In January of 2012, NBC Politics hosted an online debate between three members of the Tea Party movement and three members of the Occupy movement. Moderated by MSNBC daytime anchor Richard Lui, the forum was putatively designed to expand mainstream political discourse, as seen in Lui’s introduction: “The Tea Party and Occupy movements have each generated considerable attention and helped shape the conversation heading into the 2012 presidential election. But seldom have the two sides engaged in dialogue.” Unfortunately, rather than encouraging real dialogue between the representatives of the two movements, the “debate” served merely as a sort of group interview, and, but for a handful of colorful outbursts by a woman draped in an American flag, the questions rarely encouraged the two movements to engage directly. Rather, from the outset, the forum was premised on an all-too-common mediated conception of politics, one that privileges pre-framed policy advocacy and the electoral ‘horse race.’ As moderator, Lui’s questions served to fold the claims of both movements back within the political boundaries of the two-party, representative system. This debate frame made their debate legible within the bounds of Constitutional political processes. Take, for example, this exchange:

Richard Lui (Moderator): You know, while the Tea Partiers are really plugged in, Occupy has really been hands off when it comes to the political process. . . . What I’m asking you is why not plug in more and when do you think that might happen

Tim Weldon (Occupy Wall Street): I think as we can see with a lot of the political influence that’s happened is that we sit there and we can plug in some candidate and we can say, “Oh yeah, that’s the Occupy candidate.” And that Occupy candidate is going to have to find a way to fund his or her elections. And where do those funds come from? Those funds come with an agenda. . . . This is just my opinion, but until that system can be changed, what’s the point of putting up a candidate who has to be funded by private or corporate donations?

Lui: Okay, thirty seconds to you Elli. How do you get anything done, then, if you don’t have, number one, somebody who speaking for a group, because as you know the Tea Partiers have leaders for their thousands of Tea Party groups around the country. But for the Occupy groups, they don’t have leaders. And then if you don’t get involved in politics how then do you effect the change that you are desiring at the moment?

Elli Whiteway (Occupy Nashville): I think our intended change is Constitutional, in a way. Citizens United in 2010 declared that corporations had the full rights of human beings, were able to contribute as much as they wanted to the political process, and I think that’s where the crux—well, I’m speaking from an Occupy Nashville perspective—and that’s one of the biggest issues, is talking about overturning Citizens United so that our political process is back in the hands of people, natural human beings and not corporations or Super PACs.

EQUITING political process with political action, Lui fails to fully comprehend the activism of Weldon and Whiteway, and presses them to explain the Occupy movement within the constraints of representational political processes. When Welch...
advocates for a politics beyond the electoral, Lui turns to Whiteway for a more legible answer; she responds by fitting the Occupy opposition to corporate personhood within the framework of Constitutional precedent and representative democracy. Lui’s unspoken presumption is that the political is defined by the processes enumerated in the US Constitution, a presumption shared and advocated by the Tea Party movement, as the NBC Politics debate made clear. 2 Responding indirectly to an earlier assertion by Weldon that the United States is a democracy, Missouri Tea Partier Chuck MacNab said,

I think one of the problems is that there’s a basic misunderstanding among a lot of people about how government works. You know, first of all, I would disagree a little bit with the gentlemen who think we live in a democracy. Actually we live in a republic—and so we elect representatives to go to Washington, or wherever they go, locally or so on and so forth, to represent our views. And if we don’t like what they do then we get together and elect someone else to do that. So it isn’t like people think.

Far from merely stating the obvious, MacNab’s distinction between democratic and republican forms of government is a common refrain among the two dozen Tea Partiers I have interviewed at length in Texas and Massachusetts. Greater Boston Tea Party leader Christine Morabito explained her advocacy of governance by “representative republic” through articulating her fear of “mob rule,” while Allen (Texas) Tea Party cofounder Andrew Piziali argued, “One can be tyrannized a majority—people democratically elected through votes—as easily as a dictator, a single person. And [the Founding Fathers] didn’t want a free person in America to be tyrannized by anybody.” 3 During the NBC Politics debate, Sharon Snyder, the flag-draped firebrand mentioned above and a member of the Troy Area Tea Party in Michigan, used a similar argument in distinguishing her movement from that of the Occupiers’. In response to a point by Weldon, Snyder said, “With this gentleman has just said proves . . . why the Tea Party movement is so completely opposite Occupy Wall Street. They don’t like the system; they think the system is flawed. I think the system is wonderful; it just has not been utilized properly. We need to get back to the Constitution, to the rule of law.”

