

American Populism and the New Political Economy of the Media Field

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Abstract

The emergence of the Tea Party as a specifically mediatized, populist movement owing its success to its close affiliation with Fox News, is emblematic of the new political economy of the media field. Within the mediatized social space, populist notions of ‘authenticity’ have become the economic and cultural capital of the media field, superseding the liberal unified public. Audiences no longer merely consume media, but actively construct the very communication networks that are used by media corporations to scrutinize the minutia of personal taste preferences. In incorporating forms of free audience labor, the media simultaneously perfect the audience commodity while opening up the field of power to the social logics of difference and equivalence which constitute the political. Fox News viewers do not simply consume the news but generate it as Tea Party protestors. This new logic of commodification and the incorporation of free labor signal the positive agency of mediatized subjects.

The rise of the Tea Party, and its interdependence with Fox News, has generally been regarded as evidence of the ‘astro-turf’ nature of the movement. Underwritten by the Koch brothers and Rupert Murdoch, and fuelled by inter-generational anxieties, the Tea Party has been derided as a “fake populist pseudo movement” (Street & DiMaggio, 2011, p. 9). The aim of this article is to identify the ways in which the Tea Party as a form of mediatized populism speaks to the changing fields of politics and journalism, and the increased importance of the convergence between news media and social media as the social symbolic space of neo-liberalism. While polemical attacks on the Tea Party as a political pathology may be warranted, the concern here is with how the ‘mediatization’ (Couldry, 2008; Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999; Schulz, 2004) of the field of power is fundamentally transforming the values of the media field. This in turn may signal an opening to the return of the political, as an expression of antagonism in the new social space (Mouffe, 2005). The Tea Party embodies new forms of free audience labor, or the perfection of the audience commodity, in performing a mediatized spectacle of protest that is experienced as ‘authentic’ as it reinforces Fox’s populist brand. The symbiotic relationship of Fox and the Tea Party signals the extent to which the mythic ‘people’ of populism¹ have become both the economic and the cultural capital of the media field. Fox’s farcical slogan “Fair & Balanced” is not intentionally ironic, but rather represents Fox’s attempt to claim the universality of the media field through what I have termed a *populist exceptionalism*. In performing free labor for Fox, there is an irreducible dialectical tension between

carrying out the imperatives of News Corp's new media strategy and the potential of audience labor to exceed this remit. In the case of the Tea Party, the political returns as a populist fetishism. However, there exists in the social logics of difference and equivalence, between a political community and its outside, a potential for rupture and excess in the media field.

Populism and the Political

To proceed with this analysis, it is necessary to lay out the critical concepts of *populism* and the *political*. Populism as a politics has always assumed a certain mythic status in American political discourse. Populism has been critical in the American political imaginary as a New World substitute for a European politics marked by class struggle and revolution. As opposed to the conflict of capital and labor, American populism delineates a struggle between the productive and the parasitic, which may assume the forms of the financial class, big government, or the urban poor. Populists may well talk of the economy but this is not seen as the conflict between capital and labor, as occupying objective positions in the production process, but the corruption of "real" free market capitalism by some parasitic agent. It is in this way that we can understand how the Tea Party emerged in the wake of the financial crisis to demand more free markets and deregulation. The key metaphor for "the people" of Tea Party populism has been Thomas Jefferson's yeoman as the embodiment of capitalism and a frontier notion of private property². It is this productivist notion of the people and capitalism that shields the Tea Party populist from the "the full ontological weight of [their] world-experience" (Žižek, 1997, p. 60), in order to disavow crisis and antagonism in capitalism.

What is expressly political in populism is the "antagonistic division of the social field" (Laclau, 2005, p. 83) between a people that claim to be universal and able to enact a final ontological closure, and those who are the enemy of this people. This is the ontological necessity of antagonism that makes signification possible. For Laclau, this delineation of a universal subject is a necessary act of signification, but it ultimately fails as the people can only ever be negatively defined by the shared experience against an enemy or those defined as outside the community. Thus, the Tea Party signifier can be characterized as the "crystallization of the chains of equivalence" (Laclau, 2005, p. 93) between social actors whose identity emerges in opposition to US President Barack Obama as an over-determined marker of difference and the outside.

While populism is political in the sense of the constitutive antagonism that is essential to signification, it ultimately represents a fetishistic politics obsessed with the outsider who becomes "reified into a positive ontological entity" that must be destroyed in order to "restore the balance and justice" (Žižek, 1997, p. 278). The Tea Party's emergence in response to Obama cannot exist without an irrational investment in the enemy; therefore Obama's neo-liberal policy is experienced as 'socialism' and as an existential treat to the imagined people. Populism posits that 'the people' are whole and reconciled—capable of achieving the impossible fullness of society and enacting a final ontological closure that represents the height of anti-politics and the end of signification. This is how we can understand the Tea Party's irrational investment in Obama as the enemy embodying a multifarious and contradictory evil, from socialism to fascism. Obama's discourse of the 'new spirit of capitalism' that incorporates certain moral critiques of capitalism, offends those who are fully reconciled with the Tea Party's fetish of the man of property (Jutel, 2012). For the Tea Party, constructing Obama as the enemy is necessary in order to experience a *jouissance* in their fetishized notion of the people that will license the transgression of liberal-democratic norms of civility and

