

Whither the Tea Party

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Glenn Beck's rally this past weekend will undoubtedly be remembered as a strange episode in American political history as well as perhaps the single biggest act of egotism since Ross Perot ran for president in 1992. It is possible, however, that the event will be remembered more for the outlandish claims made by participants and the eccentricities, to be generous, of its leaders than for any lasting impact on American political life.

The Tea Party movement, as well as its leading snake oil salesman Glenn Beck, have taken on an almost larger than life place in contemporary politics. It is difficult to ignore the vitriol, noise, persistency and media attention generated by the Tea Party movement. They seem to be everywhere, in the media, the blogosphere and, of course, on Fox television. The Tea Party is also something of an unusual political animal marrying populist blue collar appeal, reactionary intolerance and the financial resources of various arms of corporate America. This makes for a heady right wing brew, which is further buoyed by strong relationships throughout the media and new media technology which Tea Party activists and their financial supporters have used well.

The unique political environment in which the Tea Party exists also makes it possible to overestimate the impact of the Tea Party movement and to mistake the noise and media attention it has generated for influence and broad-based support. Supporters of the Tea Party, as well as many who are afraid of the Tea Party and the positions it has taken, envision the US evolving in the coming decades into a theocratic country that is increasingly intolerant of immigrants and non-whites, where corporations face very little regulation and are politically empowered and where society devolves into some kind of Hobbesian free for all where collective action of any kind is impossible and gaps between the rich and poor continue to grow, leaving no middle class at all.

This could, of course, happen, but there is also a good chance that it won't. The Tea Party movement is clearly the loudest and most visible social movement today, but it may not be the most important or the one to which the future belongs. The Tea Party movement exists in a context where more and more Americans, particularly young Americans, are looking towards a different future. The political and demographic momentum is not on the side of the Tea Party movement, but of those who see a diverse, multi-cultural America not with trepidation or fear, but as inevitable and positive. The relative silence from the right after the court decision in California in support of marriage equality indicates that with regards to that issue, for example, the bigots are the ones losing ground.

The Tea Party seems, ironically, to model itself somewhat on the anti-war left of the late 1960s and early 1970s by using compelling imagery, outrageous claims and various elements of street theatre. All of these could be found in the anti-war movement four decades ago. Similarly, the movement is somewhat leaderless with various local leaders, media figures and fringe national politicians all making legitimate claims to some leadership role. There are, of course, some real

differences too, most obviously that the anti-war movement was based upon radically different ideas and views than the Tea Party movement.

Perhaps the most significant similarity is that both movements dominated the media, obscuring other social movements and political trends that were, or are, very important. From the vantage of 2010, we now know that the nascent right wing and conservative Christian movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s, which never received the media attention that the anti-war movement received, were at least as important. The US in the 1980s and 1990s, as well as even today, reflect the enduring influence of those movements more than that of the anti-war movement.

A similar situation may be occurring now with regards to the Tea Party movement, as the noise the Tea Party activists make obscures the bigger reality that other movements and developments in American politics may be more important. Twenty years from now, it is possible that the Tea Party will not have had a major impact on what America looks like, but it is also very likely that it will be seen as something of a historical footnote, the last gasp of a legitimately embattled and frightened segment of America that in their desperation allowed themselves to be lead down the road of intolerance and hatred by corporate leaders seeking to advance their own financial interests, and opportunist individuals like Glenn Beck and Sarah Palin seeking fame and fortune at any cost.