But if the Occupy movement, as the NBC Politics debate suggests and as this article will argue, is indeed stretching the bounds of the political beyond those expressly enumerated by the US Constitution, contra Snyder, the same could be said of the Tea Party movement. Lest we forget, that movement gained its initial steam by crashing Congressional town hall meetings, assuming and asserting mob power, in the summer of 2009. 4 Indeed, I argue that the two movements might be read as opposing responses to a common problem—that is, a contemporary concern with the illegitimacy of state authority despite the technical constitutionality of the current regime’s empowerment (i.e., via direct elections and the Electoral College). Tea Partiers reject the contemporary legitimacy of the state but, in their appeal to Constitutionalism and to electoral modes of political redress, nonetheless attempt to reclaim control of the state apparatus. They do so not in order to leverage its power for social well-being, but to safeguard that power against its misappropriation by those, like Barack Obama, who are seen to leverage it toward democratically excessive ends. 5 For Occupiers, who are generally, but not universally, more open to state intervention in improving social welfare, their relationship to the state is more ambivalent. That said, insofar as contemporary state power is rooted in the political enfranchisement of corporations, and the subsequent disenfranchisement of ordinary people, Occupy might be said to reject the state as illegitimately empowered the moment. Further, the movement’s commitment to horizontalism and direct democracy in practice—as opposed to following the Tea Party in attempting to wrest control of the state—suggests a more deeply rooted critique of state power or at least a commitment to seeking out alternative sources of social well-being.

The fundamental debate between the Tea Party and Occupy, then, has little to do with the economy, per se, and even less to do with the horse race of contemporary electoral politics. Rather, it is a debate in which two movements, each responding to a perceived crisis in state legitimacy, seek to advance contrary alternative models of authority—one rooted in the historical founding of the nation (i.e., the Constitution) and the other in the contemporary and quotidian performance of political action in concert. What follows is a comparative analysis of the Occupy and Tea Party movements that seeks
illuminate common ground, even as it acknowledges the fundamental antagonism between the two movements' concept of the political and the efficacy of representative government therein. Drawing on my participant observation of both movements and the insights of Hannah Arendt, I explore the movements' respective political claims and, importantly, how they are practiced. I find in their common practices a common ground, which, drawing on the radical democratic theory of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, I argue might be utilized toward constructing a new common sense—a difficult task requiring direct political confrontation and interaction between the two movements going forward.

**Occupy and the Space of Appearance**

Writing in *Foreign Affairs* less than a month into the occupation of Zuccotti Park, Sidney Tarrow correctly compared Occupy Wall Street to what political theorist Jason Frank has called “constituent moments,” that is, moments where a new claim to represent ‘the people’ becomes felicitous. Frank’s work unpacks the “double inscription” of ‘the people’ as a contested term within representative democracy, and is therefore useful in thinking about the ways in which the Occupy movement functions as a claim within the boundaries of the Constitution. He writes, “The people are the entity in whose name the state governs, and a higher power that can resist the authority of the state.” Indeed, in light of the Supreme Court’s *Citizens United* decision in 2010, which greatly expanded the political rights of corporations, the Occupy movement might be seen as making a claim in the name of ‘the people’ of the latter inscription, one which challenges the state’s authority in light of its decision to expand the definition of ‘the people’ of the first inscription, which was itself an act designed to weaken the power of the ‘people’ of the second. In other words, Occupy might be seen as an attempt to “seize the mantle of authorization,” to reclaim political personhood from the jaws of its effective erasure through case law and Super PAC fundraising. Whiteway from Occupy Nashville explicitly made such a claim at this chapter’s outset. But just as Whiteway’s explanation was partly a product of the conceptual boundaries of the NBC Politics debate, explaining the Occupy movement merely as a “constituent moment” does not fully grasp the movement’s boundary-transcending practice of democratic politics.

In order to fully appreciate democracy as it is enacted by the Occupy movement, it is useful to turn to the work of Hannah Arendt. For Arendt, the political is not enabled by, but precedes the act of formal constitution. Arendt draws a firm distinction between work (the act of fabrication) and action (the act of asserting one’s humanity, that is, as both equal to and distinct from other human beings) and argues that the latter is the source of politics correctly understood. Unlike which produces tangible albeit finite objects or entities, Arendt argues that action, and thus the power it constitutes, are boundless. As such, she defines the political realm as a space of human action in concert, a space where words and deeds are shared and common interest is built, a space she calls the “space of appearance,” and which is “where I appear to others as others appear to me.” That Occupy Wall Street originated with an act of claiming and occupying physical put space, therefore, becomes quite central to understanding the subsequent movement’s conception of democracy. As a space, Zuccotti Park was not particularly special; it was the occupation itself that instilled the park with meaning.