discourse. This is what Laclau identifies as an “affective investment” (2005, p. 116) in the people as *objet petit a*. However, the stubborn persistence of the fetish defies the contingency at the heart of his theory of hegemony. We might retain this notion of the political and of hegemony, that is, the process of hegemonic linkage through establishing difference and equivalence, without populism serving as the universal horizon of politics. For Žižek the proletariat as the “part of no-part” (2008, p. 415), negatively inscribed in the social order, might fulfill the category of the universal as their liberation consists of destroying their identity and class position, as opposed to the case of populism which fetishistically clings to its identity and the notion of the middle class. Without re-hashing the furious theoretical debate between Žižek and Laclau,³ what this article is concerned with is the impact of the populist political logic in the media field.

What is remarkable about the Tea Party is its specific emergence in the media field. Fox News was critical in enabling and centralizing this populist mobilization, effectively coordinating and legitimating the Tea Party in both its straight news and opinion formats. Glenn Beck was one of many Fox News hosts who led Tea Party rallies, and he would go on to function as a de-facto movement leader in staging various pseudo-political events and protests. Tea Partiers volunteered their labor for Fox, not merely in performing the spectacle of authentic protest, but in consuming Fox across platforms as the extension of a movement logic. Glenn Beck, in particular, was critical in setting the Tea Party reading list,⁴ and in hawking various end-times commodities from bomb-proof safes, gold, and “survival seeds”. The Tea Party movement has also produced a convergence of media and political celebrity whereby media figures such as Beck can claim to be movement leaders, and politicians such as Sarah Palin can address and assemble their mediatized constituency. In monopolizing the antagonistic terrain in American politics, the Tea Party have proved remarkably adept at popularizing an austerity politics and casting itself as the radical resistance to Obama’s ‘socialism’. The critical importance of the media field as a site of the political is not simply reflective of the media’s embeddedness in the social space, but rather of the fact that the media field *is* the critical social space of contemporary neo-liberalism.

It is important to clarify why mediatization and the political are essential concepts in accounting for the rise of the Tea Party (in addition to a political-economic analysis of the relationship between funders such as the Koch Brothers, the Republican Party infrastructure, prominent right-wing think tanks, and so-called ‘astro-turf’ groups such as FreedomWorks). While the latter explains important economic, political, and social resources that have made austerity populism salient, it cannot address the fundamental question of why Tea Partiers, many of them members of the working class, truly believe in a politics that is objectively against their own economic self-interest. To address this question, one needs to turn to a sense of the political, as the ontological necessity of antagonism, and to the logic of the fetish. For most liberal commentators, the political pathology of the Tea Party can be explained away by the nefarious influence of billionaires. Paul Krugman typifies this argument stating that the conservative political infrastructure is fuelled by ‘paychecks for the ideologically loyal’ (Krugman, 2010). The Koch Brothers, while undoubtedly important, have served as a useful foil for left-liberals in obscuring more important questions about American liberal-democracy and capitalism. Even if we accept that the Tea Party have been instrumentalized by such powerful interests, they have well exceeded this remit. The political defies such domestication as evidenced by the Tea Party’s resistance to the US Chamber of Commerce⁵ and the farcical primaries that the Republican Party was forced to endure. We are also dealing with a mediatized form of the political in the sense that the hegemonic chains of equivalence and difference are forged exclusively in the media field. As a social formation, the Tea Party emerged as

a meme invoked by CNBC's Rick Santelli, amplified by Fox News, and supported by important political contributors and lobbyists. While various Tea Party organizations have grown out of the Koch-sponsored infrastructure, the most organic Tea Party entity is the social media site Tea Party Nation⁶. This indicates the critical importance of the mediatized social space in the return of the political.

Mediatization

The concept of mediatization is essential in understanding how the media field has become a critical site for the transformation of politics, publicness, and economy. This is not a techno-determinist notion that reduces politics to its mode of transmission, nor does it ascribe a singular logic to the media field. Mediatization here is meant to identify the media field as an organ of social circulation and meaning making, guided by its own internal logics of production. However, in traversing both the social space and the field of power, the media transforms the social processes of signification. The media and its logic(s) cannot be theorized in isolation or parsed from changing political, economic, and social dynamics. Mediatization and Bourdieu's concept of the field (1996) are seen here as complementary to critical political economy of the media, allowing us to consider the ways in which the media field and user agency are transforming political economy.

Mediatization can be defined as the manner in which media genres of representation, discourse, and performance have come to define "other social subsystems" such as politics, government and business, which are now "dependent on the media and their logic" (Strömbäck & Dimitrova, 2011, p. 33). What accounts for the prominence of the media field, within the broader field of power, are not internal notions of autonomy such as the fourth estate ideal, but rather the dominance of the heteronomous pole that is economic capital. The contradiction here is between a weakly autonomous media field that is assuming immense importance in its service to political economy as "it increases the power of the heteronomous pole within each of the fields, producing a convergence among all the fields and pulling them closer to the commercial pole in the larger field of power" (Benson, 1999, p. 471). For the political field, this has meant an orientation towards media spectacle, performative embodiment, and the commodification of political identity. What is critical about the particularity of the media field is its position as the social symbolic space of neo-liberal publicness. Mediatization is essential for understanding the transformation of political identity into post-materialist lifestyle choices, the commodification of social life, and the return of the political as a populism that embodies neo-liberal individuation. How this effects audience commodification and the importance of the media field in bio-political production will be discussed in the following sections.

