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# The Theatricality of Tea Party Protests: Applying Theatrical Theory to the Modern American Political Scene

Sam Weiner

Trinity University, sweiner1@trinity.edu

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The Theatricality of Tea Party Protests:  
Applying Theatrical Theory to the Modern American Political Scene

Sam Weiner

A DEPARTMENT HONORS THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE  
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The Theatricality of Tea Party Protests:  
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Honors Thesis

April 20, 2012

## CHAPTER 1

### Introduction

"Political theater" has grown into a buzzword of sorts in American discourse; whether the term appears in the campaign season to emphasize pandering on the part of a candidate or in the legislature to describe the hubbub surrounding a symbolic bill with no hope of becoming law, political theater has taken on connotations of negativity associated with calculated inaction. In an illuminating instance, Ohio Representative Dennis Kucinich blasted the 2011 legislative battle over raising the American debt ceiling as political theater: "America's eyes are misdirected to the political theater of these histrionic debt negotiations" (Kucinich). Like many Americans, Representative Kucinich was frustrated with the unwillingness of Tea Party politicians to compromise from their radical position on the debt ceiling – essentially, Tea Partiers had very publicly refused to raise the debt ceiling, a normally non-controversial procedure through the legislature, demanding that spending be cut in order to keep the country solvent. Underlying Kucinich's flip pejorative, however, is a genuine connection between political events and theater.

A substantial body of literature has developed around performance in general, including investigation into the connection of theatrical performance to

other types of performance; in a 1973 issue of *The Drama Review*, for instance, performance and theater scholar Richard Schechner identified seven "areas where performance theory and social sciences coincide," including "The structure of sports, ritual, play, and public political behaviors" (Carlson 21-25; cited in Carlson 13). In this chapter, I argue that modern political demonstrations in the United States, especially those of the Tea Party movement, exhibit performance qualities functionally similar to those of the theater, and may therefore be analyzed via theatrical theory. The application of theatrical theory to modern political events may help to provide new insights into the performance-oriented nature of those events – as discussed below, whereas earlier American protest events have generally been designed to achieve their goals through direct pressure on and confrontation with those in power, Tea Party events are oriented almost entirely towards attracting the attention and sympathy of the general public. This is not to imply that the Civil Rights Movement or other earlier American protest movements were unconcerned with public attention and public opinion – they were, of course – but simply to point out that the Tea Party movement is nearly exclusively concerned with those factors. By looking at their performances through a theatrical lens, we may be able to understand the motives behind their unusual tactics, and ultimately test whether and why such a movement can be successful in the context of the modern American political scene.

Schechner offers a set of "basic qualities" characteristic of the activities of play, games, sports, theater, and ritual that help to define them as performance: "1) a special ordering of time; 2) a special value attached to objects; 3) non-productivity

in terms of goods; 4) rules" (Schechner 8). He appends a fifth quality of "special place" that is common but not necessary to the same activities (Schechner 8). These qualities also serve well in the analysis of performance in modern protests, and critical similarities between theatrical form and protest form emerge through the examination of these qualities in specific theatrical and protest events. These similarities aid in bridging the contextual gap between theater and protests to allow for synthetic application of theatrical theory to the protest form.

### Non-productivity

Non-productivity in terms of goods defines a critical link between theater and protest forms. Even when a theatrical performance is specifically designed to effect change outside of the world of the play, it cannot do so through the production of physical goods, or even through a demand for physical goods; at best, it may lead the audience to produce or demand such goods for themselves. Theatrical performers logically lack the agency to produce or demand physical goods through performance; if an actor or director could personally effect a desired change without convincing others to work towards that change, she would have no reason to address an audience through performance.

Clifford Odets' 1934 agit-prop play, *Waiting for Lefty*, serves as an instructive example in delineating demand for physical goods from a theatrical call *for* such a demand. *Lefty* surrounds a taxi driver union's deliberation over whether or not to launch a strike. Fatt, the union secretary, is firmly situated in the back pocket of management, and fights vigorously against the potential strike as workers come

forward to present flashbacks to instances of the injustice that have led them to the precipice of a walk-out (Seward and Barbour 38). Importantly, the play strives to blur the line between the performance and the audience; the actors playing the beleaguered taxi drivers are typically placed among the audience before stepping onstage, ideally producing a semblance of continuity between the actors and the audience. In spite of these efforts to unify audience and performance, the performers themselves remain unable to directly demand or produce physical alteration of the world outside the performance, and are forced to rely upon their audience to do so.

*Waiting for Lefty* concludes with a powerful speech from Agate, one of the drivers, that convinces the drivers (and, hopefully, the audience members) to organize and fight for better working conditions:

AGATE. (*Crying.*) Hear it, boys, hear it? Hell, listen to me! Coast to coast! HELLO AMERICA. HELLO. WE'RE STORMBIRDS OF THE WORKING CLASS. WORKERS OF THE WORLD... OUR BONES AND BLOOD! And when we die they'll know what we did to make a new world! Christ, cut us up to little pieces. We'll die for what is right! Put fruit trees where our ashes are! (*To audience.*) Well, what's the answer?

ALL. STRIKE!

AGATE. LOUDER!

ALL. STRIKE!

AGATE AND OTHERS. (On stage.) AGAIN!

ALL. STRIKE, STRIKE, STRIKE!!!

