Research Article

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Freedom over Fear: Fundamentalist Populism and the Challenge of COVID-19

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Abstract: Although public responses to national and international crises are never without contestations and conflicting truth claims, the COVID-19 pandemic draws attention to the stark political and cultural divisions presented by conservative populism in the age of the Tea Party Movement and Donald Trump. Beginning with research among Tea Party activists in 2010 and continuing through the Trump Administration and “reopen” protests, I have documented a shifting cultural world of right-wing populism. The vivid and symbolically elaborate performance of patriotism and indignation by the Tea Party Movement declined in 2012, being replaced by a more belligerent and less colorful form of populism with Donald Trump. As Trump-inspired protests opposing COVID-19 mitigation policies emerged in 2020, however, Tea Party themes and symbols reemerged as frames for resistance to government restrictions. Yet, despite the shifting styles, there was a constant theme of what I term “fundamentalist populism.” This style illustrates political identities characterized by vilification of opponents, distrust of existing political and social institutions, ideological rigidity, and a rededication to individualism and personal freedom. Ethnographic and documentary research shows how these themes animate a small yet vocal resistance to the science-based and cooperative guidelines prescribed by public health experts

Keywords: Right-wing, Trump, populism, COVID-19, Tea Party Movement

1 Introduction

I parked my car a few blocks away from the South Carolina State House grounds. I could see scattered individuals looking like they were heading to a political rally carrying American flags and large cardboard placards. My surgical mask was laying on the passenger seat; I knew that if I wanted to have a chance to speak to some of these protesters, the mask should probably remain in the car. ‘Oh, the dangers I face for my discipline,’ I thought.

Pulling into the parking space next to me was Bobby, who was equally unsure whether one had to pay to park when most offices and businesses downtown were closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. We decided to pay the weekend rate although it was Friday at noon. Bobby was tall and slim and appeared to be in his 30s. Dressed in a T-shirt and jeans, he had the rough, tanned skin of someone who works outside in the southern summer heat. He was clutching a pole with a yellow Gadsden flag attached: a bright yellow banner emblazoned with the black outline of a timber rattlesnake coiled to strike and the words “Don’t Tread on Me.” The flag has historic roots in the early days of the republic; however, more recently the flag has come to be identified with the Tea Party Movement and its unique style of American right-wing populism. Several years after the decline of the Tea Party as a prominent political force, the flag can still be found flying in front of houses, on bumper stickers, or in social media avatars.

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Bobby's flag, however, was new and made of synthetic fabric; though it was unfurled, it still had the squared creases from packaging. Moreover, Bobby did not fit the appearance of the average Tea Party supporter I have researched since 2010, being much younger and apparently working class.¹ Pointing to the ensign I asked if he had been involved in the Tea Party Movement. He replied that he had not—though he had wanted to, he could never find the time. He did say however that he had been involved with “heritage organizations,” which in this part of the nation means groups defending “Southern heritage,” often defined as representations of the Confederacy through memorials to its leaders and soldiers and the display of its flags.

Shortly thereafter, we parted ways. Bobby joined a dozen people on the sidewalk facing traffic, while I moved toward the steps of the state house where an equally small crowd was gathering and a microphone and speakers had been placed.

Bobby and I were attending “Operation Gridlock,” a protest in response to, and adapted for, the unique circumstances of a pandemic. Instead of large numbers of people congregating together marching and chanting, the protest would consist of cars and trucks driving through the streets around the state capitol with signs, flags, and blaring horns. They were protesting the orders by South Carolina governor Henry McMaster shuttering all “non-essential” businesses to slow the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus. Dozens of such “reopen” protests—both operation gridlock-style and more traditional closely packed, large groups chanting, sign-waving protests—had been occurring throughout the nation, resisting similar restrictive policies by state governments, as well as the science supporting those policies. While South Carolina, dominated by Republicans, was one of the last states to impose (loose) restrictions, the most prohibitive policies were often instituted by states with Democratic governors. Protesters in those states were encouraged and energized by the Republican President of the United States, Donald Trump.

As I later reflected on my encounter with Bobby and the subsequent hours I spent at this protest, I realized that I was witnessing the rebirth of Tea Party themes and styles that I had watched decline prior to the rise of Trump. Those cultural resources had been revived and repurposed as a cogent and persuasive frame for the protests opposing COVID-19 restrictions.

More specifically, a network of conservative political actors connected through traditional and social media was articulating a system of cultural resources—interpretive frames and practices regarding the disease, its causes, and the actions taken to control its spread. This meaning system, which I will refer to as a figured world (Holland et al., 1998) is the most recent form of conservative populism which has been developing and changing over time. A figured world is a theoretical principle emerging from practice theory and cultural-historical identity theory. Simply, humans collectively figure cultural worlds that are the basis for collective identities. These shared worlds are horizons of meaning through which people form collective and intimate identities and evaluate and act in relation to people, events, and selves.