Considering Zuccotti Park as an Arendtian space of appearance, and then tracing the boundless action and power it continues to produce post-occupation, helps illuminate not only what democracy looks like in the Occupy context, but also the fact that the movement’s direct democratic practice is rooted in and must be considered a response to a fundamental critique of contemporary state authority.

From the very beginning, the occupation was about more than mere protest, even if it often donned the appearance of protest-as-usual. As documentary filmmaker and writer Astra Taylor recalled in a special gazette issue of *n+1*, her initial reaction upon encountering the occupation in its first hours was “dispirited: same old same old, and not very substantial.” But upon entering what would come to be called Liberty Square, Taylor recalled her mood shifting. “I hooked up with a group of friends and we had an ‘assembly’ with a bunch of strangers and talked economics for two or three hours,” Taylor wrote “It was kind of nice to be at a protest and, instead of marching and shouting, to be talking about ideas.”
cofounder of the OWS Archive working group, recalled a similar experience attending the first days of the occupation: “I wasn’t sure what to make of it. It was just completely different from anything I’d seen before,” said Roberts, who had been involved in labor and social justice movements for nearly two decades before the Occupy movement came along. “So I just stayed for a few hours and listened to some of the discussion. . . . ‘I’m not sure’—that was my initial reaction. . . . But I kept coming back. And so the next day I came back and spent several hours just listening to the discussion and where it was going.” 13 “Talking about ideas,” “several hours just listening”—this is what democracy felt like in occupied Zuccotti Park.

Much has been made of the movement’s official embrace of consensus democratic practices through routine General Assembly meetings, and later more controversially through the Spokes Council, but the occupation’s ability to generate speech and action, and thus democratic power, extended far beyond official meetings and even the boundaries of the park. In a way, it was these myriad, smaller, undocumented conversations among new acquaintances where the Occupy movement realized its democratic potential. That is, the occupation of Zuccotti Park enabled not only a working space for the movement to conduct its official business, nor only a living space for those who chose (or were forced by circumstance) to reside in the park. Rather, the occupation’s appropriation of physical space enabled the kind of politics imagined by Arendt—a space where people approached one another as equals, recognized one another’s distinct human and common interest, and drew up plans to act upon that interest.

While Zuccotti Park provided a physical space of appearance that enabled the movement to embody democratic power, subsequent action that ensued was by no means bounded, either spatially or temporally, by the physical occupation. Chance meetings in the park helped connect student activists from private and public universities, for example, resulting in the NYC All-Student Assembly, an umbrella group that fostered teach-ins and actions protesting attempts by New York City and New York State to impose austerity measures on public universities, and aligned with local labor unions in solidarity efforts with workers mired in contract stalemates. 14 Furthermore, the occupation itself spread across the nation—spawning spaces of appearance and subsequent action in every state and the District of Columbia. The action produced by the space of appearance in Zuccotti Park could, conceivably, have been channeled toward electoral or representative democratic ends. That the movement, as a whole, eschewed such a path was in part evidence of the movement’s unabashed idealism. As OWS Librarian and Occupier William Scott explained, “what they’re trying to do here in the park to create a model of the society they want to live in. That is a society that really is based on democracy, on a participatory form of direct democracy in the most, sort of, ideal sense of the word. It may be something that’s unrealizable, ultimately, its present form.” 15 Indeed, as the Occupiers were evicted little more than two weeks after my conversation with Scott, that space of democratic appearance in Zuccotti Park proved, as Sheldon Wolin would say, “fugitive.” 16 But the democratic moment in Zuccotti Park, I would argue, lasted long enough to create an effective polis, which Arendt reminds us is not bounded in space, but “is the organization of the people as it arises out of acting and speaking together, and its true spatio-temporal ties between people living together for this purpose, no matter where they happen to be.” 17 When faced with the emergency of police and sanitation crews sweeping the park in the early morning hours of November 15, 2011, the Occupied Wall Street Journal put it, “It was never about a park. It’s about power.” 20