(Odets 31)



Morris Carnovsky, one of Odets' co-members of the Group Theatre and the first actor to take the role of Fatt, described the success of the premier in terms of moving the audience to action: "After we took off our make-up and went out into the street, there they were, the audience, arguing, talking, agreeing, clapping hands... there was almost a sense of pure madness about it" (Seward and Barbour 40). Carnovsky's words are telling; absent the make-up and other trappings of theater, the actors could not propel the strike forward after the performance was completed. Even in pushing theater to the very brink of the performance area, in a performance that the actors themselves considered extremely successful, *Waiting for Lefty* could not hope to do more than agitate its audience into organizing and taking action for itself.

The modern Tea Party protest exhibits an absence of agency in producing or demanding physical goods distinctly similar to that of the Group Theatre's performers; in the case of the Tea Party, this absence of agency is caused by the movement's simultaneous commitments to altering the federal government's interventionist budget policy and to upholding a limited government. The Tea Party Patriots' website sets out the interdependence of these goals in no uncertain terms: "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. Such runaway deficit spending as we now see in Washington D.C. compels us to take action as the increasing national debt is a grave threat to our national sovereignty

and the personal and economic liberty of future generations" (Tea Party Patriots Mission Statement).

The Tea Party cannot overtly violate the precepts of the Constitution without undermining the credibility of its constitutionally-oriented arguments, and while some elements of the Constitution are sufficiently vague or dated to produce doubt about their meanings – consider the endless battles over the Second Amendment's meaning – the power of the purse is not among them. Article I, Section 8 of the Constitution places the power to control the federal government's budget securely in the hands of the elected legislature (The Constitution of the United States). Short of revolution, then, the Tea Party's only means of reducing "runaway spending" is through persuading voters to elect fiscally conservative congressmen in sufficient numbers to pass budget reform bills: other congressmen lack the electoral incentives or philosophical alignment to produce the radical change the Tea Party seeks, while individuals outside of Congress have no power to do so. This necessarily persuasive quality of the Tea Party echoes the Group Theatre's persuasive efforts in terms of its intended audience -- not those with the power to produce material change (the American legislature or corporate management), but those who will demand material change (the voters or strikers).

The striking differences in productivity between the Tea Party's events focused on electoral influence and the "direct action" style of the sit-ins and boycotts of the Civil Rights Movement or the co-op mercantile ventures and strikes of the agrarian and labor movements of the post-Civil War era serve to illuminate the

theatricality of the Tea Party's events (Issel 178-179, Adamson and Borgos 21-22, 39). These earlier tactics did not seek redress of underlying political issues through legislative means - or at least did not do so unless no other means were available. Sit-ins demanded service of businesses that - legally - refused to serve African-Americans; in one of the earliest and best-known sit-ins, black college students positioned themselves at a Woolworth lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina and refused to leave until they were served, bypassing any legislative path to desegregation (Issel 178). Early labor strikes and boycotts pressured employers to raise wages and enact maximum working hours, similarly bypassing legislative options through direct action (Adamson and Borgos). Critically, these actions were not designed only to be effective through visibility, though in both cases their success ultimately functioned to promote similar actions across the United States. By denying business to companies adverse to the activists' interests, the activists sought the attention and compliance of those companies, rather than that of voters - seeking the attention of those capable of effecting material change rather than those who would demand material change.

In stark contrast, the modern Tea Party movement expressly seeks the viewership and membership of constituents to elect and pressure lawmakers to enact material change, and has managed to do so effectively. The first meeting of the Tea Party caucus in the House of Representatives in July of 2010 was attended by 28 Representatives (Lorber). Only a year later, the caucus's membership had burgeoned to 60 (Travis). The Tea Party Express group, which political analysts recognize as one of the most visible and most active Tea Party elements as a result

of its hundreds of sponsored rallies and several high-profile cross-country "bus caravans," lists sets of legislators that the group either endorses or considers as "targets" in upcoming elections ("What's the Tea Party Express?"; [teapartyexpress.org](http://teapartyexpress.org)). The front page of the Tea Party Express website crow's the group's success in electoral politics:

In 2010, the tea party movement's power was felt as incumbent Democrats and Republicans alike were replaced with Tea Party endorsed conservatives. The Tea Party Express played a critical role in the unprecedented midterm electoral victories and key Special elections, devoting millions of dollars and innovative campaign tactics to bring victory to conservative candidates. Over 200 Tea Party Express endorsed candidates went on to win their election and now have become tireless advocates of our six core principles in Washington DC.

([teapartyexpress.org](http://teapartyexpress.org))

The Tea Party Express plainly recognizes that it cannot effect material change without conservative legislators in place in Washington - meaning that it cannot be productive in the way that Congress could be by passing conservative legislation. It can only attempt to persuade its audience to agitate for the election of such legislators, and even if it is successful in doing so, those legislators must work within the limits of the Congress to accomplish the desired change. The deep unpopularity of the Tea Party caucus's refusal to vote for a raise in the debt ceiling in the summer of 2011 - a maneuver that actually forced more moderate Republicans to ally

themselves to Democrats to agree to terms to raise the ceiling – was perhaps an indication that working within the letter of the law is not a tactic that works at the legislative level, where productivity *is* demanded.