The figured world of Tea Party activism emerged in 2009 in response to the presidency and policies of Barack Obama. As the Tea Party declined in 2012, so did the practice and circulation of its figured world. Many Tea Partyists joined and engaged in a similar yet distinct cultural world centered on Donald Trump which emerged in 2016. In early 2020, President Trump became the central figure in the resistance to COVID-19 mitigation strategies, impeding the circulation of accurate information about the pandemic. The Trumpist cultural world became the template for reopen activism, though with the addition of an important component: Tea Party symbols, frames and discourses were repurposed as resonant themes for pandemic protesters.

Both figured worlds draw upon similar grievances of culture loss, distrust of expertise, institutions, and government, as well as neoliberal themes of individualism and market logic. Yet the political style, what I will term “fundamentalist populism,” present in both, intensified as conservative populism became Trumpist populism. I deploy the term “fundamentalist populism” to describe the politics of both the Tea Party Movement and reopen activists: both groups are populist, placing stark differences between “the people” and the “other,” and fundamentalist, due to their demonization of the “other” and their inflexible ideology (Westermeyer, 2019). This particular populism produces identities characterized by steadfast ideas about American cultural identity.

The media-social movement network which circulates and reproduces this figured world contains many nodes or “sites,” consisting of large national conservative advocacy groups and internet-based organizations such as Tea Party Patriots and FreedomWorks; conservative media such as Fox News, talk radio, One American News Network (OANN)

¹ On average Tea Partyists were older. In my research a large majority of my informants were over the age of 50 and nationally 75% of supporters were over the age of 45, while 50% earned over \$50,000 a year (New York Times, 2010).

and news aggregation sites like Daily Caller; and the social media and personal networks of everyday people (see also Skocpol & Williamson, 2012). As right-wing populism became Trumpist populism, the president and his Twitter feed established a fourth node of this network. All told, this network creates an insular and widespread information universe that produces and circulates consistent messages and cultural resources.²

The right-wing populist response to COVID-19 is not simply Trump followers being guided by the president's misleading statements and actions regarding the pandemic. It is the merging of Tea Party *and* Trumpist populism. Bobby and the other activists I will reference illustrate the old and new of right-wing populism—the symbols and frames characteristic of the Tea Party incorporated by the more vehement and demographically broad Trumpism—coming to life in reaction to the global pandemic.

In this article I will sketch the image of a populist figured world: a constellation of symbols, emblematic practices, emotions, and interpretive frames constructed and performed within this media-social movement network. The style and cultural resources employed by these activists can be traced to the political style of Tea Party activists in 2009 to 2012 and subsequently transformed by Donald Trump, the primary driving force of right-wing populism in America today. After describing the Tea Party themes and the shift in conservative discourses from the Tea Party to Trump, I will investigate three sites where this meaning system is visible.

2 Methodology

This article is based on qualitative data I gathered primarily between March and June of 2020 along with some interviews conducted in December 2020. I observed and interviewed participants at a large protest in Columbia, South Carolina in April 2020, followed news accounts of other protests, and conducted phone interviews with former Tea Party activists. I also followed Facebook posts at dedicated anti-lockdown groups and networks of Tea Party activists. Finally, I consulted the web sites of large conservative advocacy groups—primarily Tea Party Patriots. In this article I show how from these sites participants fashion collective identities that assign meaning to the pandemic and how it relates to their understanding of American society.

The timely subject matter of this work demanded an accelerated process of research and writing. This required accommodating several methodological and practical challenges. My work with Tea Party activists during 2010 entailed participating in dozens of small local group meetings as well as one-on-one, in person interviews. Participation in meetings allowed me to experience the performance, negotiation, and transformation of collective political identities in practice. However, reopen activists and Trump supporters, to the best of my knowledge, do not have regular meetings where supporters congregate, plan, and interact. Moreover, even if they did, the pandemic would preclude many from participating. Aside from data collection, those meetings provided the time to build rapport with right-wing activists who are much less likely to trust an (assumed liberal) academic—not to mention one whose discipline is grounded in cultural relativism and evolution—asking questions about their politics and motivations. While I have relied on some of my Tea Party informants for this research, I was not able to develop the level of engagement with reopen activists under the current circumstances.

3 A Shifting World of Fundamentalist Populism

Reopen protesters express and perform themes and styles that are the product of an ongoing process of identity formation among conservative Americans that I initially studied in the Tea Party in 2010. In its most basic sense, a collective identity is based on the sharing of cognitive, moral, and emotional connections (Polletta & Jasper, 2001). Anthropologists have conceptualized a theory of identity that considers the generative process of self-making, the agency of individuals and the embodiment of culture. This perspective builds upon the work of G.H. Mead (1912) further

² Consistency of messages and their breadth across different sources is a quality of conservative media that sets it apart from liberal media (Jamieson & Capella, 2010). One will often hear the same issue framed consistently across talk radio, Fox News and social media. More generally, Berry and Sobieraj (2016) write that fostering “outrage” is a consistent and profitable strategy for most political media today.