As such, the Occupy movement’s general abstinence from electoral political processes must be understood as more than mere side effect of its members’ idealism. Indeed, the substance of all those interactions and conversations, within the bounds of the park and beyond, suggests a far more practical reason for action in common—faced with an illegitimate and thereby ineffective state authority, the Occupy movement responded by building the foundation for a countersociety, a counterpolitics, and therefore a counterauthority to that of the Constitution. As the preamble to the movement’s Declaration passed by consensus by the New York City General Assembly on September 29, 2011, made clear:

We, the people, acknowledge the reality: that the future of the human race requires the cooperation of its members; that
our system must protect our rights, and upon corruption of that system, it is up to individuals to protect their own rights, a
those of their neighbors; that a democratic government derives its just power from the people, not from corporations, who
exploit the people and the Earth; and that no true democracy is attainable when the process is determined by economic
power. 21

The last sentence—that, "no true democracy is attainable when the process is determined by economic power"—points
the source of the Occupy movement’s unwillingness to play within the boundaries implied by the political processes of
Constitutional democracy. Indeed, the preamble suggests not only the limits of the current political system, but also the
means of redress: cooperation and the mutual protection of rights by individuals outside the bounds of the corrupted
system. Through building direct democratic power and investing in the sacredness of human action in concert, the
movement seeks to counter illegitimate representational state authority by disavowing it, working around it, and building
alternative channels for political action. As the movement’s Declaration suggests, Occupiers saw no other viable choice.

The extra-Constitutional democratic practices of Occupy, therefore, might be seen as a direct reflection of the movement
diagnosis of the problem with the legitimacy of the contemporary state—that is, its dominance by moneyed interests, who
make a mockery of representative politics through their undue influence. 22 The Tea Party movement, on the other hand,
locates the source of the state’s illegitimate authority in its failure to affirm the nation’s founding principles, as defined by
the movement’s interpretation of the Constitution. As Hannah Arendt has written, “Authority implies an obedience in which
men retain their freedom.” 23 Insofar as the Tea Party movement conceives of the state as a threat to its participants’
traditional privileges, it conceives of the state as a threat to their freedom, a belief that necessarily renders state authori
suspect. That, in the face of this, the Tea Party movement’s prescription is a return to Constitutional first principles
suggests that it sees the founding document as a safeguard against democratic excess. As Wolin has argued,
“Constitutions are not only about what is legal and what is illegal political activity, but they regulate the amount of politics,
the temporal rhythms or periodicity of politics, and they give it ritualistic forms.” 24 While the Tea Party movement’s politic
claim advocates restricting the amount of politics (see the fears of “mob rule” articulated above), in practice the moveme
tconstitutes and wields democratic power in a way not identical to but by no means dissimilar from the Occupy movement

Tea Party Constitutionalism at the Grassroots

Mike Brucia tapped a fresh American Spirit cigarette on the table. “I want to go a little further on the subject of the
misportrayal of the Tea Party,” he said. Two hours into a four-hour interview, Brucia, a 50-something Texan with a white
facial hair, piercing blue eyes, and twin habits of speaking in parables and winning arguments, felt he hadn’t convinced m
yet. The president of the then month-old Denton County Republican Tea Party went on to condemn government officials a
the media for their collective, “derisive attitude . . . toward the people.” He described the Tea Party as “ditch diggers and
millionaires and everything in between,” and attributed the movement’s rise to the Obama Administration’s, “governing
without the consent of the people.” He concluded by lamenting that the media portrayed the Tea Party movement as
populated by “hicks and yokels,” “instead of portraying these people as victims of their government, and also victims of
their own lack of action.” 25

It is worth lingering on Brucia’s dualistic articulation of Tea Party victimhood. In the first sense, Brucia sees Tea Partiers
victims of “the interference of the government with the people, with free enterprise.” But Tea Partiers also play a role in
their own victimization, according to Brucia: “We were allowing people to govern by default, because I was casting my
ballot and holding my nose.” This statement assumes that if Tea Partiers merely engaged in the established political
process, victimization by government would cease. This assumption requires another, namely that the ‘We’ asserted by f
Tea Party represents a majoritarian constituency—an odd position to hold, in light of Barack Obama’s claim to 52.9 perc
of the popular vote in 2008. However, despite the movement’s frequent use of the ‘Silent Majority’ trope, a deeper examination of the contours of the Tea Party ‘We’ reveals that the movement’s sense of entitlement to state control has less to do with the contemporary extent of that ‘We’ and more to do with its historical political dominance.