### Rules

Schechner argues that performance forms use rules to produce a performance that is "apart from everyday life" (Schechner 13). In the case of theater, these rules are generally put in terms of theatrical conventions; the "fourth wall" separating the audience from the actors is a good example of such a convention. Critically, in theater, these rules are organized to produce specific effects on the audience or the performer/audience relationship rather than to increase the pleasure or productivity of the actors. The performers themselves have agency in establishing these rules for each performance – although they must of course take the rules of previous theatrical events and surrounding cultural norms into account in order to produce rules that will generate the desired effects in their own performance.

This outward direction of rules - that is, the use of rules to improve the function of the forms' interactions with their audiences - may be usefully contrasted with the inward purpose of rules in other performance forms. Schechner identifies sports, games, and rituals as performance forms somewhat similar to theater, yet the rules of each of these forms are directed inwards; rather than making these forms more accessible or more communicative to an audience, rules allow participants to interact with one another in ways more desirable to the participants

themselves. Moreover, these performative forms are not innately dependent on the presence of an audience outside of the performers themselves - a neighborhood game of basketball witnessed only by the ten players on the court may be just as properly termed "basketball" as a professional game viewed by tens of thousands in person and millions on television. Schechner goes so far as to describe the alteration of rules in sports for the benefit of spectators as "corrupt" because any such alteration would be motivated by a desire to sell more tickets or attract more television viewers (Schechner 12-13). Rules in games are designed to heighten the competition between players, since it is this competition that drives the enjoyment of games. Altering rules for the benefit of spectators would be as corrupt in games as it would be in sports - the purpose of the activity would be undermined or at least disregarded in doing so.

Alteration of theatrical rules, on the other hand, is not so troublesome; since theatrical rules generate a performance apart from everyday life for the specific purpose of being viewed by external agents, performers may alter these rules for the benefit of those agents without producing a conflict of interest between spectator and performer, so long as the alterations do not prevent the performance from standing apart from everyday life. Tea Party protest events are similarly concerned with being viewed by external agents - specifically American voters - and Tea Party protestors may therefore also establish and change the rules of their performance without debasing their form.

The example of the fourth wall is instructive in the case of rule alteration; whereas the rules of some play performances prohibit direct address of the audience and religiously avoid contact between the performance apart from everyday life and the audience, rules in other play performances permit or require direct address of the audience. By way of example, the characters of George Bernard Shaw's *Candida* are unaware of the presence of the audience and the theater, and treat the world apart from everyday life as the only world extant. The performers do not seek to communicate with the audience by speaking to them or otherwise directly interacting with them; instead, the audience derives meaning from the play by observing the performers' interactions with one another and with the rest of the performed world. If a character speaks alone on stage, she is not presumed to be speaking to the audience - the gods or herself are more likely candidates. *Candida* provides a good example of a self-contained performed world; the audience witnesses the central male characters - Eugene Marchbanks, the young, depressed, romantic poet and James Morell, the strong, kind Christian Socialist reverend - in their battle for the heart of Candida, Morell's beautiful and intelligent wife. Ideally, the audience is able to glean Shaw's messages about love, socialism, class and personal strength by observing this battle; Shaw attempts to solidify the audience's interest in his themes by communicating them through storytelling rather than directly stating them and arguing for them scholastically or philosophically.

Importantly, the fourth wall may be broken to more than one end in terms of communicating a performance's message to an audience; depending on how the

break is accomplished, it may serve to push the audience away from entrancement in the theatrical action or to pull the audience deeper into the theatrical action by conflating the world apart from everyday life with the world of the audience. In the former case, the fourth wall remains a rule established by the performers with the explicit intent of breaking that rule for effect; in the latter case, the fourth wall may never have been constructed at all, and simply isn't applied as a rule for the purposes of the performance in question. This latter case might appear in a performance like *Dionysus in '69*, a re-envisioning of Euripides' tragedy surrounding the Greek god of wine and theater, *The Bacchae*, directed by Schechner himself (Stefan Brecht 158-159). Throughout *Dionysus in '69*, Dionysus addresses the audience directly, and even colloquially, speaking in modern language quite different from the stilted, translated speech of the other characters. As a theatrical god, he is aware as both character and actor that the action of the play is a performance and thereby puts himself on the level of the audience in terms of the ability to observe the world of the performance from the outside. He also maintains the ability to affect the performance, and certainly does so, cruelly manipulating Pentheus just as Euripides' Dionysus does. Audience members are occasionally permitted to join the performers on stage at Dionysus's behest; in fact, Dionysus begins to control the audience just as he controls the other performers through his powers as theatrical god and central performer. The fourth wall exists in *Dionysus in '69* only to be toyed with by Dionysus; if it is a rule, it is not a rule purposed to establish a barrier between performer and audience, but a rule designed to enhance the status of a character that depends on status for successful performance.