The prominence of a mediatized politics has to be understood in relation to the political impact of neo-liberal "post-ideology". With the weakening of organized labor, the rejection of ethico-political militancy as irreparably anti-liberal, "the crisis of the party system" (Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999, p. 252) and the rise of the 'electoral professional party' (Panebianco, 1988) politics has assumed an increasingly de-politicized character with political identity more closely resembling lifestyle choices in the marketplace⁷. As party ties to social groups have become tenuous and corporate funding for parties supersedes membership dues, the media field has become the site for the "opinion electorate" (Panebianco, 1988, p. 264). This has meant the rise of the professional media and campaign consultant and the fundamental transformation of language in government and politics such that all policy announcements and engagements with publicity are formulated for

maximum media impact. Similarly, protest and political action “have become reflexively conditioned by their pursuit of media attention” (Cottle, 2008, p. 853) rather than oriented towards modes of rational deliberation in the public sphere or in making demands of state power. The Tea Party exemplifies a populist form of mediatized protest in their refusal to normalize by advancing a realistic legislative agenda. Rather, they performatively act out a revolutionary iconography that cements an affective investment in the Tea Party fetish. The Tea Party fights lost causes, from repealing ‘Obamacare’ to defunding Planned Parenthood and National Public Radio, in order to disavow their own efficacy and to fatalistically assume a victimized identity that is experienced as proof-positive of the enemy’s omnipotence. This inability to normalize bears witness to the ultimate fetishism of Tea Party politics, as they are unable to transcend the specter of the enemy that negatively constitutes their very notion of the people.

Mediatization has been a critical to the neo-liberal privatization of politics and the consequent reconfiguration of publicness and civic space. If we consider the importance of media in constructing the public and mediating regional publics since the origins of the nation state it is apparent that media have always served to “bridge spatial and temporal distances” (Schulz, 2004, p. 88) within the polity. In the era of “post-ideology”, mediatization has been essential to achieving the “individuating triumph” (Hind, 2010, p. 147) of neo-liberal publicness. Notions of virtual civil society have been critical in promoting consumptive identity politics and in mediating acts that were once performed in public space such as civic activism and protest⁸. This is not to irrevocably condemn new forms of online activism as reifying the power of the market—these may be neutral technologies that aid politicization. However, without an attempt to radically reclaim public space from a logic of neo-liberal individuation, we can describe mediatization as “connection without connectivity” (Nicholls, 2011, p. 325) or the contradiction of people “more connected than ever before...yet at the same time on their own” (Deuze, 2011, p. 145). It is precisely this mobilization of isolation in the media, and its animation through fear, resentment, and alienation that defines Tea Party populism.

Mediatization, Populism, and the Media Field

It might appear tautological to talk of the mediatization of the media field. However, the field’s prominence and service to political economy, in individuating the public and in inculcating the logic of spectacle, has transformed the field’s notions of autonomy and redefined the liberal–democratic polity in populist terms. Geraldine Muhlmann writes that the emergence of journalism as an autonomous field lay in its claim “to bring people together to unify” by “giving readers the ‘truth’—that is, something that is acceptable to all, beyond differences of opinion” (2008, p. 6). From this modern notion of the field, Bourdieu identifies a split between the old pedagogic, paternalistic liberal media and a “populist spontaneism and demagogic capitulation to popular tastes” (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 48). Superseding the ideal of the rational citizen and the unified public of liberal democracy is a sense of the ‘authentic people’, validated by audience ratings⁹, with all of the potential populist fetishism this entails. Part of the mediatization of the field of politics is the performative embodiment of authenticity with political action validated in the media field by “narratives of everyday life... personal stories, ordinary problems, the subjective and the familiar” (Plasser & Ulram, 2003, p. 29). What is critical here is how ‘the people’ have emerged as the authentic subject position that validates journalistic and political practice. Craig Calhoun identified Ronald Reagan as a key figure, owing his success to the ‘spurious intimacy’ of television which

enabled him to flippantly characterize political problems “through the simple extension of life world categories” (Calhoun, 1998, p. 224)¹⁰. The mediatization of the field of power has meant that the media and political fields are engaged in a fight over access to the people as the guarantor of meaning¹¹. In terms of journalistic practice, this has meant the “fetishization of news vox-pops...[and] cheap contributions from ‘you the audience’” (Phelan, 2011, p. 141).

