do this..."; "The John Birch Society believes that..." "Members of the Libertarian Party have this perspective..." and so on. I noticed this personal detachment or impersonalization immediately and asked him what he fundamentally believed. His response:

Mark: Challenge authority!

Interviewer: That sounds anarchist.

Mark: It's not anarchy; it's holding the government accountable.... [Proceeds to discuss the questionable authenticity of President Obama's birth certificate.]... It is important for U.S. citizens to challenge whoever is in government. That's what the early patriots did, and that should continue.

It appears that the common threads among Mark's political associations are groups that challenged the *current* authority in power. The conservative groups listed above are all challenging the current liberal administration while vilifying the face behind the movement: Democratic President Barack Obama. If Mark's underlying political perspective, is to challenge the *status quo*, what better place to do so than the most popular outspoken anti-administration political group in present-day American society? But what of his loyalty to the group? Why not use "we", "us", "our" group when discussing the Tea Party?

Evidently, Mark's ties within the group itself are weak. He is the youngest active member by at least two decades²² and internally disassociates himself as being one of them by always displacing himself from the group in conversation. Mark claims that his job "pushes [him] in the direction of other conservative people." He admits to occasionally having beers with some people and then "try to figure out what they believe" and compare their perspectives to his own. I was invited to one of these beer gatherings along with Phil (mentioned above) and another Tea Party sympathizer, Dan. A conversation about what is "just" and "lawful" dominated the conversation for over an hour. Dan, an older man and MBA student at the University of Montana, (whom I classified as a "Label-Rejecter") cited Supreme Court decisions (e.g. Roe versus Wade) and referred to the United States Constitution, the Bible as "authorizes" for Tea Party activists. Despite his quoting the authority of scripture and the authority of the Constitution, Mark did not seem to agree with any statement made, but instead encouraged debate for the sake of arguing an alternative viewpoint.

²² With the exception of one young couple who began bringing their newborn baby to the meetings in January 2012.

Becoming involved with the Tea Party from Mark's perspective has little to do with religious morals, policy advocacy, or any other sense of community. Rather, it has more to do with what the Tea Party *does not* represent; that is, the status quo. The Tea Party, for Mark, is a forum where individuals gather to discuss how to avoid conforming to societal standards. Thus, his identity with the movement rests not with what can be done to change the American political system; rather it represents an *ideal* of non-conformity, which drives Mark's economic, social and political ideals.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that identity construction in the Tea Party is activists' way of personalizing their political ideologies while only figuratively associating with a political group to legitimate their grievances or to validate their non-liberal ideology. Employing the rituals, symbols, and rhetoric associated with civil religion provides a common sense of purpose and shared understanding, yet does not necessarily distinguish in-group members from out-group members. Instead of focusing on the similarities among individuals *within* the group, they identify more as individuals who collectively identify what they are *not*: anything left of far right on the political spectrum.

In my interviews with Tea Party individuals, not one respondent claimed involvement with a clear political purpose or goal in mind; rather it was a place they could go to vociferously express their frustrations. Articulating their place in the Tea Party movement was quite difficult for the members. Clearly, individualism is a key part of the culture, as

described in the previous chapter, and is validated here by measuring individual and group perceptions of identity.

The Montana Tea Party contains a diverse group of individuals whose reasons for participation, moral convictions and levels of involvement vary, but can be broad categorized into one of four types of personas: the Label Rejecter, the Philosopher, the Specialist, and the Non-conforming Idealist. Involvement in the MTP affirms their identity and gives them a sense of purpose or belonging. However, the identity of the group as a whole is not clearly defined. Take the example of Mark, the non-conforming idealist. He knows he is not liberal, so he involves himself in a number of conservative groups despite the variation of political perspectives each group represents. Hal assumed the group shared his convictions, yet rejected the label of Tea Party because either he was unclear about what he or the group believed, or he felt that by calling himself a Tea Partier, he would feel too connected or ideologically owned by the group. Debbie had little to no interest or investment in political, economic or social issues presented that strayed from her pro-life campaigning. As long as the group was (mostly) pro-life, she was satisfied with her level of participation.²³ Phil thought he would become liberal but quickly realized that ideological orientation did not coalesce with his own, so he “decided to be a conservative” and found a group that reaffirmed his sense of reality. The way he discusses his steps toward the Tea Party is quite vain, trying on a political and moral ideology as though he were trying on a pair of pants. In fact, he continues to ponder just what “conservative” means and loses himself in his thoughts, books, and philosophies. However, one thing he does know - an identity he shares with other Tea Party Patriots - he is *not* a liberal.

²³ Approximately 65% of Tea Partiers claim to be pro-life (McKenna 2010: 45).

Once identity is embedded and understood, the group is equipped to make strategic choices for collective action. As indicated above, participation in the Montana Tea Party may have less to do with collective action, but instead be a political group aiming to represent traditional Republican American politics. In the following chapter, I examine how culture and identity in the Montana Tea Party determine the dynamics of collective action, based on the way the MTP perceives its status as a political group in society.

CHAPTER 8 - COLLECTIVE ACTION IN THE TEA PARTY

Individual and Collective Activities of the Montana Tea Party

For Tea Partiers, their various interpretations of participation in the movement challenge the construction of the collective identity, unless they agree to negotiate with their fellow activists to come to a consensus on how to engage in contentious politics. As Clemens writes, “The answer to ‘who are we?’ need not be a quality or noun; ‘we are people who do these sorts of things in this particular way’ can be equally compelling” (1997:50). Indeed, the ways in which a group participates in political action indicates not only what the movement wishes to accomplish on their political agenda, but how the methods, strategies and levels of collective action.

This chapter continues to examine elements of Montana Tea Party culture, by describing how the culture constructed within the MTP influences the movement’s patterns of collective behavior and efforts at collective organizing. I continue to explore this notion following the “negotiation” of identities framework provided by Taylor and Whittier (1992) which argues that social movement participants negotiate decision-making processes and strategic choices for collective action. These decisions indicate how a group interprets their collective identity, or a group may develop collective identities based on those strategic choices decided upon within the group (Polletta and Jasper 2001: 293). Moreover, in this chapter I argue that social movement researchers ought to consider the various interpretations of “success” within a social movement. Rather than judging the successes or failures of a movement based on diffusion or policy change, scholars ought also to consider the internal

rewards the Tea Party culture provides for its constituents independently of public recognition, policy change, or empirical social progress.

Finally, taking the evidence from this study, I hypothesize what may define the Montana Tea Party's strategies and their tactical approaches to mobilization; what catalyzes movement support, and how internal rewards overall success may be achieved through various aspects of contentious political action. This proposition may also provide an explanation for why social movement scholars debate over the legitimacy of the Tea Party as a "movement," and help us better understand the potential trajectory of new conservative movements in the twenty-first century.

Collective Identity and Action

The ways in which Tea Partiers interpret their collective identity determines how they formulate political decisions and devise strategies of collective action. The challenge, then, is to identify which interests and ideologies have contributed to the group's strategic decisions about collective activities, and whether that is an accurate indication of the intentions of the Tea Party. I suggest that the Montana Tea Party participants experience and interpret their radical political culture in multiple ways. One way is by returning to the foundations of the Constitution: the first amendment's rights of freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, and the second amendment right to bear arms. One group in the Bitterroot Valley hosted an event targeting all conservative voices heard in the United States. The attempt to build a strong coalition of conservative beliefs failed, however, due to its ambiguous motive, aim and trajectory. The story below reflects the importance of a clear objective of any political group

in order to make an impact. Moreover, without a collective identity or a sense of purpose, a political group may dismember and eventually disappear.