The case of a fourth wall established only to be broken is exemplified in the dramatic works and theory of Bertolt Brecht. In his *The Good Person of Szechuan*, for instance, Brecht's characters primarily interact with one another in a state of unawareness of the audience, but Wang, the first character to speak and a central figure throughout the play, is regularly permitted to break the fourth wall to request the audience's attention or advice. In *Galileo*, Brecht provides the audience with a brief poem, often delivered directly by a chorus or a projection, at the beginning of each scene to inform them of the action to come in the scene ahead. These breaks permit the audience to focus on *how* events transpire rather than on the events themselves by deflating suspense. Brecht defines these breaks as what he calls an alienation effect - calling attention to the argument of a piece by denoting the importance of particular events through breaks in typical dramatic form: "We now come to one of those elements that are peculiar to the epic theatre, the so-called A-effect (alienation effect). What is involved here is, briefly, a technique of taking the human social incidents to be portrayed and labelling (sic) them as something striking, something that calls for explanation, is not to be taken for granted, not just natural. The object of this 'effect' is to allow the spectator to criticize constructively from a social point of view" (Bertolt Brecht 125).

Brecht and his colleagues fathered the Epic Theater style, which emerged in the 1920s and 1930s in reaction to the naturalist theater that dominated the day. Brecht found that this "traditional" theater tended to entrance its audience, leaving them intellectually disengaged and unable to logically consider the message that the drama was intended to communicate. In contrast, the Epic Theater attempted to

break the neo-Aristotelian structure of contemporary drama through alienation effects and generally anti-Aristotelian construction in order to seize the attention of its audiences and direct it towards the logical arguments contained within the action of the plays (Bertolt Brecht 121).

Like Brecht or Schechner's performers, Tea Party protesters are able to determine which rules they should establish - and whether to then follow those rules - in order to generate a performance that gains maximum audience attention and agreement. The Tea Party's dependence upon an image of red-blooded Americana and its concentration on electoral politics are best communicated and forwarded through certain sets of rules applied to Tea Party events. One such rule is legality; in general, Tea Party protesters have not been arrested or even accused of criminality. After police officers in Oakland, California fired tear gas into an Occupy Oakland demonstration and arrested approximately 85 protesters on October 25, 2011, the co-founders of the Tea Party Patriots, Jenny Beth Martin and Mark Meckler, proudly proclaimed the law-abiding nature of its movement:

"Tea party rallies have always been safe and clean. Unlike in New York [the site of several other arrests in the same timeframe], we can find no reports of tea partiers being arrested, individually or en masse, at the thousands of tea parties across the country with millions of attendees that have taken place for years now. They are not lawbreakers, they don't hate the police, they don't even litter. A quick glance at the TV reveals the sharp contrast posed by the Wall Street occupiers."

("Occupy Wall Street? They're No Tea Partiers"; Michels)

The Tea Party's strenuous efforts to maintain legality at its events is reflective of its performance-oriented nature -- the elimination of any illegal action essentially precludes effectiveness in more militant direct action. Beyond establishing performativity and allowing protesters to operate within a world apart from everyday life, legality serves to produce a performance that is explicitly oriented to take advantage of the existing political system. There is a certain promotion of stability, then, that is at the core of Tea Party performances. The rule of legality ensures that the Tea Party is not seen as a revolutionary group, in spite of its imagery echoing the American Revolutionary War era. Instead, the Tea Party plainly intends to make use of the channels legally established for their use in expressing political free speech -- repairing the government with the traditional tools for the task, a prospect far more appealing to the conservative audience that the Tea Party seeks to reach than the total overthrow and replacement of the governmental system.

The Tea Party protest seems highly resistant to producing alienation effects. By refusing to violate the law, Tea Partiers establish a rule that must be followed in order to match with the protest form. Rather than breaking this rule for effect, however, the upper echelons of Tea Party organizations, like Martin and Meckler, utterly bind themselves to the rule, refusing to make the break that sit-ins, strikes, or "occupation" might generate. Importantly, this refusal to break with the rules of legality is a conscious performance decision; Tea Partiers realize that their primary

audience, conservative Americans, will not be impressed by a break with their established rule, and that the whole of the voting public would likely condemn law-breaking intended to win electoral support, which would smack of corruption. Martin and Meckler go even further in calling attention to the legality of their actions - rather than intentionally violating a rule in performance to gain attention, they point to the absence of such a violation in an effort to draw attention to the form of their protests rather than the content. Their comparison of their own movement to Occupy Wall Street, which is less concerned with legality, illustrates the point: "The Leftist media cheers for a group of lawbreaking troublemakers who occupied a park in New York, blocked the Brooklyn Bridge, were arrested by the hundreds and treated law enforcement with disrespect and disdain—all while trying to tear down the foundations of the greatest nation on earth" ("Occupy Wall Street? They're No Tea Partiers"). This declaration steps beyond even the rule-following realist performance that Brecht resisted; whereas those performances established rules based on neo-Aristotelian standards and religiously adhered to them - like *Candida's* erection of an impermeable fourth wall - they did not actively call attention to those rules. Meckler and Martin hold up the performance of their form according to performer-established rules as a societal good independent of the message the performance communicates, as opposed to using the rules of their form to communicate that message. Breaking the form would at once end the supposed societal value generated by following the rules of the form and force attention away from the quality of the form towards the content it surrounds -- content which is not

necessarily as attractive to the Tea Party audience as the form itself. We shall return to the idea of this “Reverse Alienation Effect” shortly.

### Special Value Attached to Objects

If the production of a performance apart from everyday life begins with the establishment of rules that separate performance behavior from everyday behavior, then the special treatment of objects fleshes out that otherness and contributes to the creation of a complete performative world beyond the performers themselves. Theatrical objects - props, costumes, scenery, etc. - both receive special value from the otherworldliness of performance and help to build the theatrical otherworld (Schechner 11).