In the convergence of the media and political fields that is mediatization, and in the inter-field struggle over a people conceived not in normative liberal–democratic terms but in popular, if not populist terms, emerges what I have termed *media entrepreneurs*. These are actors that operate across the two fields, accruing the capital of both while corresponding to the spectacle and to the individuating and self-commodifying logic of the market. Media figures engage in populist polemics and protest along with “demagogic political leaders...[that use] the media to make an end run around the normal political process” (Benson, 1999, p. 474). Their capital is derived from the authenticity of the populist public. Here, one need only think of the de-facto leaders of the Tea Party—Sarah Palin and Glenn Beck. Beck is a self-styled populist broadcaster engaged in the ritualistic subversion of studio news through a habitus of authentic non-professionalism which allowed him to stage political rallies and faith events, all as a means to reinforce his and Fox’s populist brand of authenticity. Sarah Palin epitomized the mediatized politician as she contributed to Fox News, and took to Twitter and Facebook. On these platforms she offered policy pronouncements, launched publicity tours indistinguishable from a modern political campaign, and starred in her own reality TV show¹². This demonstrates the critical importance of the media field in the neo-liberalization of social and political life. Access to the mediatized public space has become dependent upon the performance of authenticity and spectacle and of managing the brand of ‘you’ in order to accrue forms of media capital. Despite what might appear as a self-reinforcing loop of populist commercialism and the commodification of ‘authenticity’, it is worth reiterating that the political, arising from the ontological necessity of antagonism, exceeds this domestication.

New Political Economy of the Media Field

What mediatization has wrought is not simply the loss of normative liberal-democratic ideals of media practice, which however flawed, maintains a universal horizon of politics, but the collapse of the poles of valorization (cultural and economic) in the media field. The “authentic people” have become both the cultural capital that legitimates media practice, and the economic capital, not simply as an audience commodity but as a hegemonic ideal of “bio-political labour” (Hardt & Negri, 2009, p. 140). In pulling others towards the heteronomous pole in the field of power, the media field is not simply reflecting the interests of political economy but is exercising agency in reconfiguring the site of economy in a way which enables the real subsumption of labor (Marx, 1976, p. 1023) and social life under capital. It is precisely the symbolic power of the media as public space, that allows it to function as a site of bio-political labor. Mobile devices and new media social networks have helped dissolve the boundaries between work and play, self-realization, and comprehensive surveillance. The labor of workers outside of the factory/office is bio-political in the sense that it creates new social relations that allow for the extension of the market into the social. However, this penetration of the lifeworld cannot proceed without conceding the necessity of audience valorization and labor.

Thus, in the reconfiguration of the field and in deference to ‘the people’, the various discourses of active/productive and self-determining audiences¹³ have been deployed to secure consent for the

incorporation of free labor in its various forms. The audience and the audience commodity can no longer be thought of as simply the alienation of mass audiences in the corporate media's servicing of advertisers. New media users create content, construct the social networks that are data mined for advertisers, and in the case of the Tea Party stage the very mediatized public spectacle that reinforces Fox's privileged access to 'the people'. What opens up the field to the return of the political in a manner that exceeds its commodification, is the indeterminate character of free and affective labor. Despite the fact that the participatory discourse of the field may serve to mask the very real commodification of this labor, these social relations constructed by user labor represent a potential crisis of control for capital. The incorporation of this audience labor power must be willingly conceded if it is to assume its dynamic character, and it is at this point that a political notion of universality may well arise from the social space, superseding the individuating and self-commodifying logic of the prevailing populist commercialism.

The Audience Commodity and Immaterial Labor

The media field does not simply mirror the broader field of power, but is critical in inculcating the particular "hegemony of immaterial production" (Hardt & Negri, 2004, p. 108). Traditional critical political economy theories of the media and Bourdieu's characterization of the media field both perceive audiences in terms of market functionality. Thus, for Bourdieu, a media populism driven by television and the increased sophistication of audience metrics simply represents a closed loop of conditioning content to "pre-existing demand" (Benson, 1999, p. 485). Critical political economy has generally understood audiences as a resource for the commodification of certain consumer profiles by media corporations in consort with advertisers and corporate capital. This formulation has the effect of positioning audiences as passive exploited automatons. What the populist destabilization of the media field signals is the opening up of audience agency, and of labor that is born of immaterial production in the media field. This is not to make any teleological assumptions about the digital multitudes, rather it is to say that the "infinite exploitation" (Fuchs, 2012, p. 714) of labor in the new audience commodity is correlative to positive human agency, whether fetishistic or not.

The new audience commodity of immaterial labor, or what Fuchs' calls the "prosumer commodity" (Fuchs, 2012, p. 706), is a peculiar commodity. It does not approach formal subsumption since there is no 'equal' exchange in the labor market and "the activities of the audience are not under the direct control of the capitalist" (Caraway, 2011, p. 697). Audiences and media users may withhold their labor without starving. However, they may suffer the "social disadvantages" (Fuchs, 2012, p. 704) of being excluded from communication and public life (albeit the public life of mediatization and neo-liberal individuation). Despite these particularities, the new audience commodity is still subject to exploitation, as the data produced by media users is owned in perpetuity by media corporations to use and sell as they please. As prosumer audiences do not actually sell their labor power (and in fact are increasingly willing to pay for content on cable, online, and wireless systems) one may talk of this as indeterminate 'free labor' (Terranova, 2004). I will return to this indeterminacy shortly.