Celebrating Conservatism

Celebrating Conservatism is the flagship organization that at one time was an aggregate of all conservative organizations, including all participating Tea Party organizations in the Bitterroot Valley. Celebrating Conservatism was the umbrella organization that encompassed the smaller conservative organizations representing smaller communities, where ranchers, farmer and school teachers are the leading political spokespersons. The group has since formed smaller coalitions in Missoula and Ravalli Counties. (I explain the reason for the division below). The Ravalli County Tea Party Patriots (RCTPP) is a group of individuals committed to adherence to the Constitution and united in accomplishing the goal of returning fiscal responsibility and limited government at the local, state and national levels through the exercise of political activism. According to the website:

Ravalli County Tea Party Patriots, Inc. is a non-partisan grassroots organization of individuals united by our core values derived from the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution of the United States of America, and the Bill of Rights as explained in the Federalist Papers. We recognize and support the strength of grassroots organization powered by activism and civic responsibility at a local level. We hold that the United States is a republic conceived by its architects as a nation whose people were granted “unalienable rights” by our Creator. Chiefly among these are the rights to “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” The Tea Party Patriots stand with

our founders, as heirs to the republic, to claim our rights and duties, which preserve their legacy and our own. We hold, as did the founders, that there exists an inherent benefit to our country when private property and prosperity are secured by natural law and the rights of the individual.

The Ravalli County Tea Party Patriots (RCTPP) claims to take charge of all conservative organizing in the county. Unlike the MTP group I observed, the Tea Partiers associated with the Ravalli County chapters had extraordinary conservative behaviors. As aforementioned, the history of conservative mobilization in the inland northwest gives way to extreme forms of mobilization. It is no wonder then that conservative groups, like Celebrating Conservatism, quickly rose in numbers after its inception, reaching hundreds within a few months, a large number of regular organizational attendees, given the small population of the area. Moreover, Celebrating Conservatism may attract members from the Montana militia, anti-Semitic groups such as Christian Identity, and supporters of the Freeman of Montana, given its broad-base appeal to all conservative groups in the region.

The group's founder, Jeanette Creason, had become increasingly frustrated at moderation of the Republican Party in the Valley. She said her time on the Ravalli County Republican Central Committee made her realize how ineffective it had become at fielding truly conservative candidates and eventually resigned from the committee. She was quoted in a 2010 newspaper article as saying, "The people they were choosing were not going to uphold the Montana Constitution...I realized I would actually have to fundraise for them, and that didn't line up with my beliefs" (Kelly 2010). An open supporter of former Alaska governor and 2008 vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin, Creason admired her religious

orientation and call to be more Constitutionally responsible (Neiwert 2010). From there, Creason followed the national trend of a more conservative “conservative” party: the Tea Party. By the end of 2009, Celebrating Conservatism was listed as a member of the national Tea Party Patriots organization. Residents of Hamilton recognized them by the large potluck dinners they held at the county fairgrounds attracting at least a couple of hundred supporters, which, for a town of 20,000, is quite an impressive portion of the population.

The group did not waste time in taking action against the political world. However, they did not start with trying to overturn federal laws or programs like “Obamacare” (that would come a few months later). Instead, 175 residents of Hamilton, Montana signed their names to a letter, crafted and submitted by Creason, reminding county officials of their oath to defend the Constitution, stating in the cover letter “the transcendent motive for this effort is to restore lawful government to Ravalli County.” Below is a list of stipulations addressed in the letter (as printed by the *Missoulian* in January 2010):

- The requirement of all federal employees and other U.S. representatives to obtain written permission from the sheriff with the support of the county commission prior to approaching any county citizen.
- To “absolutely prohibit” any governmental effort to infringe on the right to keep and bear arms, including restrictions on the kinds of weapons a person can possess, including fully automatic or silenced weapons.
- Prohibiting mandatory vaccinations.
- Prohibiting entrance into the county by all employees of the federal Environmental Protection Agency., which the group says is not a Constitutional arm of the federal government. “Much of the so-called support for environmental regulations is based

upon the dubious assumption that there is such a phenomenon as global warming, when, in fact, the majority of scientists globally agree that we are not experiencing global warming”

- Requiring the sheriff to form and command a county militia composed of able-bodied citizens 18 and older. “Women must serve, but not in a combat capacity unless the men are in danger of being overrun. It is understood that it is the sheriff’s duty to supervise the training of the militia for a minimum of three weeks every year.”

The petition certainly attracted the attention of local politicians as well as the residents of Ravalli and Missoula Counties who read about the letter in their local periodicals. Clearly, the intention was not for the county commissioners to step down, or to change any public law; rather it seemed to target the government in general, shedding light upon the misappropriations within the system and demanding the reassertion of Constitutional rights in Montana and beyond. Interestingly, the letter highlights both governmental (EPA, law enforcement) as well as individual rights (such as the second amendment right to bear arms). Thus explains the constant contradiction and lack of focus among Tea Party members: engage in responsible governing by targeting governmental authority figures, but allow them to keep their rights? This lack of clarity can be problematic for a group trying to enforce social change.

Liberty Convention

The Liberty Convention of May 2011 was the next major project developed from the Celebrating Conservatism group. Organized foremost by Jeanette Creason, the two-day

convention involved a lineup of conservative speakers includes some of the far right's most fiery advocates. This included Red Beckman, who has argued that the 16th Amendment to the US Constitution (which states that Congress may collect taxes on incomes) wasn't legally ratified; Richard Mack, who is a spokesperson for the rights of county sheriffs and state troopers over federal officers; Schaeffer Cox, a militia member, advocate and proselytizer; and Kitty Werthmann, who grew up under Nazi rule in Austria and parallels the American administration to that of Nazis and argues that federal propaganda will lead to the destruction of all rights.²⁴

Prior to the event, Creason was quoted as saying that convention's goal is to get more people involved in running for office, advocating before local government and supporting initiatives. "We are really open to people of all political persuasions, even though we're conservatives. What we really are all about is putting all the political and religious affiliations to the side and get this country back on course...What we're doing is providing education, allowing people to exercise their First Amendment rights" (Moore 2011).

The event opened with a short parade of about forty five people passing through downtown and along a bridge in downtown Missoula. The march ended on the University of Montana's campus at the Adams Center; home of the Grizzly basketball team and the largest venue in western Montana. The crowd was expected to reach about 5,000, with the hopes of reaching conservatives from around the United States and Canada. However, the first night of the convention only hosted about 250 people, only 5% of the predicted number. Allegedly, a map near the entrance of the Adams Center showed hometown pins from nine U.S. states and Alberta. The following day, vendors had set up tables and booths of a conservative

²⁴As described earlier, Werthmann returned to Montana in November 2011 as the keynote speaker at a Missoula Patriot meeting attracting hundreds from the Valley.

agenda. In the evening, a band called *The Lifers* performed for what was expected to be a large crowd, but ended up entertaining less than four hundred audience members, a number far below what Creason had anticipated for the gathering.

Since the disappointment of the Liberty Convention, there has been hardly any coverage of activity of the Celebrating Conservatism or RCTPP. The webpages have either been discontinued or haven't been updated since April 2010. No one in Hamilton could tell me where the meetings were moved, who was involved any more, or why the once-vibrant organization dissolved. Celebrating Conservatism is an example of how movements need to establish a collective identity in order to sustain membership and remain an active political and/or social force. In this case, the construction of identity was so weak and/or vague, that individuals felt no sense of accountability or connectedness to be a part of the major convention sponsored by a group that seemed to have quite high levels of involvement.