Polling tells us that Tea Party supporters tend to identify with two categories that have traditionally been equated with the universal ‘We’ in the United States, resulting in vast, if underacknowledged, social and cultural privileges: Christianity and whiteness. 26 Much to the chagrin of the Tea Party, for decades these traditional privileges—privileges rendered invisible natural as a result of their assumed universality—have been under mainstream political assault by advocates of multiculturalism and religious pluralism, respectively. In the eyes of Tea Partiers, the 2008 election of Barack Obama (a black man with an immigrant Muslim father) epitomizes the political ascendance of these tradition-subverting forces. In so as Tea Partiers understand the United States as white and Christian by default, and indeed still see this at play in their own communities, they view Obama and the political forces he is thought to represent as necessarily particular, biased, for the benefit of ‘Them’ not ‘Us.’ As David Theo Goldberg has argued, the victories of the Civil Rights movement, in utilizing the state to advance racial egalitarianism, have resulted in a conservative critique that the state is, in effect, “representing blackness” at the expense of white privilege. 27 Certainly Obama’s election has heightened this conservative anxiety, as literal black embodiment of state power, which helps explain why Tea Partiers challenge the legitimacy of state authority.

It would be oversimple, and would commit violence against the real heterogeneity of the Tea Party movement, to merely conclude that it is racist. Rather, the Tea Party’s kinship with white resentment reflects its supporters’ subscription to what has been called the “ethnicity paradigm” of racial formation in the United States, and in particular the “bootsraps model,” hypothesis espoused by Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan in 1975, which tied racial inequalities to the normative peculiarities of particular ethnic groups. 28 Indeed, this formulation was explicitly endorsed by none other than Brucia, who told me, “Bootstraps means I have my own desires from inside of me—no outside influence, with no outside assistance. Bootstraps is your own personal determination. You can’t fund it.” To underscore this point, Brucia shared an anecdote about his Italian immigrant grandfather, who started out as a bricklayer and was able to found a successful equipment supply business. “That is American exceptionalism,” Brucia concluded. 29 While white and Christian privileges remain, the growing cultural salience of multiculturalism and religious pluralism has limited the socially acceptable means of defending those privileges. In attempting to defend tradition and evade (however ineffectively) the charge of racism, Tea Partiers have been forced to adopt a political culture that justifies privilege by redefining the universal in more neutral terms. This not merely a matter of coding or rhetoric, but over time has resulted in a coherent worldview, one which justifies privilege terms of rugged individualism and productivity, values which help explain the coexistence of social conservatives and neoliberals within the Tea Party movement, not to mention the movement’s stated emphasis on protecting free market capitalism. 30 It, furthermore, illuminates the particular ‘We’ (i.e., white, Christian, capitalist) that the Tea Party represents and that their conception of politics necessarily defends.

When Tea Partiers make claims to represent ‘the people,’ therefore, they speak not of the demos (a category which would include the poor and others who rely on state aid rather than “bootstraps”) but of something like a contemporary twist on the aristoi, those possessing virtue or excellence. 31 Indeed, we might conceive of the Tea Party movement’s Constitutionalism as an effort to exclude the unvirtuous—to rein in the demos, which possesses only freedom, but squanders it by supporting and empowering the liberal welfare state. In this way, privilege is laundered into ‘freedom’ and the ‘pursuit of happiness,’ and is therefore projected back to the moment of the nation’s founding and ultimately onto the U.S. Constitution itself. Unlike Occupy, which responds to a perceived crisis of state legitimacy by appealing to the authority of the contemporary demos, the Tea Party is appealing to the Constitution as a source of authority that preserves the sacredness of the nation’s “exceptional” founding.

The worldview that coheres the Tea Party movement is by no means a new phenomenon, and many scholars have shown how it has been gradually cobbled together over the better part of a century. 32 The Tea Party’s intervention lies in how it
performs that worldview. Drawing on tactics popularized by the New Left, the Tea Party movement has in large part draw its political power from the political theatre of direct confrontation and through media-tailored spectacular rallies. But the vast majority of Tea Party activities do not occur in front of television cameras; they are often not publicly announced and are only rarely attended by journalists or scholars. One learns of these smaller gatherings through social networking websites and through word of mouth once one begins attending them. These meet-ups, which include organizing meetings, educational seminars, film screenings, reading groups, and even small-scale rallies, and which vary widely in content, emphasis, and regional nuance, are the spaces in which the Tea Party constitutes itself as a movement.