In neo-liberal public space, the Fordist mass audience commodity has been replaced by the "micro-segmented" (Terranova, 2004, p. 147) or niche-consuming mass. Embodied in this transformation of the political economy of the media is a tension between micro targeting audiences and surveying for consumer preferences, and the concession to audiences of a certain, if limited,

autonomy. This has meant that micro-segmented “audiences on the Web are actually *more* concentrated on the top ten or twenty outlets than are traditional media” audiences (Hindman, 2009, p. 134). Furthermore, there exist new corporate synergies able to merge corporate media, telecoms and tech companies in the pursuit of the perfect audience commodity¹⁴. Eli Pariser has identified a process of “lock-in” (Pariser, 2011, p. 40), whereby media corporations monopolize the communicative networks of media users and constrain their consumption options through the plethora of applications that simultaneously follow users across the media space.

The new media space is defined by the logics of personalization, difference and equivalence, means that users may experience corporate controlled mass communication as information networks assembled by their own agency. The discourse of participation and personalization does not simply extend corporate media power and the logic of audience commodification into new domains—the very nature of audience commodification is transformed in the process. Audience commodification, in new media platforms as well as traditional media, is inextricably linked to the harnessing of free and “immaterial labor” (Hardt & Negri, 2004, p. 65) from active audiences. This bio-political labor, increasingly hegemonic across all manner of production, produces “networks based on communication, collaboration and affective relationships” (Hardt & Negri, 2004, p. 66). In this sense, media do not merely reflect the interests of the economic field and capital, but privilege a specific form of socially embedded labor, best characterized by the metaphor of the social factory (Virno & Hardt, 1996). This is the real subsumption of labor under capital. In the blurring of boundaries between production and consumption in immaterial labor, media function as a critical bio-political disciplinary apparatus where interactive users learn “a kind of online personal brand management in a network comprised by multiple lines of valorization (both social and capitalist)” (Cote & Pybus, 2007, p. 95). Within the social factory, media perform a crucial function of neo-liberal devolution, extending a logic of self-capitalization emphasizing “lifelong learning... re-skilling” (Thorpe & Gregory, 2010, p. 280) in preparation for new modes of precarious labor.

The free labor of mediatized subjects can thus be seen as the creation of social networks that allow media corporations to scrutinize and monetize the minutia of personal taste preferences. Conversely, free labor can be seen as a process whereby users construct their identities in this mediatized life. This labor can be defined as both exploited and “willingly conceded in exchange for the pleasures of communication” (Terranova, 2004, p. 91). The new audience commodity has enabled more precision in the identification of consumer habits, allowing micro-targeted advertising campaigns, product placements, and promotions. However, reconciling the necessary personal identification with the construction of new media¹⁵ networks by audiences is precarious. The social and collaborative logic of the wiki has become essential in legitimizing the voluntary surrender of personal information to advertisers as YouTube ‘community guidelines’ emblematically state; “Remember that this is your community! Each and every user of YouTube makes the site what it is, so don’t be afraid to dig in and get involved!” (Van Djick, 2009, p. 45). With the perfection of the audience commodity lies an irreducible tension. The production of this commodity is entirely dependent upon the active free labor of users, and as such must correspond with how people see themselves or the social life they aspire to. This is not to make any humanist assumptions about the innate qualities of social media; rather, it is simply to identify what is both a political–economic phenomenon (pervasive commodification) and the necessary ontological consideration of positive human agency. In this sense, free labor carries the potential to rupture the mediatized social space through either a fetishistic or emancipatory politics (since the political is indeterminate). The Tea Party in this sense represents a fetishistic or fascistic manifestation of political antagonism, born of

bio-political production yet exceeding the direct control of capital as simply an audience commodity.

Fox News and the Tea Party

At the heart of Fox's Tea Party populism is a transformation of the media field, entailing increased deference to a populist public, and the corresponding logic of capitalist profit based upon the active user. Fox News itself is not primarily in the business of selling mouse clicks in the manner of Google or Facebook. However, as a subsidiary of News Corp. whose footprint extends across the broader political economy of new media, telecoms, and tech companies, Fox is critical to its parent company's brand strategy. The purpose is to amass users who will consume Fox across emerging platforms and media. Fox surpasses the perfunctory deference to online comment threads, digipolls, and the invitation for user content accompanying news stories ("Were you there? We'd like to hear from you?"). More fundamentally it stages a populist mobilization around its brand community. In articulating right-wing identity politics, Fox not only stakes a claim to populist legitimacy, it performs a coordinating role for an alienated and de-politicized neo-liberal public by projecting an immensity to the movement. In the absence of traditional political organization, Fox functions as a de-facto symbolic space of neo-liberal publicness. Fox becomes a site of struggle where users construct an antagonistic fetishized notion of 'the people' while engaging in the free labor that reinforces the brand and spectacle of Fox.