Indeed, a group may at some point lose its homogeneity and have to redefine or reconstruct a collective identity to incorporate more diversifying members of the organization. However, it is challenging to negotiate new forms of group consciousness when the group expands in size, in ideology or in purpose. For, if a collective identity is fragmented, there is no collective action. There is no *collective* or "we" group thought. I argue that lack of cohesiveness in Celebrating Conservatism led to its eventual disappearance and resulting in a failed movement.

Given the fragmented sense of identity in the Montana Tea Party, it is conceivable that they would meet the same fate as the other conservative organization in the valley. For both groups had high variance of "conservative" individuals. Participation meant a number of different things for a number of people. What makes these groups differ, however, is their

shared sense of purpose. As discussed in chapter seven, MTP members remained committed as a way to affirm and reaffirm one another's political and economic grievances. In doing so, their own grievances would be legitimated by others. But would this keep the group organizing, mobilizing and collectively engaged? This raises question on whether a fragmented identity could actually sustain a movement.

Montana Tea Party Culture in Action

Six months into my fieldwork with the Montana Tea Party, having attended dozens of meetings and other activities (such as special speakers, parties, happy hour unofficial meetings, etc), I had not witnessed a single public contentious politics *action*, nor was I aware of any impending plans to do so. I began to question the vitality of the "movement", and whether its collective behavior truly constituted the label of a social movement, in the traditional sociological sense. Recall, the definition of a social movement, according to Snow (2004:11) is:

a collective challenge to systems or structures of authority...as collectivities acting with some degree of organization (formal, hierarchical, networked, etc.) and continuity... primarily outside of institutional organizational channels for the purpose of challenging extant systems of authority, or resisting change in such systems, in the organization, society, culture or world order of which they are a part (italics in original).

Returning to this definition, I noted that I had documented little formal organization in the group, and had hardly witnessed any active forms of resistance or direct confrontation against authoritative social organizations. Curious to see what Tea Partiers themselves thought about group *inactivity* – not to imply political stagnancy, but rather the absence of collective activity.

I attempted to subtly approach these issues in my interviews. I asked Eliot, mentioned in chapter five, as an individual who was organizing a panel of politicians running for local or state offices in the upcoming elections, if he thought the Tea Party was still considered an active, political force from a public perspective. After all, I argued, there had not been much media coverage of the group in recent months, Eliot, responded:

The Tea Party is *very* active and vibrant in Montana. And there's the perception that the Tea Party is on the decline. Couldn't be further from the truth. But I understand why the perception is there. When the Tea Party started it was a grassroots reaction to what was going on. People could see that the country was headed down the wrong road. Especially economically and the level of debt and the uh inability to manage resources and finances by government at many levels was terrifying to all of us. And there was a reaction! And you saw 3 years ago, people were standing in front of the court house people holding signs up saying "Oh my God! Oh my God! What are we gonna do?" You know that was the genesis of the Tea Party.

But that didn't solve anything. I mean it –it brought awareness. It brought attention - you know the support from educational standpoint - but really didn't address the

problems; didn't propose solutions to the problems. And after that first year at looking at each other and saying "what are we going to do?" Leadership developed at several levels: local and organizational like the Tea Party Patriots and nationwide and ...that leadership recognized that we have to do something. So we got busy organizing local Tea Party groups. And fairly selectively, I mean, selecting people who were not only to worry about things but to make progress. We started organizing at state basis and the national organizations grew stronger. And instead of standing on corners with street signs and yelling a lot, we've gotten active in candidate selection and support and grooming. We got active in legislative at local and state levels. A lot of Tea Party people actually ran for office and got elected. And now we're a political force to be reconciled with. We're just a little bit under the radar. So you know the major media assume that since they don't see the signs on the street corner anymore, the Tea Party's dying couldn't be farther than the truth. The Tea Party has never been stronger. And especially in the state of Montana, the growth and strength of the organization has just been awesome.

Eliot's articulation of Tea Party activity is important for our understanding of the Tea Party's perception of their progress as a social movement, as an organization, and a legitimate political actor in America's public sphere. There are a few important points to note from Eliot's response. First, the receding publicity of Tea Party activity is not, in fact, indicative of a disappearing organization. Instead, Eliot interprets this period of abeyance as a restive period of seeking political renewal when people were literally asking themselves, "What are we going to do next?" In effect, Tea Partiers, while out of the public limelight,

were actively strategizing and engaging in dialogue on how to achieve movement goals. Therefore, according to Eliot (and others I characterize below), the alleged vitality of the movement is internal rather external, though he suggests the effects of the internal mobilization is external as they are making changes in society, one elected official at a time.

Second, Eliot recalls the process of establishing a Tea Party base in Montana through selective leadership at the local level. Leadership does not have any particular title as in other organizations (such as “President” of the local chapter). Instead, leadership constitutes any individual in the organization, which may be inspired to take ownership of a particular political action. The local leaders of the group I participated in had three primary organizers. I use the term organizers to indicate their delineated leadership roles. They organized meetings, conventions and were in charge of email lists. However, they did not forge any particular acts of contentious politics. Nonetheless, the organizational infrastructure, according to Eliot, did require a concerted effort of deliberation before the Tea Party could effectively mobilize.

Third, the ways in which the Montana Tea Party mobilizes or attempts to make social changes indicates the level of commitment of the group, which may influence the strategies employed by MTP organizers. For as Doug McAdam has noted, “The actions taken by insurgents, and the tactical choices they make represent a critically important contribution to the overall signifying work of the movement” (1996: 341). In Montana, the Tea Party is attempting to resist social change by inserting the politicians that agree with their conservative ideology into local and state offices, rather than taking up signs of protest. Moreover, Eliot claims that Tea Party individuals have been elected democratically. This indicates that the Tea Party works with the political structures in place, through “candidate

selection and support and grooming” rather than fight against those structures. This tactic not only suggests MTP respects political processes, but it also demonstrates their ingenuity, appreciation of, and level of commitment to democratic processes “instead of standing on corners with street signs and yelling a lot.” Moreover, this strategy prevents them from being directly attacked by the authority structures, as their confrontational tactics are – while forceful – remain mostly indirect.

Recall the goals of the Montana Tea Party: “to inform, educate, and empower all American Citizens with information necessary to restore the original intent of the republican principles contained in the founding documents, particularly The Declaration of Independence and the United States Constitution” (“Missoula Patriots”). Eliot’s assertion that the Tea Party is vibrant, active, and making progress may be true, even if the public may not see active signs of protest. From a scholastic perspective, the MTP has proved itself a successful organization for logical purposes. The Tea Party is a social and political movement urging government accountability, personal liberty, and a return to the Constitution. Therefore, how the Tea Party might organize, strategize and reify their ideology is essential not only to understand the dynamics of the Tea Party itself, but will also be an important contribution to the social movement literature on tactical innovation and variation of collective action within the Montana Tea Party, and perhaps conservative social movements more broadly. . A renewed interpretation of “success” allows us to theorize the functions of the Tea Party and how its success is achieved through its creation of a specific culture.

To Act or Not to Act: Approaches to Contentious Politics

Conservative movements, like populist movements, arise in a variety of forms to construct some measure of perceived stability and safety through collective action (Bertlet 2011:11). For the Montana Tea Party, membership in the organization alone is the most important, since it represents an existing social group that intends to hold the political system accountable to citizens. It allows individuals to discuss political restoration, which then provokes ideas on participation in public protest. For many MTP members, however, this is where contentious politics begins, and ends.

Since the inception of the Montana Tea Party in 2009 very few activities were identifiably forms of public mobilization. Other than the April 15, 2009 Tax Day protests, the public displays of collective action in the MTP have been sporadic, as most MTP members have not participated in any other public demonstration. The mobilization that has occurred in the MTP was indirect forms of protest: petitions, boycotting, letters to the editor (about half of the individuals I interviewed write letters on a regular basis) or participation in individual action against state institutions. These individual and collective acts of protest specify levels of personal and group commitment to the Tea Party mission.