The Tea Party protest sees a similar benefit from the use of props and especially costumes by assigning special value to costumes and paraphernalia associated with American imagery and history. Many Tea Party protesters dress themselves in stylized fashion after the participants in the historical Boston Tea Party, wearing tri-cornered hats and other 18<sup>th</sup>-century-style clothing to link their own anti-tax protests to what is viewed as the original anti-tax protest and a critical moment in the thirteen colonies’ efforts towards independence. The use of clothing that would appear bizarre in the context of everyday interactions, political or otherwise, helps to set the protesters apart from the everyday – and, of course, to attract the attention of passerby and media cameras. The context of the political protest also serves to generate special value for the clothing itself; rather than

appearing as cheap Independence Day props, the clothing becomes a symbol of protest and a specific hearkening to the Boston Tea Party.

This link between the Boston Tea Party is not a simple accident of the language employed by Rick Santelli in his so-called “Rant Heard Round the World” on February 9, 2009 – “We’re thinking of having a Chicago Tea Party in July!” (“Santelli’s Tea Party”). Dick Armey and Matt Kibbe, the Chairman and President of FreedomWorks, a libertarian thinktank now broadly credited for the Tea Party’s meteoric rise, authored a 2007 op-ed article advocating the use of Boston Tea Party imagery in activism and recruiting for Tax Day protests (Zernike). Though it is unclear whether or not FreedomWorks was the first to push for the application of the Boston Tea Party’s imagery to the modern Tea Parties, they certainly were instrumental in spreading that imagery to nationwide status through their broad organization of the Tea Party at large, to be discussed further in the second chapter.

### Political Value of the Speech Act

In this section, I argue that political speech in general – regardless of the content of that speech – produces a positive response in the American public as a result of the historical importance of political speech and participation in American politics.

J.L. Austin outlines a useful taxonomy of speech acts that may occur through written or vocal speech, consisting of: “the locutionary act which has a *meaning*; the illocutionary act which has a certain *force* in saying something; the perlocutionary act which is *the achieving of certain effects* by saying something” (Austin 120). Most

political speech, in the context of republican electoral politics, is logically concerned with perlocutionary acts - specifically, achieving the effect of convincing voters to cast their ballots for particular candidates or parties. The Tea Party certainly concerns itself with these sorts of perlocutionary acts in the context of its protests. Critically, however, Austin holds that "perlocutionary acts are not conventional, though conventional acts may be made use of in order to bring off the perlocutionary act" (Austin 121). In fact, only illocutionary acts are strictly conventional; Austin argues that such acts gain their force through the recognition of pre-established conventions within those acts (Austin 121, 14). The relationship between the illocutionary and perlocutionary act is more easily understood by way of example: saying "I do" at a wedding constitutes the illocutionary act of entering into a contract of marriage, and only does so as a result of the conventions surrounding weddings; doing so might trigger the success of the perlocutionary act of convincing one's wife that she is the permanent and unique object of one's romantic affections. Naturally, modern protest movements attempt to maximize their generation of effective perlocutionary acts of persuasion; that is, they attempt to persuade as many voters as possible to vote for their preferred candidates. If modern political movements are to take advantage of established conventions -- as the Tea Party attempts to make use of the protest form -- they must do so through conventional illocutionary acts that facilitate the non-conventional perlocutionary acts that are the genuine aim of their political speech.

Austin's notion of the "performative utterance," a statement that constitutes or partially constitutes an action rather than merely describing an action, is also

useful here as an element of the illocutionary act (Austin 5). Performative utterances necessarily occur in the course of illocutionary acts, given that one of Austin's criteria for the success of a performative utterance is that "there must exist an accepted conventional procedure having a certain conventional effect, that procedure to include the uttering of certain words to certain persons in certain circumstances" (Austin 14). In other words, context is necessary; performative utterances do not occur in a void, but instead are dependent upon (among other criteria) the presence of an appropriate context for their success or "felicitousness," as Austin terms it.

To re-cap in brief: protest events have as their end goal the successful completion of perlocutionary acts of persuasion. Such perlocutionary acts may be generated in numerous ways, but if a movement wishes to harness the power of established forms (conventions) to produce perlocutionary acts, it must do so through the intermediary of illocutionary acts. Illocutionary acts occur, at least in part, in the form of performative utterances, which are dependent on context for their success.

Modern protest movements in the United States benefit to an extraordinary degree from the political context they inhabit, which both allows for an extremely wide range of utterances to function as performative and, even more vitally, permits nearly all illocutionary acts that these performative utterances compose or partially compose to directly facilitate the perlocutionary acts that the movements in question ultimately seek to generate. The key to this unusual context lies in the



positive value assigned to political participation in the context of a representative democracy -- particularly in a nation with a history of emphasis on the importance and positivity of political participation. This is to say, in essence, that the implied performative "I Say" or "I State" has a distinct political value in the United States *independent of what is said or stated.*

The American reliance on political participation may be traced, at least in part, to the constitutional framers' efforts to secure the United States against the possibility of tyranny. James Madison's "Federalist #51" -- the idolatrous icon of seemingly every American high school civics teacher -- explains that the proposed American federated government might act as a defense against the tyranny of a dangerous majority: "Whilst all authority in [the federal republic of the United States] will be derived from and dependent on the society, the society itself will be broken into so many parts, interests, and classes of citizens, that the rights of individuals, or of the minority, will be in little danger from interested combinations of the majority" (Madison). Madison's unspoken implication is that the various "parts, interests, and classes of citizens" within the society must participate in government in order to protect themselves from tyranny on the part of an unjust majority; even a minority might enforce its will upon the whole of the country if the rest of the populace were to fail to participate in the political process to make its voice heard within the government. The framers did not emphasize citizen participation as a simple reaction to the absence of citizen agency under the previous British monarchical rule; rather, they constructed the American federal government to *require* citizen participation in order to function properly.