informed by the theories of Pierre Bourdieu, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Lev Vygotsky. Figured worlds are an especially potent concept emerging from practice theory to explain the fashioning of both individual and collective selves (see for example Escobar, 2008; Holland et al., 1998; Holland & Lave, 2001; Price, 2009; Satterfield, 2002; Westermeyer, 2019). Figured worlds are figurative spaces individuals inhabit—collectively constructed worlds that are populated by frames, practices, symbols, sentiments, and dispositions that have distinctive meanings within that world. One could conceive figured worlds as the institutional spaces and life worlds people collectively construct, are “recruited” into, and inhabit, such as restaurant work, academia, and religious congregations; each has its own vocabulary, jokes, emotions, and frames for seeing and making sense of the world. Within the context of figured worlds, people author themselves, forging collective and intimate identities (Holland, Price, & Westermeyer, 2018; Lachicotte, 2002). Considering our stereotypical Tea Party supporter from 2010, one can see the outlines of this cultural world in the revolutionary-era clothing, the yellow Gadsden flag, the primacy of the US Constitution, and the indignant emotions. These cultural resources are signs representing the primary themes that constitute the Tea Party identity, and cultural artifacts one can explore to understand the development of the current reopen activism.

Participant observation with several local Tea Party groups in North Carolina in 2010–2012 gave me a unique opportunity to see the formation and performance of right-wing populist figured worlds and the political identities forged within them. While the explicit grievances of the Tea Party Movement were based in deficits and taxation, I have argued that the foundational and often implicit demands were cultural politics, conflicts over the meaning of American citizenship and American cultural identity.³ For my Tea Party informants, the meanings of America, cultural citizenship, and the contemporary state of “American exceptionalism” were all under threat or had been cast off by contemporary Americans. Tea Partyists traced American decline to the diminished importance of what they saw as “founding principles,” or the keys to American exceptionalism, including patriotism, individualism, and social traditionalism. These qualities had been forsaken by contemporary Americans and most importantly, America’s leaders. “Out-of-control spending,” social programs that “increase dependency,” and the decline in Judeo-Christian values were the outward signs of the rejection of founding principles (Westermeyer, 2016, 2019).

The Tea Party emerged in 2009 at a historical conjuncture characterized by a severe economic downturn, changing demographics in which white Americans were declining as the dominant racial category, and a new center-left president who had been thoroughly demonized by conservative media. For three years they enjoyed success, most significantly by forcing the Republican Party to shift further to the right (Skocpol & Williamson, 2012). By 2013, however, most of the local Tea Party groups I conducted research with had declined in membership and most no longer met regularly. The figured world that had been constructed with the frames of patriotism, the Constitution, and its powerful symbols was no longer being widely reproduced and its symbols had lost their purchase. In 2016, Donald Trump’s brand of conservative populism emerged, though my Tea Party informants did not see him as an appropriate successor. Drawing upon the declining Tea Party frame, they believed he lacked the proper qualities such as fealty to the Constitution and Founders and ideological discipline.

This contrast was apparent to me when I attended my first Trump rally in the Spring of 2016 in Greensboro, North Carolina. Trump rallies were very distinct in style and tone. Tea Party rallies I attended, while earnest, were nonetheless reasonably ordered events. Speakers evoked similar themes to crowds of primarily older, middle-class whites, many with signs and Gadsden flags, who were hoping to hear condemnations of President Obama and historical references framing current events. The Trump rallies, by contrast, featured no revolutionary-era themes or Gadsden flags. There were many younger and working-class participants, an atmosphere of contained rage, and more explicit themes of demonization, xenophobia, and jingoism.

However, by Election Day it was apparent that the Tea Partyists I knew were firmly in the Trump camp and that a Trump figured world was emerging. While his personal style was different from that of my Tea Party informants, there were qualities that were quite attractive to Tea Partyists, primarily the combative rhetorical challenges to the political and cultural establishment and political correctness, and his uncompromising anti-immigration stances. Speaking with my Tea Party informants later, many expressed to me that they believed that their movement had been a failure. They

³ I employed the term “cultural politics” as a contrast to the “material” politics of taxation, fiscal policy and formal political structures that appear on the surface of Tea Party activism. I accept that drawing a distinction between the two is problematic. To a large degree all politics is cultural. Kay Warren (1998) put it aptly that “[M]aterial demands are in practice politically advanced selective constructions, conveyed in fields of social relations that also define their significance” (p. 178).

believed the reason for that failure was that their movement had not been aggressive enough. To them “progressives” had strengthened their stranglehold on the discourses and institutions of America. Trump confronted the Left like no other. As Paul, a former Tea Partyist from western North Carolina said,

Everybody in this fight gets to this point. We're against the Goliath [the Left] ...Will we win? If I had to guess right now, I would say that we are so outgunned and so outnumbered. They go, "I'm not big enough I don't have a big enough voice. But that big man there is the biggest man on the block and he's spoiling for a fight always. He's a bully and we need a bully."

As the Trump administration continued, it was apparent that his supporters had fashioned a distinct cultural world centered on the president that many Tea Party supporters embraced. This cultural world became visible as conflicts over pandemic restrictions emerged in the late winter of 2020, though with an additional turn. Tea Party symbolism—Gadsden flags, the Constitution and historically-based patriotism—was incorporated within the political style of reopen protesters.