Tea Party leader, Glenn Beck was a critical figure in Fox's populist brand strategy. A veritable media entrepreneur, Beck ascended to the heights of Fox's symbolic power while retaining his own media company which connected him to the more far-flung regions of American political discourse. Beck was crucial not just because he politicized audiences against Fox's competitors, but because he staged impassioned campaigns of spiritual, and political rebirth, as an extension of an 'authentic' movement logic. Beck's program functioned as a flagship of authenticity for the new media user that followed Fox across platforms and into social media/super fan sites like Fox Nation. While Beck boasted remarkable ratings for the 5pm timeslot,¹⁶ the advertiser withdrawals that followed his claims that Obama 'hates white people' and his anti-Semitic attack on George Soros, drove down advertising rates for the program, effectively making it a loss leader for Fox.

Fox Nation embodies Fox's attempts to define the mediatized field in terms of populist commercialism. The site functions as the equivalent of Fox's Facebook wall, where it puts out a mural of the different stories and issues Fox is covering in terms which exceed even the network's standard polemics. This engages the user in the exercise of sending stories up the 'Hot List' as they 'Fire Up' a flaming icon to indicate their interest. Stories and accompanying videos solicit comments from Fox Nation subscribers through a plethora of feedback options. In addition to the ubiquitous Facebook 'Like' button and the invitation to tweet or email the page in question, users may indicate the following sentiments: 'offensive', 'funny', 'cool', 'obnoxious', 'scary', 'inspiring', 'crazy'. This site not only gives Fox information about viewer attitudes, it also allows them to construct a more precise sense of their audience as internet cookies and user preferences are collected. Aside from pop culture plebicitism Fox attempts to claim the liberal universality of the journalistic field formulated as populist exceptionalism. The Fox Nation site offers a statement of purpose that invokes the iconography of the founders as the original 'people' on a page that mimics the weathered paper and ink blotches of the nation's founding documents;

The Fox Nation was created for people who believe in the United States of America and its ideals, as expressed in the Constitution, the Declaration of Independence, and the Emancipation Proclamation... The Fox Nation is committed to the core principles of tolerance, open debate, civil discourse, and fair and balanced coverage of the news. It is for those opposed to intolerance, excessive government control of our lives, and attempts to monopolize opinion or suppress freedom of thought, expression, and worship. (The Fox Nation Team, 2012, para 1, 3)

This populist media field does not merely supplant previous ideals of liberal universality, which, however spurious, maintained the universal horizon of the political, it articulates a populist universality that seeks a final resolution of the people's identity. In claiming access to traditional populist values, Fox constructs a people who are universally committed to 'tolerance' and 'civil discourse' while the outsiders, who are not invested in this fetishization of the people, are beyond such values.

Glenn Beck and the 9/12 Project

Beck was able to harness the free and affective labor of Tea Partiers for Fox, through the many political events, rallies, and pseudo-movements that he led. This began early in 2009 when he announced on his program the '9/12 Project'. This would materialize around 100,000 protestors on the National Mall in Washington D.C. articulating the populist demand for moral restoration and a return to the founding fathers. Beck's tearful inauguration of the movement provided great fodder for late-night comedians, however, rather than representing an unhinged moment, this affect typifies the mediatized populist logic at work in the Tea Party. The program begins with a video package detailing the contradictory alliance of the people's enemies—socialists, Wall Street bankers, unions, Mexican immigrants, and terrorists, before cutting to Beck who is backstage fighting back tears. As his voice quavers he addresses his viewers, "remember who you were that day after 9/11, I told you, 'You are not alone'" (Fox News, 2009). From this dark moment of anxiety and 'sincerity', Beck announces that he wants to introduce the viewer to 'some people' as he enters his brightly lit studio to cued audience applause with the message that 'you are not alone'. Upon this contrived emotional rise, Beck locates his populist audience community with various live feeds—from Chuck Norris' ranch to military bases and various viewing parties 'from the Garage Bar in Columbus, Ohio to virtually every small town and big city in between in this great nation' (Fox News, 2009). As fear of the enemy constitutes the populist community, Beck's monologue swings wildly between a communal warmth and trepidation concerning the enemy's menace. Again, the tearful Beck declares: "It seems like the voices of the special interests and the media they are surrounding us. It sounds intimidating. But you know what...the truth is we surround them, this is our country" (Fox News, 2009). Facing this existential crisis, the populist people are elevated to become the universal subject: "The real power to change America still resides with you, you're the secret [tears] you're the answer" (Fox News, 2009). The exact delineation of who the authentic people are is later rendered in culture war terms. Immediately after Beck's overwrought monologue, he crosses over to a live feed from Hollywood, California where Beck's producer is alone in a room. The producer, Stu, then utters the punch-line: "It's really important for people to know that they are not alone, unless they are me". This joke, met with uproarious laughter, is offered as a moment of levity after Beck's tearful monologue but it does not belie the populist dichotomy of the people and their

enemy. In these moments the very human warmth of the community is based on dehumanizing the enemy.