Importantly, though Madison himself held strong and often divisive political beliefs, the scheme of government he advocated called for the participation of citizens from radically different geographic, political, and philosophical beliefs.

### Congress and the Speech Act

As noted above, the performative utterances of the Tea Party, which form the foundation for its perlocutionary acts, are dependent upon context for their success. The tremendous unpopularity of the Tea Party caucus's efforts to reject the raise in the debt ceiling indicates the difference that context makes; whereas political participation is generally lauded in individuals regardless of their political aims, members of Congress are forced to do more than imply "I say" through their actions – their votes are more directly performative, and produce broad and often very visible effects on the public. This direct linkage of the speech act with specific policy results – rather than the linkage of the speech act with political participation, as Tea Party protesters evoke – reduces the value of the Tea Party's self-protection and self-promotion through adherence to societal rules and norms. In other words, voters expect more than participation from their lawmakers: they expect positive results. Rather than being celebrated for their refusal to negotiate a deal to allow a raise in the debt ceiling, Tea Party caucus members were condemned and even compared to hostage-takers by major news outlets (Cooper). Ironically, the tactics that allowed Tea Party events to be successful and Tea Party candidates to be elected backfired at the Congressional level, simply because the altered context did

not allow for the positive valuation of participation to sustain the popularity of the Tea Party's heterodox economic ideas.

## CHAPTER 2

### Applying Brecht to the Tea Party

In Chapter 1, I argued that the Tea Party's protests are more explicitly performances than previous protest events, and further argued that Richard Schechner's criteria for categorizing performance events linked Tea Party protests closely to theatre. In this chapter, I examine the specific theatrical tactics employed by the Tea Party through the theatrical theory of Bertolt Brecht. By identifying and unpacking the Tea Party's theatrical tactics, I attempt to analyze why some of those tactics were so successful in bringing the Tea Party closer to its over-arching goal of promoting fiscal conservatism. I also attempt to better understand the Tea Party's general strategy in promoting its goals by examining its specific tactics, and, more importantly, posit some conclusions about the broader American political landscape in the context of the Tea Party's successes and failures.

Why Brecht?

Bertolt Brecht's theatrical theory lends itself well to the task of examining the Tea Party demonstrations for a number of reasons. Brecht was an innovator in terms of how theatre could be made to contact and stir public sentiment, and much of his thought surrounded the mechanisms through which theatrical performances could make the most impact on their audiences; as he stated in an essay entitled "Emphasis on Sport": "A theatre which makes no contact with the public is a nonsense" (Brecht 7). Given the Tea Party's reliance upon convincing voters to support conservative Congressmen in order to achieve their legislative aims, as well as the theatrical nature of their demonstrations (as explained in Chapter 1), a body of theatrical theory largely oriented reaching the public seems an extremely valuable tool. Moreover, Brecht's own plays often addressed the political situation of his own time, and often took a populist view, meaning that his theoretical work on his own plays is likely applicable to the modern political events of the Tea Party.

### The Alienation Effect and Its Tea Party Inversion

As mentioned in Chapter 1, among Brecht's most important theoretical contributions to the theatre is the alienation effect, or A-effect. Brecht's explanation of the principle is worth repeating here:

We now come to one of those elements that are peculiar to the epic theatre, the so-called A-effect (alienation effect). What is involved here is, briefly, a technique of taking the human social incidents to be portrayed and labelling (sic) them as something striking, something that calls for explanation, is not

to be taken for granted, not just natural. The object of this 'effect' is to allow the spectator to criticize constructively from a social point of view.

(Bertolt Brecht, 125).

The Tea Party's events are noteworthy not for their production of alienation effects, but rather for their extraordinary resistance to the production of such effects. Rather than violate the established rules and customs surrounding political events to call attention to their cause, the Tea Party strenuously maintains those rules and customs, and even attempts to make them more stringent, as in the case of Tea Party Patriots co-founders Jenny Beth Martin and Mark Meckler's insistence that Tea Partiers "are not lawbreakers, they don't hate the police, they don't even litter" ("Occupy Wall Street? They're No Tea Partiers"). In fact, by publicly proclaiming that they are not breaking the law, Martin and Meckler call attention away from the actual issues that they ostensibly wish to argue (i.e., the promotion of fiscal conservatism), instead placing emphasis on Tea Partiers' decision *not* to violate established societal forms.

