

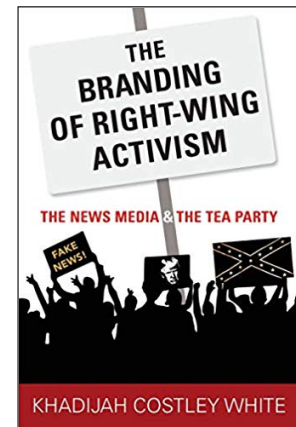
Khadijah Costley White, **The Branding of Right-Wing Activism: The News Media and the Tea Party**, Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2018, 288 pp., \$99.00 (hardcover).

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Just how biased is the liberal media against conservatism, and how to make sense of the political fires burning in the United States? In a thorough and well-argued book, **The Branding of Right-Wing Activism: The News Media and the Tea Party**, communication scholar Khadijah Costley White surveys media coverage of the right-wing insurgency of the early years of the presidency of Barack Obama. Far from marginalizing the Tea Party, White argues that media coverage actually helped figure the Tea Party as a corporate brand, producing the “cultural signifier” (p. 5) *Tea Party* as an object of public attention through news coverage that segmented it from the historical narrative trajectory of conservatism in the United States. Consequently, media coverage gave the Tea Party—and its nihilistic, anti-institutional ethos and animating anti-Black sentiment—political cover and plausible deniability, legitimating it as if it were a social movement. White’s study renders media discourses about the Tea Party movement as symptoms of capitalist media culture narrating events in ways reproducing the ideological and identitarian limitations of mass media. Using the metaphor of “turning up the volume” (p. ix), White notes how media emphasis can focus audiences on certain understandings of phenomena rather than others in ways that set social and political parameters.



Arguing that “the Tea Party was less social movement and more mass-mediated brand” (p. 5), White makes at least several key arguments to show how media helped legitimate the phenomenon. First, where historically news media tend to track and observe social movements, in the case of the Tea Party right-wing outlets like *Fox News* and *World Net Daily* actively participated in the phenomenon, producing content about it that other media found difficult to separate from the cultural signifier *Tea Party* (p. 149). Consequently, mainstream media coverage of the Tea Party often felt to consumers like an intramural dustup between different news entities, reinforcing the sense that media were producing different rather than shared realities when narrating the national state of play. A second key observation relates to the negative frames used by the media in reporting on the phenomenon. “While the news coverage did frequently cover Tea Party policy stances more often than is typical of media reporting on social movement, it was largely described in opposition to certain issues rather than advocating for a particular platform” such that “news coverage of Tea Party policy preferences reflected little ideological coherence and functioned more as a multiple signifier for its brand” (p. 25).

The negative grammar of Tea Party coverage unlocks the book’s most vital contribution: The antisystemic, nihilistic, right-wing populism burning down Western governments owes itself to a kind of negative temperament and affect that is characteristic of political neoliberalism. The media’s tendency to affirm the authenticity of sentiment behind the Tea Party suggests a media ecosystem which confuses nihilistic, hell-for-leather opposition with authentic politics, reflecting an internalized, neoliberal

understanding of politics. Various actors in civil society often presume the existence of a system, which is more selfsame with official political institutions and organs than corporate entities. In turn, even forces like the media, which are nominally democratic guardrails protecting civil society from slipping into pure marketized violence, posit Tea Parties and other nihilistic acts of political rebellion as the opposites of the system of market relations rather than their extension. If conservative populism in the United States is largely animated by a negative energy, as scholars like Corey Robin (2013) suggest, White's book highlights what was continuous between the movement and its conservative forbears, a capacity to critique "the system" while defining that system as a moving target to serve corporate and white supremacist interests.

The book is organized into discrete sections. Chapter 1 introduces the book's context and summarizes key concepts in media theory; chapter 2 focuses on branding; chapter 3 looks at the identity politics of the Tea Party as it circulated in media; and chapter 4 examines how the Tea Party phenomenon became inextricably yoked to intramural debates within the news industry itself. Chapter 2 makes the most significant contribution to conversations about media bias. While it is true that members of the media, especially national and legacy media, by and large identify as Democrats, the incentives of the news industry, the identity characteristics of these reporters themselves, and the character of American civil society work together so that news often normalizes—and even praises—right-wing politics as an authentic form of citizenship. To wit, White observes that the Tea Party ended up having two brands: "third party" and "social movement." In both cases, media reporting gave the movement significant social capital, associating it with nonpartisan, authentic roots outside two-party politics in the former, and in the latter associating it with a rich tradition of left-wing social activism (p. 33). Of course, such associations strain credulity: Many Tea Partiers were loyal Republican voters and would remain so even after the phenomenon faded from view. White's keen analysis indicts conventional mainstream media organizations, many of whom swallowed hook, line, and sinker the idea that the Tea Party represented something dynamic and different from the same old conservatism.