Individual Action

In my interviews with Tea Party members, I asked when each individual first engaged in political action. All said they had never protested, or done anything outside of attending political rallies, meetings or conventions. While MTP individuals were not hesitant to blame national political figures (i.e. President Barack Obama), they were less willing to talk about national policies and were more concerned with the issues that effected them directly (such

as public versus private land use and the liberal versus conservative representation on the city council). When asked why individuals did not participate in broader social issues, respondents essentially implied the superiority of their own individual pursuits of justice, rather than the collective pursuits identified by the organization itself. One older, male MTP member asserted that as citizens of Montana, one must “take responsibility for your own actions”, and not let authorities tells you how to act. “One is obedience the other is your responsibility. Two very different things.”

Some MTP members chose neither obedience nor proactive responsibility. For few others, taking responsibility is exactly what some members did. One individual act of public political action that was a popular tactic among MTP members is writing letters to the editor. About half of my respondents regularly share their conservative views about local social and political issues to the local newspaper, which has a community reputation for producing more liberal, rather than conservative, journalism. In a simple internet search on the local newspaper website, I came across thirty-six of these letters written from March 2009 to August 2012. 50% of the articles pertained to government dissatisfaction at the state, county or city levels, 23% was about election fraud at the city level, 36% was about various aspects of economic development, 7% was about job creation directly. 5% pertained to supporting oil pipes in state, and 5%, I coded as “other” which included two letters: one letter pertaining to preserving a stable social structure for future generations, the other a commentary on the dissatisfaction with local newspaper reporting. Two of my respondents claimed to write letters weekly using a secret pseudonym. Clearly not all of these letters were published weekly, so while I could systematically decipher who these individuals were, I cannot be certain so therefore did not include those names in my search.

Publishing letters to the editors is one way for an individual or group to publically advocate for the principles to which he or she adheres. These letters are not necessarily indicative of public resonance or editorial agreement with the issues debated, however. Rather, editors must uphold democratic principles by allowing individual diatribes about a particular issue to be made public as a way to foster public debate and to provide every individual with the right to exhibit his or her opinions (Wahl-Jorgensen 2001). In the MTP individual letters to the editor mentioned above, not one of them indicated party affiliation with the local MTP group, indicating individual pursuits of contentious politics. In the previous chapter, I argue that the collective identity of the Tea Party is rooted primarily in a common anti-liberal agenda. Yet MTP members' ideological variations that leads to a fragmented collective identity in the Montana Tea Party: they are individuals in a collective, rather than a collective fighting for a common cause. This does not imply, however, that there is an absence of contentious political action; rather, it may not be the way in which scholars have explored *collective* action in the past.

Collective Action

The “taking responsibility for your own actions” approach, which permeated MTP culture, may be the result of Montana’s geographic and cultural isolation from the rest of the United States. Indeed, many of my respondents have never lived outside of Montana, therefore not fully understanding or appreciating broader social issues that may be more prevalent in other regions of the country. For example, a very common grievance MTP members have with local and federal politics is the move toward stricter gun laws, which they interpret as a challenge to second amendment rights to bear arms. Gun culture in

Montana can be traced back to hunting, a metaphorical past time for survival, and an individual's right to protect him or herself. Hence, gun protection laws threaten individual rights. Whereas gun culture in other parts of the country may have more to do with honor, and defense, rather than for sport (Felson and Paré 2010).

The relative isolation of Montanans may result in political or cultural ignorance, or unfamiliarity with broader social problems at the very least. That is, some Montanans may not be fully aware of the social issues in the country because those issues are mostly absent from one's own social context. Therefore, in Montana, issues plaguing other regions may not be relevant in the Montana context. Locals, therefore, do not only perceive second amendment rights as unconstitutional, restricting gun ownership is not necessary in the Montana context. As a result, the MTP takes defensive action against their perceived loss of rights, rather than offensively promoting political change. The result of this political grievance is an ongoing discussion among Tea Party members about how and why the government wants to limit the abilities of American citizens to effectively defend and protect themselves. Clearly misunderstanding the intentions of the government, the MTP discuss this particular issue without actually enacting any counter-movement, since there is no government movement to counter. While this may be indicative of group or movement actively engaging civic discourse, these discussions are mostly outside the public sphere of influence, and confined within the boundaries of Montana Tea Party meetings.

During my field research, there was only one, single identifiable act of collective political action in the MTP group. It was pioneered by a Tea Party Patriot named Dolly, a social critic whose primary goal was to reveal the discrepancies in the electoral process in a medium sized town in the Bitterroot Valley. Her contention was that the election results in

2010 led to a predominately liberal city council resulting in very few conservative voices to push or prevent a “socialist agenda.” Convinced that the county miscalculated votes or engaged in election fraud, Dolly has written letters to the editor, to the state senate, to the state Supreme Court, and to other political groups around Missoula to encourage more accountability of our local officials.

At each MTP meeting, Dolly gives an update on the advances she’s made to try to have a recall, who she is communicating with, when she may possibly get to hand-count the ballots, and so on. Dolly’s standard address to the group lasts anywhere from ten to thirty five minutes, though not much is said that indicates progress, rather it is a discussion of how the city seems to be continually denying her access to public records. While most of Dolly’s political activities have been independently pursued, yet she earned a positive reputation among the Tea Partiers as an aggressive, committed Tea Party member with extraordinary perseverance when it comes to negotiating with government, be it at the local, state or federal levels. She receives loud applause and is lauded among Tea Partiers in casual conversation before and after meetings.

In March, Dolly asked her fellow Patriots to assist her in hand-counting ballots at City Hall the following week. A clipboard with a sign-in sheet was passed around the meeting hall for people to indicate interest, and at what time they were available. The following month, Dolly shared that three other Missoula Patriots went with her to count the ballots. Despite her seemingly high rapport with Tea Partiers, I was surprised at the low levels of participation in this public act of protest. Unfortunately, while Dolly was not willing to speak with me, or engage with me in any fashion, I was able to interview two of the men who participated in the action: Phil (the Philosopher archetype) and Tom, a farmer from a

rural town the Bitterroot Valley. Below is the conversation I had with these men following the counting of the ballots:

Interviewer: So you must be pretty involved if you went to the county courthouse to count ballots...?

Tom: I'm not really that involved! Other than this ballot thing.

Phil: I don't understand her really.

Tom: Who?

Phil: I mean she talks over my head.

Tom: Who? Dolly?

Phil: Dolly.

Tom: Yeah, Well, that's as involved as I've got. In that. You know, she needed help [counting] And she's put all this time into it, I figure it's the least we can do is help her count the dang things. I mean if you just leave one person to do all the work. How much can one person really do?

Phil: It was interesting, they had their lawyer there. And...people that were looking at the ballots, there was what six of us? Umm... we had someone from the county sitting right next to us actually handling the ballots.

Tom: [to Interviewer] You didn't weren't there? [Interviews shakes her head "no"]
Oh I thought you were there!

Phil: Actually handling the ballots, so we had to slide them, look at them then hand them back to him. But yeah it was pretty interesting.

Tom: It was quite a process

Phil: Yep. They were following the letter of the law

Tom: Well -I'm not, I'm just not, I'm probably the most uncivilized of the group....and I just it's not something I do. I don't look at numbers, I hate paperwork. We started, and Phil hands me the first sheet and I was trying to find the first name of the sheet... going through all these pages. I almost left! I was thinking I can't do this! I kept thinking "I can't do this! I can't even find the first name on the list"

Tom and Phil are not exactly typical MTP members. For, of the 40-50 Tea Partiers that attend a typical meeting, only 10% are actively involved. Only 10% of the MTP engaged

in the only group-level collective action of contentious politics that occurred between August 2011 and May 2012.