In order to understand how this contrived authenticity and sincerity works for the Tea Party fetishists, we have to consider the convergence of mediatization, free labor, and the political. Beck's tears, whether genuine or not, are a marker of populist non-professionalism and authenticity in the media field. His emotionally wracked state functions as an affective invitation to join him in the fetishistic flight from reality. Beck goes on to claim that his program serves to connect the people across time and space from "every small town and big city in between in this great nation" (Fox News, 2009). The new media field is exemplified in the soaring rhetoric of narcissistic produsage as Beck states "You are the secret, you are the answer" (Fox News, 2009). This perfectly epitomizes the mediatized mobilization of individuation as Tea Partiers remain alone, even as they congregate, in the sense that their politics represents a fetishistic retreat into a populist lifeworld. Their very identity is constituted through the self-fetishization and mediatized performance of protest and spectacle, all functioning as free labor for Fox and Beck. As Beck delivers his tearful monologue, he stands in front of a mural containing thumbnail images of 9/12 community members that form the words 'We The People'¹⁷. Here, the Tea Party audience commodity functions as a mediatized social movement locked in to Fox News, Beck's reading list, and certain forms of lifestyle consumption, all as part of participating in an "authentic" struggle. The Tea Party's mediatized subjectivization is secured as they declare themselves the universal, authentic people. However, the political economy of the new media field bares a contradiction; perfecting the audience necessitates forms of free labor that are marked by the political logics of difference and equivalence. The media field becomes the site of the return of the political by virtue of its role as the social symbolic space of neo-liberalism. In identifying the new audience commodity of immaterial labor, there arises the necessity to consider the convergence of the media and the political as something which might exceed the confines of a populist commercialism¹⁸.

Conclusion

The relationship of Fox News to the Tea Party is not so much a 'fake populism' as it is symptomatic of the mediatization of politics within the new political economy of the media field. As the social symbolic space of neo-liberal publicness, the media field has simultaneously pulled other fields towards the performative logic of spectacle which is shaped by economic capital. The media field in this sense is not simply subservient to the broader field of economic capital, it also effects a transformation that encompasses an expansion into the social. The individuating logic of neo-liberal mediatization has given the political field more single issue protests, online activism, culture wars, and lifestyle and identity politics at the expense of traditional political parties and labor unions. Tea Party populism represents the return of the political, or more specifically, the ontological necessity of antagonism in signification, within the confines of neo-liberal individuation and publicness. Fox in this sense is coordinating an alienated and de-politicized neo-liberal public that is properly populist in the sense of fetishistically clinging to an ideal of the people as a reconciled whole. This mediatized movement constitutes a struggle over the values of the media field and over notions of the polity which have become absorbed by the performance of populist 'authenticity'. This culminates in Fox's formulation of a populist exceptionalism whereby the people of the Tea Party are deemed to have exclusive access to the liberal universality of the field—with their enemy

irredeemably excluded. This ontological closure presages the loss of the universal horizon of politics in the media field; a development which necessitates a critical left response.

The apparent symbiosis between Fox and the Tea Party has to be seen as a consequence of the new political economy of the media field. In the populist reconfiguration of this field, the active, self-determining audience or productive new media user has emerged as a hegemonic ideal. What discourses of interactivity belie is the appropriation of free and affective labor in perfecting the audience commodity and in micro targeting user profiles across media platforms. The Tea Party thus becomes a means for Fox to distinguish itself in the field as “of the people”, while establishing a loyal audience that follow Fox across the media landscape with a political fervor while consecrating the “authenticity” of Fox. Although it appears that a seamless populist commercialism dominates the media field, the very ability of the field to extend the economic logic of neo-liberal individuation into the social is premised upon, if not consent, then at least the positive agency of users. While constructing the active user as a combination of taste preferences, the engagement of the audience is premised upon a “sense of connection and participation in something that is larger than one’s self, which provides the impetus for exploring new techniques and practices of communicative and affective productions” (Cote & Pybus, 2007, p. 96). It is in this sense that the new audience commodity is social even as it exemplifies the commodified individual. There remains a potential crisis of control for capital which is inscribed in the very commodification of affective labor. It is from this potentiality that the political repercussions may breach even politicized institutions such as Fox, the Republican Party, and the Koch-Brothers’ funded political infrastructure. The critical question then becomes whether other notions of the universal might arise through the media field in the name of left emancipatory politics.