Although the dominant figured world of American right-wing populism had shifted, an underlying style remained. The themes of this cultural world include the politics of identity and demonization; conspiracy narratives and mistrust of cultural, political, and scientific “elites”; and market fundamentalism, characterized by demands for free choice and the sanctity of individualism. An effective way to describe this style is through the joining of two broad political concepts—populism and fundamentalism. Populism has been defined as a style and perspective that conceptualizes “the people” as opposed to an “other” (see Pied, 2019 for a useful discussion of the concept). That “other” could be the railroad barons of the 19th century, the Tea Party’s RINOs (Republicans In Name Only) or the “deep state” bureaucrats and scientists of Trumpist populism.

Though populism and fundamentalism are not often understood together, I would argue that cultural fundamentalism is a defining characteristic of many right-wing populisms. Psychologist Peter Herriot (2020) sees both populism and (religious) fundamentalism as closely related reactive movements, due to the attention directed toward enemies—heretics and secularists in the case of the latter, and elites in the case of the former. Expanding upon Herriot’s religious focus, fundamentalism is a form of identity politics—political activity driven by a sense of injustice by a social group (Heyes, 2020). Anthropologist Judith Nagata writes that fundamentalism is a form of identity politics “characterized by a quest for certainty, exclusiveness, and unambiguous boundaries, where the “Other” is the enemy demonized” (Nagata, 2001, p. 481). More than just a political opponent, fundamentalist populism often constructs an enemy as evil, nefarious, or pathological. Verenna Stolcke, in her discussion of cultural fundamentalism, focuses upon the racism and xenophobia of fundamentalism describing characteristics of “primordial national identities and loyalties” (1995, p. 4). Along these lines, right-wing populism in America is focused upon an idealized American who is independent, Christian, patriotic, self-sufficient, and ever vigilant to tyranny. Those seen as not possessing or sufficiently valuing those qualities are suspect, vilified, or ridiculed.

In my work with Tea Party activists several enemies were constructed that are also present in the meaning system of reopen supporters, such as those on public assistance, federal and state employees, the mainstream media, and, of course, political liberals. All are described as having values that are inconsistent with their sense of American cultural identity or worse, intent on destroying that identity and the republic. Relatedly, there is also a mistrust of institutions including, in addition to the media, political representation, science and intellectualism, and global institutions such as the United Nations.

Donald Trump’s description of mainstream news sources as “enemies of the people” tapped into and intensified a common grievance among Tea Partyists. My informants were avid news and opinion media consumers though their information was nearly always taken from the nearly 24-hour a day conservative media universe of Fox News, talk radio and online “news” sites. These media, often circulating similar messages, devote their primary focus on the creation of outrage, enemies, and “others” (Jamieson & Cappella, 2008; Berry & Sobieraj, 2014) as well as recirculating and amplifying the statements of Donald Trump.

This information environment is also fertile ground for conspiracy theories. A decade ago, I traced the emergence of the conspiracy narrative surrounding Agenda 21, the nonbinding set of sustainability guidelines issued after the 1992 Rio Climate Summit. Many conservatives saw this as a plot by global elites to destroy local communities and institute “social engineering” (Trapenberg Frick, 2013; Westermeyer, 2017). This narrative began in a relatively obscure corner

of right-wing cyberspace and grew in prominence as it circulated through the conservative information network. As I explain below, such conspiracy theories were a salient feature of the reopen movement.

At the same time, one cannot understand right-wing populism in America today without considering the influence of fundamentalist or evangelical Christianity. Right-wing, white, evangelical Christianity is a political identity as much, if not more than, a spiritual one (Bieber & Beyers, 2020). Today's evangelical Christians are engaged in the legacy of the culture wars of the 80s and 90s over, for example, abortion and "traditional values." Many of their goals remain unrealized, and Protestant denominations, according to Robert Jones (2016) of the Public Religion Research Institute, are in decline primarily due to demographic and generational change. While many Tea Partyists were also strongly evangelical, Donald Trump's style of grievance politics restocked the culture wars and has drawn widespread support among evangelicals (Haberman, 2018).⁴

A final aspect of fundamentalist populism is "market fundamentalism," the quasi-religious belief in unfettered markets as the most desirable form of economic activity. John Clarke (2004, p. 90) writes of the populist flavor of American neoliberalism, which "is associated with the celebration of the figure of the sovereign consumer, free to make his or her own choices in the face of the dizzying array of possibilities that the market can generate." This idea of "choice" is very apparent in the reopen protests. Moreover, the veneration of "market logic" connects back to cultural identity in what Cohen and Arato (1992, p. 24) term the "cultural politics of neoconservatism," where the root of the national crisis is figured as a worsening culture of dependency at the expense of historic and defining American values such as achievement and self-reliance, as well as "principles of order" such as private property.