By participating in Dolly's political action, Tom and Phil demonstrated commitment to the group, and what the group represents, despite their lack of interest in the actual activity. I call this *peripheral action*; that is, participation that may or may not reflect the ideologies, perspectives, morals or opinions of the actor, in order to support the political undertakings of an individual whose actions represent the broader political endeavors of the group. Participation, therefore, is indirect or peripheral advocacy for the social movement organization. As in the right-wing white supremacist movements in the early 1920s, Klansmen could "transform individual grievances into collective grievances" while at the same time, appealing to "cultural identities" as a way to gain support among those who were not being directly affected by economic consequences" (McVeigh 2009: 66). Perhaps others in the group felt they reaffirmed the group's mission by appealing to the culture of the movement, rather than committing to particular activities itself. The statement of the Tea Party movement indicates that the intention of the group to hold the government accountable to ensuring rights and freedoms to citizens of the United States. Yet, perhaps, it extends beyond that.

Perhaps the purpose of the Tea Party is not to engage in contentious politics, but rather to reaffirm one another's conservative ideologies, as suggested in chapter seven. Participating in a protest or other political activity may instead be a symbolic activity so the group does have a public reputation as a contentious group, such as letter writing or passing out petitions. In which case, participation in itself is indicative of "success" because individuals were actively engaging in their rights as American citizens, challenging the

government in an effort to “restore” the Constitution, in accordance with the principles established in the Montana Tea Party mission statement.

Dialogue as Contentious Political Action: A forum for discontent

The erratic, infrequent, and idiosyncratic actions of contentious politics in the Montana Tea Party may indicate that participation or membership in the Tea Party has less to do with political action, and more to do with finding a gathering place where individuals share a culture of conservatism. But MTP membership – while not a direct or traditional method of protest – can be interpreted as an innovative tactic that constitutes as political action. Indeed, discussion, dialogue, and dissemination of information (both within the group and extending into the public as well) are the purpose for the Tea Party, at least in the Montana context.

Personal efficacy and validation of conservative ideologies is the implicit, manifest function of the Tea Party, while its unintended latent functions or implications serve an even greater purpose internally. I argue that meeting attendance, participation in email forums, conventions and other miscellaneous group activities serve to validate the conservative ideologies of Tea Party members while simultaneously providing community support to authenticate their actions and beliefs. In a social context where individualism and free thinking often leaves individuals socially isolated, finding an organization that supports individual thought, without requiring party membership is rare. The Tea Party fulfills this niche for many of the MTP participants.

Hart (2008) suggests a similar theory in his secondary analysis of a survey on the John Birch Society who argues that conservative organizations are merely groups where all conservatives congregate regardless of specific grievances. Hart writes:

Collective action culture is simultaneously an identity performance: practicing collective action is a public demonstration of being the type of person who can and will act collectively in the face of a social problem and, as such, is a member of a culture that values collective organizing. Rather than identity being predicated on the idiocultural²⁵ coherence within an SMO, acting collectively can also be a public sign of a more general movement identity and/or of adherence to a general collective action culture (2008: 122-123).

Hart's conclusion is significant, yet he utilizes survey data from 1965. Conservatism has since evolved and adapted to the changing progressive circumstances. Moreover, he suggests that John Birch conservatives gather together without necessarily agreeing to the anti-communist foundations of the John Birch Society itself. Hart's theoretical suggestion has little influence on social movement theory without empirical examples of social movement identity and culture that only qualitative, ethnographic studies may provide.

This argument does not presume that the Tea Party is simply a social gathering aimed at political gossip. Rather, it is a public sphere where conservative individuals engage in critical economic political, social discourse. Tea Partiers need a place, or a forum where

²⁵ Hart utilizes the term "idiocultural" from the definition given by Gary Allen Fine as, "a system of knowledge, beliefs, behaviors, and customs shared by members of an interacting group to which members can refer, and that serve as the basis for further interaction . . . This approach stresses the localized nature of culture, implying that . . . it can be a particularistic development of any group" (1987: 125).

individuals may openly express their discontent for dominant forces. This reflects the concept of *free spaces* which Poletta describes as, “small-scale settings within a community or movement that are removed from the direct control of dominant groups, are voluntarily participated in, and generate the cultural challenge that precedes or accompanies political mobilization” (1999:1). Futrell and Simi (2004) examined the multiple groups and organizations that make up the radically conservative White Power Movement, which include the Neo-Nazi movement, the KKK, and the Aryan Nation. These authors argue that the everyday practices, culture and submerged networks of the conservative activists contribute to collective identity and commitment of a socially marginalized and organizationally disconnected social movement. Futrell and Simi elaborated on Poletta’s description, then by providing a theoretical lens by which we can understand how *conservative* movements “materialize, communicate, and sustain” (2004: 20). They therefore interpret free spaces as:

[E]nvironments where participants nurture oppositional identities that challenge prevailing social arrangements and cultural codes. Free spaces are critical for cultivating the social networks that anchor oppositional subcultures, as participants feel safer to openly express and enact their beliefs than in other settings....Maintaining indigenous pockets of collective identity and linking them through transmovement spaces is critical to the White Power Movements’ ability to sustain a rich variegated movement culture. In other words, for the WPM, these free spaces *are* the movement (2004: 20, 38; emphasis in original).

Similar to the White Power Movement, the Tea Party is another example of a radically conservative movement, and that it is comprised of individuals representing a variety of conservative political interests. The MTP finds commonality rooted in “anti-liberalism” despite their ideological cleavages (such as pro-life versus pro-choice, religious versus non-religious, Republican versus Libertarian, etc.). As a result, achieving collective action is somewhat difficult, as the group cannot inspire enough passion around a single topic to inspire mass mobilization; hence, the erosion of Celebrating Conservatism.

Clearly, the inconsistent collective activities of the Tea Party makes it difficult to determine whether the movement is actually mobilizing, if it is disappearing, or if it is in a period of abeyance. The very fact that social scientists question its legitimacy as a social movement (as debated in chapter two) is due to the Tea Party’s inconsistent mobilization patterns. That does not necessarily imply movement failure, however. Social movement scholars tend to measure movement failure or reduction to the level of public protest. However, the empirical evidence reveals that groups with varying ideologies makes for a disconnected identity, thereby stifling collective political action and forms of public protest. But again, who is to say that *that* – public protest - is the actual intention of the Tea Party?

Manifest and Latent Functions and Consequences of the Tea Party

In order to determine the manifest consequences of the Tea Party – that is, their open, stated, and intentional outcomes, I return to the mission statement once again: “inform, educate, and empower all American Citizens with information necessary to restore the original intent of the republican principles contained in the founding documents, particularly

The Declaration of Independence and the United States Constitution” (“Missoula Patriots”). The active words in the statement – inform, educate, empower – say nothing about attempting social change. Their goals are to discuss the issues they consider to be challenging the documents that are the foundation of our country. Does the Tea Party inform and educate its constituents? Absolutely, albeit with a distinctively, aggressive political tone. Every meeting there was a new topic presented to the group so they could discuss their “reality” of a corrupted, overpowering government. Moreover, the letter writing campaigns to public media outlets, such as the local newspaper, attracted public attention to the issues that concerned the Tea Party.

Empowerment through the Media

Empowerment has also proven to be an efficacious outcome for the Tea Party movement. The media has been a salient factor contributing to both organizational as well as personal efficacy. The media has highlighted the elaborate costumes, bizarre protest signs and eccentric characters that are often found at Tea Party rallies around the country since its inception in 2009, all the while providing free publicity for the political agenda of the social movement organization (DiMaggio 2011). Whether or not the Tea Party earned rapport with the American people, or whether they generated mass public support from their media image, the Tea Party’s very intention to *inform* and *educate* was strategically carried out through the amount of airtime they were given during the first three years of its existence.