Chapter 3 notes how media coverage weaponized class, constituted the polity as postracial in character, and confused the presence of women with gender salience in the rise of the Tea Party. Media narratives made the case that the Tea Party was fighting a class war, but the classes were better understood as elites versus people than say, wealthy versus poor. When it came to race, media reports framed racist acts at rallies as outliers that did not represent the nation's present or future (p. 122). Media also focused on making visible the female leadership in the phenomenon, celebrating figures like former Alaska governor Sarah Palin (pp. 130–131). Such reports tacitly rebutted the idea of the Tea Party as a case of possessive, angry white masculinity on the loose, producing a patina of progressivity that could insulate Tea Party enthusiasts from charges that they were hostile to social difference. White's analysis underscores how so many analysts, commentators, and scholars failed to predict the rise of Trump that followed the Tea Party: If the media reported on the threatening violence of "Don't Tread on Me" and "Take Our Country Back," they simultaneously diminished the intensity of the threat by indulging in nostalgia and focusing on female leadership of the movement.

Chapter 4 takes on shifts in the character of the U.S. news industry, especially amid a world of consumer capitalism focused on capturing—and holding—audience attention even as the neoliberal context brings leveling effects that placed bloggers and *Breitbart News* on more even footing with traditional media

organizations (p. 155). While the entire chapter elegantly illustrates how unprepared the media was to deal with the Tea Party's asymmetric spoofing attack on liberal democracy, one especially salient takeaway is that reporting about the Tea Party often took participants at their words, trusting the intent and the aims of the protest and energies motivating participants. Rather than intervening with a perspective to educate readers about how to judge whether Tea Partiers were neutrally committed to freedom or was fueled by a resentment of Barack Obama's Blackness, straight news stories mostly left the ball in the air, letting the readers judge whether or not it hit the line when it came down.

The book concludes with a meditation on what it means that within hyperconsumerist neoliberalism boundaries between political actors and journalism have become blurred. Technologies of celebrity work for both individual news reporters and politicians, with a spectacle of political firestorm that consumes both journalists and politicians the fevered stuff of Guy Debord's nightmares. By drawing attention to the Tea Party as antagonism, White suggests the media are participating in a model of political economy that produces negativity as a politics while enlisting them as agents doing free public relations work for political activists who adopt the neoliberal view that politics is bankrupt and the opposite of the popular will (p. 191).

White's book makes a case on its own terms, but she also offers a vital supplement to other contemporary works on conservative populism and the American Right. For example, Reece Peck's (2019) *Fox Populism: Branding Conservatism as Working Class* does excellent work to dig closely into the semiotic powers of Fox News, while White's book offers a theory for why phenomena like the Tea Party feel authentic to journalists and consumers of the news that exist outside the audience ecology addressed by Peck. Similarly, *The Branding of Right-Wing Activism* contributes to the debate about the fate of the Tea Party, suggesting that it cannot be judged a success or failure based on how its policy agenda has fared or how many of the officials it elected are still in office. Rather, the effectivity of the cultural signifier is to be found in how scholars, elected officials, and political commentators today invoke the Tea Party as if it were a distinct phenomenon rather than a discursive entity marking continuity within the American Right. White's book helps shed light on the "how" question lurking in a text like Lawrence Grossberg's (2018) *Under the Cover of Chaos: Trump and the Battle for the American Right*, showing that conservatism's ability to shape-shift and mutate its identity found much purchase in a phenomenon the media branded as leaderless and iconoclastic. Finally, White's book offers a complementary study to Nicole Hemmer's (2016) *Messengers of the Right: Conservative Media and the Transformation of American Politics* by highlighting how mainstream and liberal media often compound—rather than counter—the effects of right-wing media echo chambers.

The Branding of Right-Wing Activism makes a vital and urgent contribution to scholarship on the American Right. White makes clear that the Tea Party became an insurgency not only because of conservative donor networks and misdirected postbailout anger, but because a consensus-driven legacy media that lacks both the diversity of perspective and personnel necessary to serve broad democratic interests is ill-prepared to serve the public in a world of increasingly individuated and fragmented media consumption. The book helps make sense of the progression of late-20th- and early-21st-century conservatism into more visible extremism by making clear the role of both right-wing and liberal media in producing the Tea Party as a phenomenon to be consumed rather than engaged with through a historical reflexivity.

References

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