From the general perspective of fundamentalist populism one can understand the shift in support by Tea Partyists to Donald Trump. The populist themes of "ruling class," career politicians, and "crony capitalism" so vilified by the Tea Party conservatives are expanded in the "drain the swamp" frame used by Trump, as well as in attacks upon the mainstream media as "fake news." Moreover, it was easy to visualize the "deep state" "never Trumpers" who have infested the federal bureaucracy's scientific, legal, administrative, and regulatory apparatus. Trump valorizes conservative, often rural, social traditionalism, which is portrayed as looked down upon by coastal and cultural elites, as exemplified by Hillary Clinton's famous "basket of deplorables" label. Moreover, the demonization of others and conspiracy narratives have been a primary strategy of Donald Trump for most of his public life. The president has successfully turned the Christian evangelical "values voters" into "nostalgia voters" through "his sweeping promise to 'Make America great again'" (Jones, 2016, p. 246). Donald Trump has latched onto the resentment and demonization of right-wing fundamentalist populism and turned it into a bare-knuckled political style. This hardened conservatism burst into view in response to the cultural and political conflict surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic.

4 Reopen Activism

In the previous section I outlined a political style that I initially saw among Tea Party supporters and how that style developed during the era of Donald Trump. This figured world of fundamentalist populism surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic had the familiar ring of the Tea Party, yet the style encompassed new actors such as Bobby and had an even more pugilistic mood, reflecting the changes brought by Trumpism. In this section I want to describe different aspects of the meaning system introduced above. Through examples drawn from different sites in the media-social movement network, conservative populists have fashioned a figured world of COVID-19 resistance encompassing identity politics and demonization; conspiracy narratives and mistrust of institutions; and market logic, individualism, and free choice.

⁴ Although many of my Tea Party informants were evangelical Christians, political fundamentalist Christianity is a separate movement. The place of religion in the Tea Party groups I studied as well as the Tea Party in general was in fact contested. The majority of local groups had very strong Christian currents running through them. Others took pains to exclude religious themes from their meetings, maintaining that the Tea Party was a movement focused upon fiscal issues, not religious ones. From the perspective of figured worlds, the Tea Party and evangelical Christianity are two separate figured worlds that for some Tea Partyists intersect. For others they do not. But for the purposes of fundamentalist populism, evangelical Christianity should be considered as an artifact in its construction.

4.1 On the Ground Protest—Patriotism, Faith, and Market

Let me return to the moment I parted ways with Bobby on the sidewalk in front of the South Carolina State House. We were attending one of the many “Operation Gridlock” protests staged around the country in April of 2020. It was essentially two different demonstrations taking place concurrently. The most visible was the automobile protest described above: several dozen cars and pickup trucks driving a circuit in front of the state capital and through the surrounding streets, sounding horns and chanting from windows. Many people held signs through their open car windows or had slogans painted or soaped on their car windows. Large pick-up trucks had flags fluttering from poles erected in their beds. The yellow Gadsden flag was flying nearly as frequently as the American flag.

Often the messages on automobiles were related to the economic effects of the lockdown, primarily people desiring to return to work. Common placards would often in some way indicate that the jobs of regular people were just as important as those termed “essential” by the government, or that people’s desire to work is much more important than the disease. For example, a sign read, “killing our economy is not saving lives.” This argument points to the individualism and market logic that is central to conservatism.

Of course, this argument rests on a false dichotomy. For the virus’s spread to be sufficiently slowed a large amount of economic and social activity needed to cease. To alleviate the losses to employment and economic activity, the U.S. Congress had authorized direct payments to Americans, expanded unemployment benefits, and granted forgivable loans to businesses. Not only does direct payment to able-bodied Americans run counter to conservative fiscal discipline, however, the expanded unemployment benefits and stimulus checks sent to Americans were taken as evidence of what many conservatives see as the corrosive role of government: By making direct payments, the government is encouraging “dependency” and “socialism.” As one attendee at the Columbia protests said, “I don’t think they [furloughed workers receiving enhanced unemployment benefits] are interested in going back to work. Some want to be able to sit in a café and drink coffee” (Monk, 2020). In 19th century American populism, the “other” was framed as those who didn’t work as opposed to “people” who did. The railroad barons and eastern bankers didn’t work but rather derived their wealth from the work of others. In contemporary right-wing populism the other is not only the cultural and political elites, but also those down the class ladder that don’t work, including the lazy that lack the foundational American values (Cramer, 2016; Burke, 2015; Judis, 2016).

Primary components of market fundamentalism are ideas of free choice and individualism. These ideals are foundational aspect of American cultural identity in general but are especially so for right-wing populists, one reason why many conservatives are so profoundly averse to engaging in the practices necessary to slow the spread of a highly communicable disease. Simply put, individualism causes social spread of the disease. Yet it was often puzzling to me how far reopen supporters would go to prioritize individualism over mitigation. For example, Janine, a public-school district administrator from the Charleston area, argued that parents and teachers should decide for themselves whether they wanted to return to school or not. She was angered that the school board in her county did not consult either group when they decided to close all the schools in the district. It is difficult, however, to envision how such a decision-making system would have worked in practice. To illustrate the point of individual choice, she used an odd metaphor: not yielding to a red light. She argued that one makes a choice as to whether to stop or go through an intersection when the light turns red. The person risks injury or a legal penalty but it is *their* choice. This awkward logic in fact illustrates the idea that individualism has grave collective consequences especially in the case of public health. For as we know, running a red light risks the lives of not only the driver who chooses to break the law but also the innocent pedestrian crossing the street who expected the driver to maintain established norms. Pressing the metaphor further, our fictitious light runner is potentially endangering their own passenger in the car—an apt representation for one’s own family. The power and stark contradictions of individualism are glaring contributors to America’s feeble response to the pandemic.