McAdam (1996) has identified three factors that contribute to the media’s attraction to a particular social movement: (1) disruptive actions as newsworthy; (2) ideational framing; and (3) the strategic dramaturgy of staging elaborate demonstrations, giving the impression

of a perceived political threat. Perhaps the amount of time the media spends broadcasting the extreme radical behavior of the Tea Party is the cause for public attraction to the Tea Party in the first place. The media is an important strategy for Tea Partiers to gain public recognition without actually having to *do* anything, other than be collectively organized, which was a way for Tea Partiers to practice their first amendment rights of freedom of assembly. Instead, the Tea Party has encompassed tactics that are relative docile compared the extreme conservative groups of the past. DiMaggio, who studied Tea Party groups in the Chicago area for two years, noted that, the National Tea Party was covered by the media hundreds of times consistently from 2009 to fall 2010, yet “Tea Party supporters were unwilling to participate in grassroots organizing, let alone engage in direct confrontation, civil disobedience or nonviolent direct action” (2011: 91).

The level of personal self-efficacy or pride was a theme in each of my interviews. Individuals felt that while they were not actively engaging in public action, they had a sense of purpose by merely participating in discussion. Phil (the Philosopher archetype) commented on his excitement about his place in the MTP by saying that it was not the charisma of the leadership that keeps individuals motivated and enthusiastic about the mission. Rather, it is the fact that they can organize individuals who did not know where else they could turn to talk about their conservative sentiments. He said, “I’m not saying that’s a bad thing – [the local organizer] just gets all of us together who felt alone after Obama was elected...Alone, feeling like we were the only ones that didn’t understand where our country was going.” How this personal efficacy translates into further acts of contentious politics has yet to be documented. However, we do know that the latent functions – or unintentional consequences of Tea Party activity – could go far beyond what the public expects from the

organization. Especially if their media presence is diminishing (DiMaggio 2011), providing a false impression of movement decline.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, an unintentional consequence of the Tea Party as a social movement is their indirect yet threatening internal acts of political contention within the confines of their semi-private meetings. This provides opportunities for discontented, conservative Americans to engage in contentious politics through discourse, peripheral action, and individual or occasional opportunities for political action. These unique characteristics require a new theoretical frame through which scholars ought to interpret forms of contentious politics, how this differs from progressive mobilization, and what this means for the trajectory of social movements.

The Cultural Dynamics of Conservative Mobilization

What new social movements aim to achieve on a societal level should be replicated in their own structure as a movement (Pichardo 1997: 415), so that the strategy fits the culture of the movement. For example, ideologically, if a movement desires gender equality, then gender equality will be practiced in their movement by allowing sympathetic men to have the opportunity to work alongside women's rights (see Taylor and Whittier 1992). In terms of organization: a communist revolution likely will not have any formal structure with identifiable leaders, thereby creating an unequal balance of power in their own social movement organization. In terms of strategy: If an anti-war movement seeks international efforts at non-proliferation, then their strategies and tactics will also be peaceful and non-combative. The Tea Party seeks resistance to change, thereby reacting defensively –

negatively – to social progress. The mission of the Tea Party to “*restore* the original intent of the republican principles contained in the founding documents” (“Missoula Patriots”). The statement implies *reactive* politics, rather than *proactive* political engagement. As a result, protests, rallies, demonstrations, petitions, ballot counting to prevent election fraud: each of these is a form of *reactive* political engagement.

Indeed, the Tea Party is not a political party; but not because it lacks organizational skills, charismatic leadership or a large, broad-base group of constituents. Rather, part of the strategy of the Tea Party is to resist co-optation with a political organization that then provides a specific ideological platform indicating which policies they do and do not support, and that would dictate how and when they could protest. Individual freedoms, liberties and justice drive the freethinking Tea Partiers, hence the “individual as collective” group dynamics I described in chapter seven. Remaining politically independent, therefore, legitimizes the Tea Party status as a social movement organization wherein groups may individually mobilize, rather than enforcing a set of political principles Tea Partiers must be in accordance with in order to constitute membership.

This tactic may have contributed to the overwhelming internal success of the Tea Party; without being labeled as part of a specific party, individuals were free to choose which issues they wished to confront. In the case of Hal, the label-rejecter archetype of a Tea Party, the thought of being committed to a particular party was unappealing and may have resulted in his eventual disappearance from Tea Party activities. Without the label, Tea Partiers may very well continue to fight for conservative dimensions of their interpretation of “justice” without the threat of being misrepresented by their leaders.

Concluding Propositions

Given the evidence from this study, I argue that for Tea Partiers, contentious politics is a mostly internal dynamic where individuals collectively gather and reaffirm one another's conservative beliefs and openly discuss economic, political and other social issues as a way to justify their individual moral and ideological framework and to experience emotional energy. In-group communication, participation, enthusiasm and support for conservative ideologies (however, an individual chooses to identify with that term²⁶) all contribute to the intention of the Tea Party. The cultural displays of affinity for symbols such as the Bible and the Constitution, the incorporation of civil religious structures to borrow sacred rhetoric to express the emotive responses to political institutions, and the affirmation and reaffirmation amongst Tea Partiers themselves drives the movement, rather than hitting benchmark moments of "success" that would be considered "successful" by outsiders looking in.

The 2009 Tax Day protest was a reaction, a backlash, to the new policies in place. The militia movement was an effort to protect second amendment rights to bear arms. The Freemen of Montana movement was an effort to protect individual rights. The ballot-counting action forged by the Dolly in the MTP was *after* the election had already taken place. She was unsatisfied with the results so *reacted* as opposed to proactively being involved in the election process before it began. The aforementioned discussion on anti-immigration policies exemplifies the fear associated with the changing social structure. Rather than proactively organizing around a policy initiative, it reacts by attacking the phenomenon and the government that "allows" change.

²⁶ See Chapter Seven

The Tea Party is in reality, a faction of conservative America; it is a social movement group directed at challenging the increasingly liberal politics pervading the United States government. As indicated in previous chapters, only a small proportion of Montana Tea Party members consider themselves religious, yet conservatism has historically been linked with religious institutions (Young 2006). Religion is a place where individuals share in their common sentiments, experience collective effervescence through religious experiences, and validate one another in a sacred community (Durkheim 1914). So how does one reconcile being conservative without being religious? How does one find a place of community and social solidarity that celebrates traditionalism and social and political conservatism outside the American Christian Church? The answer: the Tea Party. Not that the Tea Party is religious, making space for those who do openly practice Christianity, but it does so in a nuanced manner, encouraging civic discourse through politicized civil religion rhetoric. With a new mission of reaching the “sacred” through various aspects of contentious politics, Tea Partiers continue to participate and remain active in discussion, despite the receding media attention in recent months. Moreover, instead of offering adherents a list of moral codes or a distinctive political platform, the Tea Party sustains membership by supplying a range of validating experiences and notions of interdependency that are often rare commodities in contemporary society. Such feelings of connection are valued, lived experiences of people in this diverse environment often feels fractures and even lonely. As Phil reiterated throughout this dialogue, he originally joined the Tea Party longing for others to share a similar worldview, without the irrationality that accompanied religion. The Tea Party provided for him the free space where he could share those ideas openly, while not being required to adhere to a list of ideologies to which he did not fully consent.