Endnotes

1. This ‘people’ is an over-determined signifier which stands in for the ‘impossible fullness’, or ontological closure, of the social (Žižek, 2000, p. 100). Thus ‘the people’ do not exist in this fixed sense; however the fetish of the yeoman has persisted as the universal measure of the American people.
2. Jefferson wrote that: “Those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of god, if ever he had a chosen people, whose breasts he has made his peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue. It is the focus in which he keeps alive that sacred fire, which might otherwise escape from the face of the earth” (Jefferson, 1975, p. 217). Jefferson opposed this virtuous yeoman to the “mobs in the city” who are cankerous “sores” upon the body of government eating at the “heart of its constitution” (p. 216). It is easy to see how this delineation echoes in the present Tea Party/Obama antagonism.
3. This debate can be tracked in the annals of *Critical Inquiry* Volumes 32 and 33.
4. This reading list includes Friedrich Von Hayek, David Barton, Dinesh D’Souza, Ayn Rand and of course Beck’s own assortment of fiction and non-fiction titles. The most important title in Beck’s Tea Party canon is Cleon Skousen’s self-published *The 5,000 Year Leap*. A virulently anti-communist text, it climbed to the number one spot on Amazon.com in the summer of 2009 (Zaitchick, 2009).
5. The vehemently anti-Obama US Chamber of Commerce was the largest spender in the 2010 election, overwhelmingly supporting Tea Party insurgents (Center For Responsive Politics, 2012). However, with the Tea Party-led brinksmanship that ensued around the debt ceiling, the Chamber issued an urgent warning to Republicans to raise the debt ceiling as a failure to do so “would create uncertainty and fear, and threaten the credit rating of the United States” (Josten, 2011, para. 2).
6. Analysis of the Tea Party social media space forms the basis of this author’s ongoing work.
7. Obama’s 2008 electoral campaign is exemplary in this regard having claimed the two top prizes at the largest global advertising awards (Sweney, 2009). The business magazine *Fast Company* described ‘Brand Obama’ as ‘personal’, ‘engaging’, open to the way consumers communicate with one another while recognizing ‘their desire for “authentic” products’ (McGirt, 2008).
8. This discourse of the ‘authentic’, virtual grass-roots was critical to Barack Obama’s successful 2008 campaign for the presidency. Through the innovative use of mybarackobama.com, the campaign was described as inspired by the ‘free and open software movement...[with Obama as] the first real “wiki-candidate”’ (McGirt, 2008). This idea of virtual civil society also informs the White House’s ‘We the People’ website where online users can petition the White House to respond officially to an issue once it receives enough clicks.
9. Fox News’ website proudly proclaims its status as the top rated cable news network in the 25–54 adult demographic and offers the following barbed comment to its competitors:

CNN and MSNBC use an asterisk in their ads to point out some half-baked one-time statistic to prove that somebody stumbled across their channels giving them a temporary spike in the ratings, which they would tout as unprecedented, earth-shattering and monumental. It’s actually pathetic since we all know if they massage their statistics long enough they can come up with something to make their tiny lame point. But deep in their little hearts, even they know that FOX NEWS IS NUMBER ONE [sic] in cable news and has been for years (2012).

10. In the case of Fox News, the ratings success of the Glenn Beck Program has to be seen as a result of the show's spurious intimacy with 'the people' of the Tea Party movement. The most radical innovation of the show was the twenty minute monologue in which Beck showcased a combination of his political convictions, faith, personal frailties, and direct emotional pleas in obliterating the rational lens and elevating the personal as political truth.
11. A useful concept here is the *big Other* which functions as the 'symbolic order' (Žižek, 1999). This materializes ideology as concrete social practice. In constructing this big Other of 'the people', the media and political fields disavow the process whereby the people are merely a symbolic expression brought into being by discourse. Instead, it is implied that 'the people' really do exist as a virtuous, patriotic middle. Here, it is also important that any authentic people be properly in their place as an anti-political, privatized public.
12. The show Sarah Palin's Alaska is illustrative of the particular character of American populism. In the show, Palin strikes the image of the frontierswoman whereby a traditional family exemplify the ideals of the private property, the homestead, and the frontier.
13. The apogee of this narcissistic discourse is of course Time magazine's 2006 Person of the Year which featured a reflective computer screen on the cover and simply the word 'You'.
14. Newscorp's wireless strategy is encapsulated in its deal to produce the exclusive newspaper for Apple's iPad. Available only on the iPad wireless device, the subscription model of The Daily may prevail over attempts to monetize web newspapers. Murdoch himself states that iPad users were typically more 'immersed' in the personal interface of their device than in online news consumption, where users could be lost to 'unfocused surfing' (Helmore, 2010). Additionally, News Corp. itself is in the business of cloud computing. Its subsidiary NC3 allows wireless devices to perform advanced computing remotely.
15. The term 'new media' is not exclusive to Web 2.0 technology, but rather pertains to the new hegemonic logic of accumulation across the field including more traditional media such as cable news and Fox News in this instance.
16. The show peaked at 2.8 million viewers per night in January 2010 while declining to 1.7 million in the last months of the program (Carusone, 2011).
17. Beck would claim that the flood of images that people volunteered for the mural crashed the servers at Fox five times.
18. Glenn Beck and the Tea Party clearly represent this excess despite having functioned to commodify protest for *Fox News*. Beck was released from *Fox* for several reasons. Firstly, much of the free labor of Beck's audience was being monopolized, to Fox's annoyance, by Beck's own media ventures such as Insider Extreme, soon to become GBTV (Carter & Stetler, 2011). Following the 2010 mid-term elections and the shooting of congresswomen Gabrielle Giffords, there was a general chorus calling for civility which Beck could not abide. He would go on to stretch the populist chain of equivalences to include Obama and the "global caliphate" (Pleat, 2011). More recently, Judson Phillips, a prominent Tea Party leader a founder of the social media site Tea Party Nation, has split with Fox labeling it the 'formerly fair & balanced Fox News' (Phillips, 2012) for failing Tea Party tests of ideological purity.

Author Bio

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