The second location of the Columbia Operation Gridlock protest was on the steps of the South Carolina State House, where protestors gathered to hear a series of speakers. This event had the feel of the Tea Party rallies I attended during my earlier fieldwork, in which several people from different backgrounds would speak for 5 to 10 minutes on the topic of the rally. Here social distancing was being observed more closely, with a microphone stand in the center and flag-holding supporters (the American flag and the Gadsden flag) standing 2 meters away on either side. Several steps below the microphone in front and center was a large 2-meter wide “Trump 2020” banner held by two more supporters. Tea Party themes were most visible in these on-the-ground-protests. The former Tea Partyists organizing this particular protest were undoubtedly drawing upon the strategies that proved so successful a decade earlier.

While the signs and slogans on the automobiles focused upon market logic and individualism, the speeches on the steps were directed toward the preservation of liberty and the dangers of government tyranny. Among right-wing fundamentalist populists, liberty is always threatened. A common story I heard many times over the years was that of Benjamin Franklin being asked at the conclusion of the constitutional convention in 1787 whether the founders had established a republic or a monarchy, to which he answered, “a Republic, if you can keep it.”⁵ For example, I asked a reopen supporter if and where in the constitution mask mandates could be interpreted as unconstitutional,

It's not, but it is viewed as a bold step toward tyranny, that most politicians don't want to take, especially in an election year. The governor can request it during the state of emergency [SOE] which he has the power to do for 15 days. After that, the state of emergency has to be approved by our general assembly, which has yet to happen. Technically his SOE order is illegal currently.

To her, this meant that any action by the governor, such as the mandated wearing of masks, would be an overreach of government power.⁶

A corollary of this belief is that as government inserts itself more and more into people's everyday life, it “captures” and indoctrinates them to new, corrosive ideas that destroy individualism, initiative, and self-respect (Westermeyer, 2018). For example, one speaker argued that because people could not work and provide for their families, the shutdowns and school closings destroys family because parents who cannot work become dependent on the government. This logic interprets government as the “provider” replacing the head of household as the financial and moral center of the family. Government replaces the family.

Occasionally at meetings of more religious-oriented Tea Party groups, speakers would use Bible stories and biblical metaphors to make broader political points. The strong support by evangelical Christians for Donald Trump, in addition to attracting religious Tea Partyists, opened a space for similar themes. One male speaker at the reopen protest made the connection between the United States government and Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar as described in the Old Testament Book of Daniel, explaining how the king had kidnapped children after capturing Jerusalem, returning them to Babylon to be “trained in the learning and tongues of the Chaldeans.” In other words, the state captures people, and trains them to follow different values.

Many Tea Party evangelicals argued that the United States was inspired by and founded upon Judeo-Christian “values.” Historical links between those values and historical events and persons (sometimes with tenuous evidence) become powerful political messages. A photograph of a Texas protester's sign draws a quote from Alexander Hamilton's oration after the Boston massacre in March of 1774. The sign reads, “I conjure you, by all that is dear, by all that is honorable, by all that is sacred, not only that ye pray, but that ye act...” (Rummler & Falconer, 2020).

4.2 Conservative Organizations—Conspiracy Narratives and Institutional Mistrust

In describing the operation gridlock protest, I particularly focused on the theme of values—individualism, patriotism, and religion. Describing the second site will focus on a different theme of fundamentalist populism: mistrust of elites and conspiracy narratives. The online presence of large and small national conservative groups such as Tea Party Patriots and FreedomWorks has been instrumental in the spread of right-wing populism, providing a networking platform, professionally produced materials, and expertise to grassroots Tea Party organizers. These networks were reactivated to promote resistance to the public health measures taken to confront the pandemic. Tea Party Patriots promoted what it called the “Second Opinion Project,” which consisted of short videos from medical professionals discussing the deleterious health effects of the lockdown. The stated purpose was to portray experts that are being ignored by public health leaders and the mainstream media because of their contrarian views. The website argues that Americans diligently followed guidelines in March and April of 2020 to prevent hospitals from being overloaded, but the predicted cataclysm did not happen (not acknowledging that those restrictions may have prevented the dire

⁵ The quote has salience on the left as well. Shortly after the Trump-inspired insurrection that occupied the U.S. Capitol on January 6th, 2021, I heard a few Democratic Party members evoke the same statement.