Liberal or progressive movements, in comparison, are fighting for a change in socio-cultural practices, political restructuring or advocating new policies. For example, advocating black voting rights (Civil Rights Movement), equal wages (Women's Movement), same-sex marriage (Gay Rights Movement), etc. Each of these examples is a form of *proactive* political protest among socially marginalized groups. They must take offense shots at the political or social system that are defending the status quo in order to effectively change it. As with any competition, phenomenon or activity, whether an individual or group is on the offensive or defensive can theoretically alter the dynamics of contention and the strategies they utilize while attempting to innovate tactics as a way to throw their opponent off track. Furthermore, liberals do not typically have the support of Christian church to advocate for their ideologies on their behalf. As a result, liberals have had to fight for justice outside any other social institution for decades so therefore have a different cultural framework under which they have been trained to mobilize.

The dearth of information directly comparing liberal versus conservative cultural repertoires and tactics of mobilization is truly a detriment to the scholastic field of social movements. This study is, in part, an attempt to fill the gap in the literature on the changing dynamics of social movement protest by providing new evidence and suggesting a new lens through which we may examine conservative tactics of mobilization.

CHAPTER 9: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The Tea Party as a Social Movement

The objective of this dissertation was to examine the cultural dynamics of the Montana Tea Party through various methods of qualitative research and to propose new information on a radical political movement in the United States. Investigation through the means of ethnographic field research and semi-structured interviews, this project elucidates the means of mobilization and contentious politics in the Montana Tea Party, a case study of the nation-wide United States Tea Party. The research design outlined in this study may be used to examine other Tea Party organizations further, as a way to explore the cultural dynamics of the movement, or to explore variations by region. I propose that the new perspectives generated from this study on the Montana Tea Party may provide a foundation for future studies of contemporary conservative movements in the United States. The conceptual application from this study is an attempt to contribute to the literature on social movement and collective behavior by suggesting variations in the way individuals organize or engage in collective action

At the inception of this study, I set out to conduct an exploratory research project by asking two primary research questions: (1) What are the cultural dynamics of the Tea Party? and (2) How does this determine the way the Tea Party engages in contentious politics? The answers I provide to these questions are described in detail in preceding pages, and summarized below.

Overview

The cultural foundations of the Montana Tea Party likely originated from the radical movements that pervaded the region in the twentieth century. Historically, conservative to moderate groups have used aggression and anti-liberal rhetoric to appeal to those that clung to the fundamental or traditional social, political and economic ideologies. The extreme right felt challenged by the conservative views of George W. Bush in the early 2000s, to make a leap even farther to the right. In the wake of the election of a liberal president, the Tea Party emerged on the political arena, requiring a new, innovative frame to reclaim the country for true American citizens by returning to the stipulations outlined by the United States Constitution. Before generating support from other Americans, however, Tea Partiers had to successfully convince the new right that their new frames, rooted in civil religion, American citizenship, individuality, freedom and liberty were necessary to stimulate political change.

In this dissertation, I have identified three important cultural components of the Montana Tea Party that make up the dynamics of new conservative mobilization in the twenty-first century. The first is regarding the way the MTP utilizes the resources of religion to provide a structure familiar to participants. It utilizes religious rhetoric to provide familiarity to the nation's civil religion, which is a politicized version of the sacred, that is less spiritual than it is political. It also relies on the resources of conservative Christianity as a cultural mechanism to root their political grievances as something that is sacred. By using religion as a strategy, the moods and motivations are transformed into supernatural mandates, which may be non-rational by modern societal standards, but further legitimizes the goals established by the Montana Tea Party.

Second, the MTP relies on the narratives and biographies of Tea Party members to evocative emotional strategy. As individuals profess their personal “testimonials” of government action against them, they become an active audience with the knowledge and resources to overcome the “evil” big government. This also evokes a range of emotion, which, as social movement scholars have identified, can translate into collective sentiments and therefore collective consciousness leading to collective behavior. Emotions such as pride, fear and anger pervade individuals’ stories and become the emotional commonality among Tea Party participants that binds the group together. The MTP’s collective consciousness and ambivalent connection to religion – seeing as most of its members are actually non-religious – does not necessarily bind them together. Rather they generate the emotional energy through the cultural toolbox that actually stimulates collective behavior.

Third, the Montana Tea Party consists of a variation of conservative individuals – social, cultural, political, and economic – representing various political parties, ideologies, and various degrees of religiosity. Some are involved in the MTP as a way to express their discontent; others participate in meetings in order to have their grievances and frustrations with social powers justified. Still others are involved to push a conservative political agenda (such as the pro-life movement); while still others are involved simply as a way to engage in non-conformist conversation. Either way, participation legitimates their moral convictions of conservatism and traditionalism. The result is that the MTP has failed to construct a complete collective identity within the group; there is a fragmented sense of identity, making it difficult to stimulate *collective* political action. Scholars of social movements have suggested the absolute salience of a collective identity in order for a social movement to thrive (Goodwin, Jasper & Poletta 2001). Not only does it serve to embed the group in a collective

purpose, but also their very identity – that which is most personal to an individual – is under contestation. Perhaps the identity as a contentious or disgruntled American citizen is not enough to mobilize the group. However, as suggested at the conclusion of chapter eight, perhaps this is not the primary objective of the Montana Tea Party.

The Trajectory of the Tea Party

The progressive nature of contemporary politics has all but disappeared, even among the presence of more radically conservative voices. Therefore, the Tea Party, while perhaps not centrally located in political debates, is a pervasive political faction. Given the increasingly progressive economic, political and social policies - something the conservative Tea Partiers hold as challenging traditional American values - will continue to protest liberal political agendas in the near future.

The Tea Party has tremendous political potential to redirect the trajectory of society in coming years, given its access to resources and the current opening in the political structure. Yet, if the conservatives want to do something about the progressive nature and growth of the American government, they need to be more direct or clear about their mobilizing activities, not only as a way of generating in-group enthusiasm inspiring mobilization, but to also work toward shifting broader cultural norms to attract a broader constituency base. Yet, the Tea Party's ambiguous construction of identity as "anti-liberal", "American citizen", or "individualism" is so vague it may lose its foothold as a central organizing point or a collective identity. Though, ideologically speaking, reducing government spending and lessening its tight grip on American's private lives appears to be

a shared value both in the Montana Tea Party and more broadly to the United States Tea Party as well. This therefore affects the Tea Party's ambition to pursue public protest, given the variety of interests of grievances represented by the cultural milieu and diversity of conservative Tea Party members.

The purpose of establishing a collective identity is to instill a sense of belonging within a group to maintain movement participation, moral support, and to offer activists a clear message. This message to the public indicates what they stand for, what they are fighting for, and can formulate strategies in order to help the Tea Parties achieve their goals of education and reform. Whether the Tea Partiers are reaching this goal is debatable. As demonstrated by the case of Celebrating Conservatism, individuals that identified as non-liberal joined, but without a sense of belonging to a greater purpose. As a result, the organization vanished. Similarly, it appears that there is a flaw in current cohesiveness of the MTP. The collective identity of the Tea Partiers, which is rooted in being anti-liberal must establish an identity based on who they are and what they stand for, rather than what they are not if they desire longevity as a movement.

Nonetheless, the Tea Party is making political progress, though perhaps not as anticipated by outsiders. Progress or success may indicate policy changes, or public rapport. However, as indicated in the mission statement of the Tea Party, educating and maintaining a public presence is the intention of the movement. This is demonstrated, in part, by electing conservative representatives at local and state levels of government. The Tea Party challenges conventional wisdom, which states that a social movement cannot survive or maintain a strong level of commitment without clarification of the group itself. Rather than engaging in public protests, training political leaders to represent the Tea Party specifically

on local, state or national levels, the Tea Party engages in contentious politics through dialogue. Tea Partiers focus primarily on internal dynamics to provide a free space for conservative thinkers, which is removed from the public sphere. Perhaps now, I venture to say the Tea Party is a new organization, rooted in contentious political mobilization, developed into a conservative forum for civic discontent.