This method of using strict adherence to social forms – and going to the trouble of advertising that adherence – in order to influence public opinion, rather than violating boundaries in order to draw attention to the cause is, in effect, the inverse of Brecht's A-effect. As outlined in Chapter 1, the Tea Party's philosophical and public-relations connections to the Constitution essentially preclude law-breaking as an effective tactic. Nonetheless, Tea Party rallies attempt to capture the spirit and appearance of previously successful protest movements, including

emulations of the Civil Rights Movement and the tactics associated with Saul Alinsky, the noted leftist community organizer and activist of *Rules for Radicals* fame (Zernike). The combination of the appearance of a social justice movement – heavily infused with the symbolic patriotism traditionally associated with populist movements – with a refusal to actually commit the breaks with societal standards that similar movements have employed establishes the basis of the form that the Tea Party refuses to break.

### Resistance to Alienation through Location

Tea Party rallies resist the violation of form through their location, as well. Tea Partiers often attempt to use areas associated with historical American pride, along with areas already associated with protest movements. Events have occurred in locations like the Washington Crossing Historic Park – the site of George Washington’s crossing of the Delaware River and subsequent attack on British forces on Christmas night, 1776 – and on the Mall in Washington, D.C. (Zernike). Staging events at areas associated with American independence and history at once attracts attention to the events and places focus on the fact of the protesters’ political participation in the American political process, rather than on the specific policies that the protesters advocate; there are, after all, few recognizable American monuments specifically glorifying fiscal conservatism. In keeping with their efforts to avoid illegality, Tea Party organizers have carefully acquired permits for each of their events. In March of 2009, only weeks after the first Tea Parties, Brendan Steinhauer, a young political operative working for the libertarian thinktank

Freedomworks, registered for a permit for a Tea Party march on Washington on September 12 (Zernike). After one event planner, Diana Reimer, was errantly informed that a permit for a rally in Love Park in Philadelphia would cost \$8,000 dollars, she asked a Tea Party organization known as Tax Day Tea Party to intervene on her behalf. The Philadelphia parks department was promptly swamped in calls demanding that the permit be issued without the exorbitant fee, resulting in the discovery that the fee could be avoided entirely if the protesters agreed to bring their own sound system and generator (Zernike).

The Tea Party's decisions to use these locations are hardly accidental; often, those choosing the locations have had a background in political organizing. In the case of the Washington Crossing Historic Park rally, one of the first few rallies that occurred on April 15, 2009, Mariann Davies, who had founded and initially pushed to use the park. Steinhauser, a trained employee of a sophisticated conservative political machine, modeled the Tea Party's September 12, 2009 march on Washington after the Civil Rights Movement's march on Washington (Zernike).

The Occupy Wall Street movement provides a useful contrast to the Tea Party's legal presence at historically valuable sites. Whereas the end goal of the Tea Party's rallies is essentially to be seen and counted as an indication to fellow voters that fiscal conservatism is a valid and powerful political position within the United States' political system, leading most events to proceed calmly within the time allotted to them by their permits, Occupy events occur over the course of days or even weeks, and do not necessarily adhere to legal strictures. The initial Occupy



protests were scheduled to rally at the Wall Street Bull statue in Manhattan's financial district on September 17, 2011. Police officers cordoned off the surrounding area, citing the protesters' lack of a permit for the event; in response, protesters blocked traffic in surrounding roads. NYPD Deputy Commissioner Paul Browne released a statement on the events of the day, noting, "A group that formed at the bull at Bowling Green spilled into the streets on each side of the bull, posed safety issues and impeded vehicular traffic. The streets were re-opened to vehicular traffic and barriers were subsequently erected at the bull to prevent a re-occurrence" (Pepitone). In October of 2011, Occupy protesters in New York were turned away from public parks by massed police forces due to their lack of a permit, leading them to encamp themselves in the privately-owned Zucotti Park (Batchelor). The resulting violations of the park's rules, which forbade the erection of the semi-permanent encampments typical of the Occupy movement, attracted media and governmental attention; Occupy protesters established structures that included stations designed to deal with the distribution of food and medical supplies, along with media and legal matters (Batchelor). The location of these protesters, along with the duration of their stay, produced a violation of legal and spatial boundaries designed to attract attention to Occupy's anger with the banking community. Moreover, these actions were intended to directly inconvenience those that the Occupy movement held culpable for the economic meltdown of 2008, whereas the Tea Party's actions were actually authorized by those they saw as responsible for the country's continuing economic woes – the same government that the Tea Party is ostensibly protesting against. The Tea Party actually relies upon the central

structures of government, specifically the legislature, to remain in place so that policy can be changed via the mechanism that it deems appropriate for such change: the Constitution.

### Behavioral Resistance to Alienation

Brecht describes his A-effect in part through an analogy to a “Street Scene” in which an eyewitness to a traffic accident describes and re-enacts the accident for other interested citizens; he compares the epic theatre’s “choruses and documentary projections, the direct addressing of the audience by its actors” – the features designed specifically to produce alienation effects – to pauses in the eyewitness’s story to retell or briefly re-enact key moments of the accident:

One of the spectators might say: ‘But if the victim stepped off the kerb with his right foot, as you showed him doing...’ The demonstrator might interrupt saying: ‘I showed him stepping off with his left foot.’ By arguing which foot he really stepped off with in his demonstration, and even more, how the victim himself acted, the demonstration can be so transformed that the A-effect occurs...The direct changeover from representation to commentary that is so characteristic of the epic theatre is still more easily recognized as an element of any street demonstration. Whenever he feels he can the demonstrator breaks off his imitation in order to give explanations.