⁶ At the time of writing, the governor has never mandated a statewide mask ordinance though many individual communities in South Carolina have.

predictions from being realized).⁷ Rather, the government was using “predictions as justification to deprive us of our natural God-given rights and plunging millions of Americans into poverty and despair” (Tea Party Patriots, 2020).

Essentially the videos mirror the statements by President Trump who in person and on Twitter cautioned that “the cure cannot be worse than the problem itself” (Haberman & Sanger, 2020). This has been a common theme among conservatives opposed to media and government reactions to the virus. The principal claim is that it simply isn’t as serious as described, and that because of the unnecessary restrictions, the health of Americans is actually put at greater risk (Tyson, 2020). In a Facebook comment thread in which I conversed with a reopen supporter, he maintained that deaths by suicide from despair brought on by unemployment and confinement were equal to if not greater than the death toll directly from COVID-19.

More conspiratorial themes also emerge from the Tea Party Patriot’s website. One “second opinion” video portrayed Dr. Simone Gold, identified as “a board-certified emergency physician and a Stanford University Law School-educated attorney.” On June 26, 2020, Tea Party Patriots re-posted an op-ed by Dr. Gold that appeared in USA Today accompanied by a claim that the newspaper edited it “without her approval!” (Gold, 2020). The deleted section made the argument, without evidence, that the virus had been manufactured and had escaped its confined environs.

This claim has circulated most notably through a video entitled *Plandemic* which described an elaborate conspiracy theory in which scientists and a cabal of elites manufactured the virus in pursuit of power and profit. The video was viewed more than 8 million times in the week it was posted and was shared over 2.5 million times before being removed by major social media platforms (Frenkel, Decker, & Alba, 2020). A Tea Party informant I recently spoke with followed a slightly different conspiracy, in which COVID-19 was manufactured purposely during the administration of Donald Trump specifically to destroy his presidency. While conspiracy narratives should be expected in times of crisis, the mysterious nature of the illness coupled with the circulation of these narratives by the President of the United States within a closed political media environment, moved them from the fringe to the mainstream and undermined attempts to confront the emergency.

4.3 Social Media: The Cultural Construction of the Mask

I briefly touched upon the work done by internet-based organizations such as Tea Party Patriots to raise doubts and suspicions regarding the pandemic. But there are many sources for these narratives across the internet, from aggregated news sites such as Townhall.com to news organizations such as One American News (OAN).⁸ Those not immersed in the conservative media universe are often unaware of the breadth of the network. As the legitimacy of mainstream media and news declines among conservatives, this other media universe becomes a key site for developing the outlooks, symbols, and discourses that constitute the reopen figured world. Facebook, the third space of meaning-making, had earlier been a primary mode of Tea Party organizing and the spread of the movement’s symbols and discourses. Reopen groups utilized Facebook for similar purposes. Initially used to coordinate protest, these groups have become rough and tumble spaces where people exchange information, conspiracy narratives, express outrage, and circulate internet memes.⁹ Unlike the Tea Party groups, where the participants were typically in agreement sharing and amplifying familiar themes, the reopen Facebook groups occasionally included some reopen opponents. These rancorous exchanges often showed the stark differences in belief systems between different sides of the COVID-19 conflict.

In experiencing all these sites including Facebook, the surgical mask or face covering was an ever-present sign. In Simone Gold’s conspiratorial column mentioned above she also expresses the symbolic and practical significance of the face covering writing, “The mask has become the most visible symbol of #socialconditioning to Americans determined to preserve individual freedom. Thus far most Americans have continued to give their consent to be governed. But you are trying our patience” (Gold, 2020). Identities forged in practice are disclosed and mediated through cultural

⁷ This was prior to the more deadly 3rd wave of the virus in the Winter of 2020-21.

⁸ Small online news organizations such as OAN and Newsmax rose in prominence in the second half of the Trump administration. Trump’s press office allowed an OAN reporter in the White House briefing room much to the anger of the White House Press Corp. After Fox News, reported the victory of President Biden (at the time other mainstream networks did), many of my Tea Party informants switched their allegiance to the two upstarts.

⁹ Internet memes are images accompanied by short text of a catchphrase, concept or platitude that are often circulated on social media.

“artifacts,” signs by which figured worlds are “evoked, collectively developed, individually learned, and made socially and personally powerful” (Holland et al., 1998, p. 61). Socio-historical psychologist Lev Vygotsky termed this “semiotic mediation,” the notion that collectively generated symbols provide human actors and groups the ability to organize their own efforts toward ends they desire (Vygotsky, 1978; see also Hochschild, 1983). By assigning collectively constructed meanings and symbolic values to objects, emotions, political actions, and events, humans make the political thinkable and materialize intimate and collective identities.

The mask has become arguably the primary artifact of the socio-political conflict surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic in America; and the internet is a primary site of this conflict. I have seen countless arguments on Facebook, in online newspaper comment sections and even in social networks that are not typically sites of ongoing political conflicts, like NextDoor. The mask and its meanings circulating on social media encapsulates all three themes I have discussed in this paper—the cultural politics of identity, conspiratorial narratives, and market fundamentalism.