Montana Tea Party: Exceptional or Typical?

The population parameters of this dissertation extend throughout Montana, the target population. Through convenience sampling, I chose to investigate the individual and group activities of Tea Party chapters in the Bitterroot Valley in western Montana specifically, which limits my generalizability to the broader United States Tea Party. The proposition that Montanans participate in the Tea Party as a way to collectively engage in conservative culture by means of contentious politics may be generalizable to the entire Montana population. While this study gathered information from the western region of Montana primarily, the sample is representative of the target population in the entire state of Montana. Though I utilized non-probability sampling methods, the homogenous demographic construction of Tea Party groups nationally (Skocpol and Williamson 2011), indicates that this sample could potentially be representative of the Tea Party nationwide. It is conceivable that what I have observed in the Montana Tea Party is merely the foundation of a broader, more vibrant and affective movement on the rise.

There may be regional differences in the internal organization of Tea Party groups, which could be founded upon the grievances each group has with their respective

governments, the issues they are confronting, as well as variations of the construction of collective identities, which may vary by organization depending upon the individuals involved. However, the broader perspectives, regarding cultural dynamics and tactical innovation, are rooted in American conservative ideologies, without specific regional cultural influences that may cause variation in those ideologies, or in their methods of mobilization. Indeed, American conservatives have varying degrees of interest in “conservative politics” ranging from pro-life, to the defense of traditional definitions of marriage, to upholding the Constitution, to preserving private entrepreneurship.

This study may hold implications for political sociology, the sociology of religion, comparative historical sociology, and especially the literature found in collective behavior/social movements scholarship. Broadly speaking, it may provide a new historical sociological perspective on a contemporary social and political force that varies somewhat from movements of the past decades. This study also presents a unique perspective for examining the role of religion in the twenty-first century and how political aficionados may utilize both the cultural and structural resources to attract members and to create an artificial sense of solidarity by attempting to root the movement’s goals in that which is considered sacred by most American citizens. Moreover, future studies should consider the role of civil religion in twenty-first century America when religious symbols and rhetoric have been nearly co-opted by the religious right, such that civil religion may not serve the same sacred purpose for progressive voices as for conservative voices.

Perhaps most directly, this study attempts to contribute to the literature in political sociology and collective behavior/social movements. It may provide political scientists and sociologists with a unique, cultural perspective on an organization that until now has only

been examined from a structuralist or journalistic standpoint (see DiMaggio 2011; Skocpol and Williamson 2011; Zernicke 2011). Acknowledging the various cultural aspects of the Tea Party elucidates many of its sociological components as culture becomes a resource for mobilization and is utilized when making for strategic decisions within the group.

Finally, the contributions of this study may extend beyond social movement/collective behavior, political sociology and research in communication or media studies. It also contributes to the dearth of social science research conducted in and around contemporary Montana social history. If we can learn anything from Montana history, it's that counter-cultural political groups are not on the decline. Even if the Montana Tea Party disbands or loses its stronghold on conservative culture in the region, similar groups will continue to rise that question the morality and legitimacy of big government. In essence, we should not be dismissive of MTP activism as a blip in the social timeline of American history; rather it should be considered an important indication of the continual frustration various Americans have with the authorities that govern them.

Limitations & Directions for Future Research

The limitations I discussed previously in chapter four prohibited me from exploring a number of attributes of the Tea Party that could have provided supplemental data to support the primary research questions posed at the outset of this project. For one, my limited access to interviews with Tea Party members privately prevented me from exploring individual components of social movement participation that may not have been announced in Tea Party meetings. Moreover, while I was not granted access to lists of all Tea Party members, I

only had access to those who presented themselves at the monthly Montana Tea Party meetings, or those who self-identified as Tea Partiers in other conservative group contexts (see chapter four on research methodology).

Methodologically, future research ought to consider distributing surveys to various Tea Party chapters across the nation to allow for conformity among responses, and that provide quantifiable empirical data. This is similar to Skocpol and Williamson's (2011) work; however, in order to capture the cultural dynamics of the group, more extensive exploratory work ought to consider the concepts and themes outlined in this dissertation as a point of departure.

Future research should also consider the effect emotions had on Tea Party participation in the movement, and how they may or may not contribute to the group's methods of mobilization. As previously argued, moral outrage in the Tea Party becomes legitimated by framing political and economic grievances as sins of the enemy, directly attacking the intentions of our founding fathers, a sacred society. The group is strengthened as emotions such as moral outrage, fear, and pride instigate a reaction against the social and political structures that are preventing them from achieving their ideals. My qualitative research methods allowed me to document emotions in a way that previous research could not, given their methodological approaches and/or their limited access to semi-private contexts. The emotions I did document in the Tea Party include fear, anger, paranoia, confusion and suspicion which may contribute to the erratic behavior of the Tea Partiers. Emotions are context specific; what a culture determines as abnormal or rare can evoke culturally relative reactions that are essential for individual and group survival (Thoits 1989). The various components that evoke emotions in a particular person in a given social

situations is of particular importance to sociologists. Kemper (2001) argues that *power* is the generative source of emotions in social movement activity. Since social movements may rise in response to individual status discontent (McAdam 1982), one could assume that loss of power instigates mobilization. How fear or anxiety may spread in the Tea Party may through the religious language in the Tea Party meetings, through narratives and biographies offered by Tea Party participants and speakers at each meeting, or, alternatively, these emotions could be a precondition that leads individuals to seek out conservative organizations.

Secondly, future research should explore the public response to the Tea Party at various levels: locally, statewide, or nation-wide. Interpreting public opinions to the movement could help sociologists understand the impact this group has on civil society, rather than just the political institutions that they attack. Moreover, how various Tea Party chapters reach diffusion would also be of interest, as an examination of social acceptability, or demonstrating the external “successes” the Tea Party may have in different contexts, apart from election results. Similarly, further investigations should explore public responses to Tea Party activities based on the levels of impact on society, be it protests, boycotts, demonstrations, or letters to the editors. Such a study could examine the depth of impact on the public and which methods of mobilization proved to be most “successful.”

Finally, future studies should conduct a longitudinal study on the Tea Party and examine at which points in history the movement was the most active, and which periods could be considered periods of abeyance. This may also contribute to the literature on social movement life cycles, while also speaking to the argument presented here that those variations of conservatism are determined by their place in the historical, social context.

The Contemporary Tea Party and the Trajectory of “New” Social Movements

Tea Partiers are actively engaged in democratic protest by practicing their first amendment rights including freedom of speech by contributing to the public sphere as a politically disgruntled organization. As a result, I argue that the Tea Party represents a new category of social movement, while maintaining the traditional contentious politics definition. This perspective, which diverges from traditional structuralist perspectives on economic or political movements, argues that rather than attempting to restructure social institutions, the Tea Party aims to educate, inform and reconstruct culture to accommodate their conservative perspective in a progressive social context.

As society continues to change and progress to meet the changing nature of human relationships, interactions and behaviors, so will the reactive response to society. There will always be a group of individuals hesitant to take that leap into the future for whatever emotional or convicting reasons. Therefore, to assume that all movements and their methods of mobilization will follow the same pattern of action is not only naïve, it is just not good social science. As scholars, we ought to continue to challenge conventional theories of social movements and collective behavior in order to make them relevant for today, even if that means suggesting a new definition to a somewhat antiquated concept of “social movement.” Moreover, examining the public sphere in more detail will not only shed light about how individuals talk about politics in everyday life, but it may determine the trajectory of society.

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