Take, for example, a meeting I observed at a Bertucci’s Italian Restaurant in Framingham, Massachusetts. Attended by 2 people, it was led by then Greater Boston Tea Party (GBTP) president Christen Varley. After encouraging meeting-goe to order food to support the host establishment—“We’re free market people,” she urged—Varley turned to the agenda, which included discussion of recent primary elections and GBTP efforts to promote a bill designed to check the residency status of applicants for state entitlement benefits. Discussion then turned to Senator Scott Brown, who Varley chastised for supporting a cloture vote on a financial regulation bill. After a brief appeal for volunteers to join the new Education and Vc ID committees, Varley turned the meeting over to Dr. Nicolás Sánchez, an economics professor and Cuban refugee, who spoke in promotion of his then-forthcoming book, Destined For Failure: American Prosperity in the Age of Bailouts. Deploring Keynesian economics for promoting “crony capitalism,” which he equated with “socialism,” Sánchez called for “growth theory” and “market competition” as a solution. “We have destroyed our productivity,” Sánchez lamented. His talk was followed by stump speeches by several candidates for office, continuing the gloomy tone of the second half of the meeting.

With the official business concluded, the formal gathering devolved into casual conversations, at which point I chatted with fifty-three-year-old Bridget Neumann. Neumann later told me that, despite attending the Tea Party meet-up, she did not consider herself to be a “political activist.” Rather, she framed her participation this way: “I am taking a stand to work to get all levels of Government back to the common sense basics that started this country. That common sense says you don’t spend what you don’t have. When you give your word, you keep it. Simple and basic, but lost or forgotten.” In Framingham, Neumann found a community of politically like minds—a community she saw as fostering an old-fashioned common sense that was being put at risk by those who “want to ‘fundamentally change’ this country.” Distilling the sentiments of the movement more broadly, Neumann wrote, “The Tea Party movement accepts that the Constitution works and the Founding Fathers had it right.” Many GBTP attendees I spoke to echoed the importance of socializing at meet-ups in bolstering traditional American exceptionalist common sense—how, especially in putatively “liberal” Massachusetts, the Tea Party gatherings served to comfort conservatives who otherwise felt alone in their beliefs. As Carolyn May, whom I met at a Tea Party gathering in Medford, later told me, “Ironically in the beginning it was not really that I wanted to become politically active with the Tea Party. I was desperate to talk to more fellow conservatives and like-minded people.” Indeed, on more than one occasion Greater Boston Tea Partiers reported feeling “closeted” in their conservatism, depicting the Tea Party movement as a support group of sorts.

As the Framingham meeting illustrates, the Tea Party movement, much more so than Occupy, was consumed with and engaged in electoral politics—a reflection of the movement’s stated commitment to the representative political system derived from the Constitution. Talk of returning to first principles in general, and the Constitution in particular, is ubiquitous Tea Party discourse. Indeed, Neumann eloquently expresses the real nostalgia to preserve the nation’s foundational common sense that so permeates the movement. Nonetheless, the experiences of Neumann and May are telling. Both attended Tea Party meetings with the express purpose of seeking out like-minded people with common interests so as to act upon those interests, and yet, contra Arendt, neither fully recognized their attendance as necessarily engaging in the political. Action implies change, but both women were more concerned with what they saw as preservation, with reaction. Yet, paradoxically, it seems one does not need to intend to constitute democratic power in order to do so—indeed, as illustrated in the case of Snyder and MacNab at this chapter’s outset, such power can be constituted while being outright...
opposed on principle. Largely outside the public eye, Tea Partiers are busy constituting a democratic power that they do not oppose because—unlike the nameless, faceless “progressive” mob—it is familiar, comprised of others they recognize as both coeval and distinct.

Conclusion

In June 2010, I attended a meeting of the Carrollton (Texas) Tea Party, which met in the dining room of an understaffed IHOP, off the President George Bush Turnpike. At meeting’s end, I was asked by the group’s leader to introduce myself to the thirty-or-so people in attendance. After explaining I was a Texas-born researcher affiliated with NYU, a detail that provoked considerable hushed chatter over whether I was politically sympathetic, I explained that while I was interested in the movement as a subject, and aimed to treat it fairly, I did not share its politics. One middle-aged woman grew visibly concerned and raised her hand. When I called on her she recounted a recent trip to California, during which she said she met “some liberals.” Those liberals, the woman continued, “hated America,” “wanted to destroy America,” and “wanted to punish Americans for succeeding.” She concluded asking, “On behalf of the Left—why do you want to destroy America?”