One of the qualities of Trump-era populism has been the more expressive and transgressive style of Trump supporters. In other words, some Trump supporters are more interested in “owning the libs,” or inducing (and hence controlling) the emotional reactions of liberals by evoking Trump’s more offensive and politically *incorrect* statements. Thus, the significance of the mask goes beyond the freedom to simply not wear it: More importantly, one needs to express and perform not wearing a mask and seek out those sharing the stance. Internet memes and status updates become one site for expressing that political identity.

The mask also represents the opposition to expertise. To many, the mask is a kind of joke. In one internet meme for instance, overly emotional millennials are shown tearily and sanctimoniously proclaiming that mask wearing protects others not themselves. This joke is being played on the gullible and soft “sheeple” by “experts” who are selectively choosing data that supports the wearing of masks and making fools of the dupes. Often members of these groups will post sources that center on earlier statements by scientists such as Dr. Anthony Fauci declaring that masks were unnecessary. Though Fauci did say these things early in the pandemic, soon after those statements were made, the CDC and Fauci began to strongly emphasize mask wearing as the pandemic became more widespread (Impelli, 2020). To those opposed to mandatory mask wearing, the motive for this medical legerdemain is scientists’ own hubris or self-serving goals of power and wealth. Doubts raised by shifting guidance from health professional regarding masks, rates of infection, death, and severity of the disease, highlight a misunderstanding or unwillingness to understand the process of Western science. As earlier scientific conclusions are modified or refuted, many reopen activists see the earlier conclusions as shoddy science or as a false pretense for restricting individual liberty.

Finally, social media also highlights the ideas of market fundamentalism and individualism as symbolized in the mask. In the simplest sense, many people claim not to be opposed to mask wearing but rather complain that having the government order them to do so removes their freedom of choice and liberty. However, opposition to mask wearing is also articulated through the examples of (typically small) businesses suffering under the undue government regulations of mask ordinances: For example, a post will highlight a small business owner who has been penalized for violating mask ordinances. They may also highlight the businesses that openly declare that they are ignoring a local mask-wearing ordinance. In both cases, these business owners become a small and brief *cause celebre* within the Facebook communities for practicing their patriotic duty to resist tyranny.

The mask has become the quintessential artifact of the conflict surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic in America. It has joined other artifacts of identity politics such as the headscarf, the American flag lapel pin that politicians must wear to mark their patriotism, and the “pussyhat” of the 2017 women’s marches. For many, the mask symbolizes that the dangers of the pandemic are fraudulent and exaggerated and part of a conspiracy to deny Americans their liberty. Moreover, the mask is a battle over choice and individualism. For many months of the pandemic conservative political leaders, including the president, stressed personal choice regarding masks while undermining their effectiveness, undoubtably leading to many unnecessary deaths and hospitalizations.

5 Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has laid out in stark relief the importance of tracing the cultural processes that constitute the formation of collective political identities in the figured worlds of conservative Americans. The right-wing populist response to COVID-19 reveals severe fissures in the American political culture that undermine the nation’s ability to

confront collective problems. Strong collective identities are not the problem *per se*; it is the socio-political context within which they are constructed and the processes through which the cultural resources used to construct these identities are created, appropriated, and circulated. Americans cannot avoid the fact that extreme and antagonistic partisanship coupled with ideologically separate media universes present conflicting realities that have become even more apparent and lethal during this pandemic. These divisions have had, and continue to have, significant effects upon how well this country lessens the effects of the pandemic-medically, socially, and economically.

Though many may look down on some of the reopen activists as extremists (and rightfully so in many cases), it is important to see the logic of these outlooks. At the same time, this type of analysis presents a particular challenge to anthropologists when the cultural logic is unequivocally leading to unnecessary deaths and suffering. While there have been calls for more nuanced and analytical studies of the socio-political right (e.g. Gusterson, 2017; Tretjak, 2013), I for one have found this research much more challenging than my previous work (see Westermeyer, 2019, p. 16) due to the potential consequences of my informants' actions and the personal emotional salience of their effects.

Yet, the COVID-19 pandemic highlights the serious dangers emerging due to changes in American political culture that require thoughtful analysis. The need is clear to understand and trace these cultural processes and how they affect responses to other collective perils such as social inequality and climate change. The cultural politics of neoliberalism, or more specifically, the enshrinement of individualism as a paramount value, undermines the idea of consent in a republican form of government. Reflecting upon my research encounters, I thought of a recent article by historian Rick Pearlstein in which he wrote, "COVID-19 has sucked the world into a vortex of interlocking crises that demand collective sacrifice to resolve. The world's most powerful nation has revealed itself as tragically unequal to the challenge—unwilling to transcend private interest" (Perlstein, 2020). He continues, pointing out that while the nation and its institutions effectively engaged in collective sacrifices during past national emergencies, American culture led by business, media, and politicians has all but cast off the ideas that make such collective sacrifice possible. American citizenship enshrines liberty but also requires the yielding of some liberty in order for all to have the opportunity to share resources and overcome collective problems. That concept is crucial if a collective is to overcome the immediate crisis as well as those of the future.

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