(Bertolt Brecht 126)

The types of breaks described by Brecht are absent in Tea Party rallies, and in fact are menacing to them, as a shift from representation to commentary would be jarring to their audiences. Here the question of who precisely that audience is comes once again into play; it must be remembered that while Tea Party rallies apparently address politicians, passing on a message of dissatisfaction with the status quo in economic policy, their actual target is the voters who have the power to threaten those politicians' positions. This means that most of the audience has no opportunity to interact with the performers; in most cases, the audience will see the performance via television or internet broadcast, or in print media, simply because they are not physically present. While the media may accept press releases or interviews from the larger Tea Party organizations to help contextualize the rallies, the images and videos of the actual rallies that their audience generally sees are of protesters proclaiming their presence to lawmakers.

Tea Party organizers have made efforts to produce rallies that lend themselves easily to presentation to the media. After seeing Rick Santelli's call for a Chicago Tea Party, FreedomWorks operatives organized a website called "IAmWithRick.com," which included a crash course in how to hold a Tea Party protest. Advice included methods of increasing the numbers of protesters (starting facebook groups, calling local newspapers and talk radio hosts) and methods of attracting attention at the protest (make signs easily legible, speak to the nearby public, be loud, give any reporters concise, cogent answers) (Zernike). The Tea Party Patriots quickly established a similar site (Zernike). Steinhauser also put together a listing of upcoming Tea Parties, both to direct interested individuals to

protests and to help combine multiple small protests into larger, more effective events (Zernike). By virtue of the protests' primary audience seeing them through the media, the protests prevent jarring alienation effects; audiences see reports of positively-associated political activism surrounded by American imagery, and individual protesters, who may or may not be skilled or experienced in political activism, are not forced to explain the movement's philosophy or activities.

Preventing alienation effects is especially critical to the Tea Party because of its diverse composition. While FreedomWorks, Tea Party Patriots, and most other Tea Party organizations emphasize the importance of maintaining fiscal conservatism as the central demand of the movement without dividing their forces over social issues, the inability of the rally-organizers to pick and choose who will appear at any given rally means that when individual demonstrators are interviewed, they may say almost anything about the goals of the movement – part of the organizational difficulty of a “leaderless” movement (Zernike). Even high-profile, politically sophisticated Tea Partiers can cause problems; at the 2010 Tea Party Convention in Nashville, for instance, former Congressman and occasional presidential candidate Tom Tancredo railed against illegal immigration and insufficiently stringent voting requirements, fueling speculation that the Tea Party was, at its core, no more than another manifestation of the Dixiecrat South (Portnoy and Berman).

Even the actual definition of fiscal conservatism, along with the policies that fiscal conservatives should pursue, is not totally agreed upon by members of the

movement. This is in part due to the generational overlap within the movement; youthful, idealistic libertarians, elderly, pragmatic Republicans, and everything in between are to be found in the Tea Party (Zernike). Many Tea Partiers support both fiscal conservatism and the continuation of massive government-funded entitlement programs; in a 2010 New York Times/CBS News Poll, 62% of Tea Party supporters responded in the affirmative to a question that read as follows: "Overall, do you think the benefits from government programs such as Social Security and Medicare are worth the costs of those programs for taxpayers, or are they not worth the costs?" (Zernike). The movement's nature as a leaderless, small-government advocacy group also tends to have a certain appeal to fringe elements of the American electorate, further complicating the actual message projected by the party.

These fringe elements can pose a serious threat to the Tea Party's image as an all-American, patriotic movement by producing breaks in the form of the Tea Party protests. One such break occurred during the 2010 Washington protests against healthcare reform: participants in the Tea Party protest hurled slurs at black and gay Democratic Congressmen, sparking a press backlash against the Tea Party (Keane). The Tea Party Patriots acted to resist the break, releasing a press statement repudiating the remarks and insisting that the slurs were not representative of the whole movement, but significant public relations damage had been done nonetheless (Zernike).

### Implications

The extraordinary successes of the Tea Party as a grassroots movement, along with its mixed results as a Congressional force, speak to the state of the American political landscape. The Tea Party's central focus on associating itself with political participation and Americanism paid off in the form of votes, swelling the ranks of its Congressional contingent through its theatrical tactics. However, the Tea Party's failure to prevent the passage of healthcare reform and the increase of the debt ceiling speak to the weakness of the movement's dependence on the speech act; Tea Party legislators were ultimately unable to produce results in the context of legislation, in large part because their associations with political participation could not overcome the unpopularity of the specific measures they proposed. The power of those associations, then, seems to be limited to the field of the campaign – a fact that is in some senses a reassurance of the viability of republican government. At this point, public excitement over political movements independent of their content is apparently not enough to bring that content to legislative fruition, but is sufficient to win at least some elections. These electoral victories, while enough to bring the problems surrounding mounting governmental debt to the forefront of the American consciousness, did not result in the institution of the radical economic decisions that some members of the Tea Party sought. Though the Tea Party's goals were never brought entirely to fruition, and seem unlikely to in light of the self-destruction of the Tea Party-related candidates in the recent Republican presidential primary elections, the movement has had a significant impact on the conversation surrounding fiscal policy in the 2010 and 2012 elections, and its influence will likely be felt for years to come.

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