After the meeting the woman left without speaking to me, but several others approached me warmly, and among them was former long-haul truck driver Luke Doak. When we met again days later, Doak apologized: “You know, I kind of laughed at first and kind of felt bad for you and kind of realized, wow, you’re walking into the lion’s den! Because these are not quick, easy pat answers — they aren’t.” I conclude with this anecdote because it reiterates the limitations of the mediated, pre-framed politics exemplified by the NBC Politics debate discussed at this chapter’s outset. Our formal, representative, political system has devolved into a series of false choices and illusory caricatures that prevent us from recognizing commonality amidst ideological distinctiveness—a pretense of democracy that has left both Tea Partiers and Occupiers questioning the legitimacy of contemporary state authority. As this article has attempted to demonstrate, despite their varied ideological differences in terms of how the political is and ought to be conceived, the Occupy and Tea Party movements together exemplify a craving for direct political engagement that mediated, representative politics cannot fulfill. Despite their different conceptions of what democracy looks like, they seem to share a conception of how democracy should feel in practice—both seek out that feeling through gathering together, discussing their common interests, and engaging in political action, thus constituting democratic power. This shared taste for direct political engagement is something common to both Occupiers and Tea Partiers, but not to those whose political practices extend no further than the voting booth.

As Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe have argued, in advocating for a radical democratic politics, “Politics . . . does not consist in simply registering already existing interests, but plays a crucial role in shaping political subjects.” They call for a “multiplication of political spaces,” a radical pluralism that embraces political difference and does not shy away from political antagonism. Thus far both the Occupy and Tea Party movements have remained largely within their ideological comfort zones. Save a handful of examples where the two movements have joined forces on local matters, Tea Partiers have generally not been recognized, nor have they recognized themselves, in the spaces of appearance constructed by Occupiers. But if we accept the premise that the political system is broken, as Occupiers surely do, and if we wish to build enough democratic power to serve as an effective alternative to that system, we have to shed our fear of preexisting interests and ideologies—we have to engage in the frustrating and vital work of direct, trans-ideological conversation. As suggested above, the burden of such conversation falls on Occupiers, because Tea Partiers are, for the moment, ideologically predisposed to returning to the safe boundaries of representational politics, as enshrined in the Constitution they extol.

The objective for Occupiers, then, is to recognize the contingency of political identity and ideological affiliation, to approach Tea Partiers and engage them in political discussion, organizing conversations, and forms of political practice that extend beyond the boundaries prescribed in the Constitution. Doing so builds the extra-Constitutional realm of politics, prohibiting its foreclosure by those who benefit from the two-party hegemony of the representational system, and opening the potential...
for constructing a broader-based democratic power among those who have already developed a similar sense of what democracy feels like. As suggested above, the Tea Party movement’s privilege-fraught political motivations will not make such conversations easy, but the act of conversation itself can serve to enable the kinds of political recognition that transforms “takers” into “producers,” and Others into coevals. As Luke Doak suggested, there are no easy answers to the dilemmas we face, but engaging in a politics of conversation is a necessary first step in building political recognition and constituting the power to change our common sense and common future.

Footnotes:


2. Throughout this article I draw a distinction between political practices prescribed by the US Constitution (i.e., representational democracy established through the electoral processes enumerated therein, the checks and balances of various branches of government, etc.) and political practices merely enabled by the Constitution (i.e. the right to petition for redress of grievances, the First Amendment). As the NBC Politics debate suggests, there is an oft unspoken assumption that the former is the real realm of politics and that the latter is only truly political insofar as it promotes the former (i.e., protests that translate into or bolster electoral mobilization). Such an assumption implies a hierarchy of political practices, one which measures true political efficacy against the yardstick of electoral or state policy success, thus privileging demand-based representational politics and placing other, more direct, political practices out of bounds. I am expressly arguing here that Occupy represents an attempt to stretch beyond that political boundary, and that the Tea Party movement’s under-acknowledged presence in that extra-Constitutional space opens a possibility for a more direct political practice, one that does not necessarily affirm the hegemony of the US Constitution. My thinking behind this distinction draws on the work of Sheldon Wolin in “Fugitive Democracy,” Constellations, 1, no. 1 (December 1, 1994): 11-25.  

3. Christine Morabito, in conversation with author, Medford, Massachusetts, June 17, 2010; Andrew Piziali, in conversation with author, Parker, T exas, June 29, 2010. For further examples, see especially my interviews with Mike Brucia and John Scobey, http://historianseye.commons.yale.edu/a-j-bauer-contributor-archive.  


5. The Tea Party might be helpfully thought of as believers in what Ruth Wilson Gilmore has termed the “anti-state state,” which she defines as the “ideological and rhetorical dismissal of any agency or capacity that ‘government’ might use to guarantee social well-being.” Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis and Opposition in Globalizing California (Berkeley, CA.: University of California Press, 2007), 245.  

6. I conducted field research of the Tea Party movement between April and August of 2010, primarily in the regions of Greater Boston, Massachusetts and Dallas/Fort Worth, Texas; in that time I attended twenty-three movement gatherings (ranging from spectacular rallies to intimate meetings) and conducted extensive interviews with twenty-five movement activists. I have been an active participant in the Occupy movement since October 2011, mostly via Writers for the 99%, NYU4OWS, and the Occupy Student Debt Campaign. I have attended countless meetings and have formally interviewed more than a dozen Occupy Wall Street activists, primarily students and the movement’s librarians and archivists.  


10. Ibid., 198.

11. Indeed, Zuccotti Park was not even the first choice among the initial Occupiers’ list of potential targets. See Writers for the 99%, *Occupying Wall Street: The Inside Story of an Action that Changed America* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2012), 16.


16. Wolin writes, “Democracy is a political moment, perhaps the political moment, when the political is remembered and recreated.” “Fugitive Democracy,” 23.


18. The sustained existence of the Zuccotti polis was illustrated by the emergence of Occupy Sandy, which coordinated and mobilized hurricane relief efforts in areas where federal response was delayed or inadequate. See Sarah Jaffe, “Power to the People,” *Jacobin*, November 3, 2012, [http://jacobinmag.com/2012/11/power-to-the-people/](http://jacobinmag.com/2012/11/power-to-the-people/).


22. When I use the term “extra-Constitutional” I am not suggesting that such forms of politics are illegal, I am merely suggesting that they exceed the conceptual boundaries of Constitutionally prescribed electoral politics.


26. Poll results are published in full in Zernike, *Boiling Mad*, 195–227. Eighty-nine percent of Tea Party supporters identified as white (compared to 77 percent of all respondents) and only 1 percent of supporters identified as black (compared to 12 percent of all respondents). Further, 83 percent of Tea Partiers identified as Christian (compared to 73 percent of all respondents) and only 7 percent gave no religious preference (compared to 16 percent of all respondents).


29. It is important to note that the terms “bootstraps” and “American exceptionalism” were introduced into the conversation by Brucia and not by me. These are the metaphors and expressions by which Tea Partiers self-actualize, not a result of my intellectual footprint. That this is the case makes the Tea Party’s resonance with pertinent theory all the more striking.

30. For a helpful account of this worldview’s ascendance that might be read as a pre-history of the Tea Party


33. The nearly two dozen Tea Party gatherings in Texas and Massachusetts that I witnessed during the summer of 2010 ranged in attendance from about 20 to more than 100.

34. The May 26, 2010, meet-up was representative in both structure and content of the other GBTP gatherings I observed in Framingham, Reading, Braintree, Boston, and Medford—all of which were led by Varley or her fellow steering committee member Patrick Humphries. Meetings in June 2010 in the Dallas/Fort Worth, Texas region were less centrally orchestrated, but nonetheless included many similar features—emphasizing education and conversation.

35. Bridget Neumann, e-mail message to author, June 13, 2010.

36. Carolyn May, e-mail message to author, August 15, 2010.

37. I recall hearing the term “closeted” used in this context on several occasions throughout my time in Boston, but only have it attributed in my field notes to Patrick Humphries, while he led a meet-up in Reading, MA on June 1, 2010.

38. Carrollton, Texas, June 22, 2010. I answered that I did not feel comfortable speaking on behalf of “the Left” (a term she used after I had used it to identify myself) and that in any case I, personally, did not have any desire to “destroy America.”


42. Many of my Tea Party informants, especially those in Texas but some in Massachusetts as well, openly inquired about my personal political affinities and were not afraid to engage me, asking me to defend them and attempting (unsuccessfully) to convert me to their cause, often through telling anecdotes and crafting parables. These conversations, which sometimes overtook and often overflowed my formal interviews, allowed me to achieve a sort of recognition through contention, as suggested in the sympathetic response of Luke Doak to my grilling in Carrollton. While some Tea Partiers certainly viewed me skeptically, others were willing to embrace my ideologic difference while recognizing me as someone not out to “punish” them, not out to “destroy America,” and therefore worthy of some modicum of trust. Therein lies the opportunity.