

BALANCING THE SCALE OF RATIONALITY:
THE PUBLIC MEMORY OF THE BOSTON TEA PARTY AND THE TRANSFORMATION
OF DISSENT

by

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ABSTRACT

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This study examines the public memory of the Boston Tea Party as it has been appropriated for political purposes throughout history. First, I examine the Boston Tea Party to show that the rhetoric surrounding this protest created a tradition of American dissent in which dissenters created a balance between the rational and the irrational. Next, I analyze how woman suffragists participated in the centennial celebration of the Boston Tea Party in 1873 by planning protests that evoked the message of the Boston Tea Party. I illustrate that the rhetoric relevant to these events carried on the tradition of dissent established one hundred years earlier as these women balanced assertions of irrationality with rational argument. Finally, I analyze the Modern Tea Party Movement and conclude that their movement has been overwhelmed by irrationality. Thus, they have transfigured the tradition of Tea Party dissent in America.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

On May 10, 1773, the British government passed the Tea Act. This act, which was created to save the East India Tea Company from bankruptcy, stipulated that the company's tea would be shipped directly to America, where appointed agents would sell it to the colonists.¹ Due to this direct delivery route, Americans would no longer be able to buy untaxed tea smuggled in from England. Many colonists, especially those in the Whig party, strongly believed that the British were overstepping their rule in creating this act and planned to boycott the selling of the tea.

On November 28, 1773, the tea arrived in Boston's harbor on Francis Rotch's ship known as the *Dartmouth* and two other ships carrying tea, the *Eleanor* and the *Beaver*, were not far behind.² After several unsuccessful meetings and pleas to send the tea back, a group of Bostonian Whigs decided it was time to take the matter into their own hands. Therefore, on December 16, the date of their last failed attempt to persuade the Governor to take action, a group of men raided the *Dartmouth*, the *Eleanor*, and the *Beaver* under the leadership of Samuel Adams, who signaled them with his cry, "This meeting can do nothing more to save the country!"³ Upon this signal, his men, many of whom were dressed for the occasion as Mohawk Indians, threw 342 chests of tea into the Massachusetts Bay.

Although many parts of this political protest remain a mystery, like exactly who and how many participated, most Americans have been taught some general outline of the event, which is now widely known as the Boston Tea Party.⁴ However, the Boston Tea Party should be recognized for more than its undeniable significance to the revolutionary period. The various

tellings of this iconic story have made it an inspirational tale, which future American political activists of all stripes have remodeled and cast into their own version of American history.

On December 15 and 16, 1873, the centennial anniversary of the Boston Tea Party, two groups of women held their own Tea Parties, one in Boston and one in New York.⁵ Although these groups were commemorating the Boston Tea Party's original accomplishments, celebration was not the only item on their agenda. Like the original Tea Partiers, these women wanted to mix tea and politics. However, this time the "vile bohea" was put to a different use—suffrage.⁶ Although the women did not find it necessary to actually throw tea into the harbor, they did recognize a parallel between the colonists' situation one hundred years earlier and their own: both were lacking equal rights. Therefore, they celebrated these men to legitimize their own cause by providing it with a mythic history. By turning tea to suffrage, these women claimed, in effect, that suffrage was rooted in the same principles that these American heroes fought for one hundred years earlier.

Approximately 140 years later, it was political teatime yet again. On February 19, 2009, after much conservative frustration with Obama's stimulus package, CNBC's Rick Santelli attacked Obama's plan as "promoting bad behavior."⁷ He jested that he was trying to plan a "Chicago Tea Party" in protest. Thus, the Modern Tea Party Movement was born. Since Santelli's television tirade, hundreds of tea parties have been held across America—the exact number of which is uncountable as these protests are still occurring regularly throughout the country. The reasons for protesting have gone beyond just the stimulus package. For instance, the tea partiers also argue against Obama's health care package and big government in general. Although these protests do not revolve around an anniversary date, they are similar to the woman

suffragist's events in that they are paying tribute to the men who participated in the Boston Tea Party in order to invent a history for their own particular cause.

The multiple appropriations of the Boston Tea Party indicate the power of rhetoric to interpret and appropriate history for diverse partisan purposes. They remind us that history is not simply a chronicle of events, the meaning of which appears clearly and unambiguously to anyone with eyes to see. Rather, the sheer diversity of the causes that the tea party has been made to serve reminds us that history and its remembrance are, first and foremost, rhetorical. That is, America's past is a potent political resource and, like any such resource, rhetoricians of every political brand will marshal it and deploy it to their own ends. No one has captured the rhetorical character of history better than Hayden White. As he argues in *Tropics of Discourse*, history should be considered a species of fiction because, much like the novelist, the historian too seeks to create a coherent story out of events that are meaningless until framed by a storyteller/historian.⁸ Due to the power that the storyteller possesses, it is inevitable that our memories of the past will be distinctly colored by the political agendas of the present. In other words, as humans, we will inevitably stain the stories of the past with present standards. Or, as Steve Browne aptly put it, the "present, it seems, will not leave the past alone."⁹

In this study I will focus on the various retellings of the Tea Party in order to show transformations in the tradition of American Tea Party dissent. Specifically, I illustrate that the people involved in the Boston Tea Party of 1773 created a tradition of dissent based in a dialectical tension between the rationality and irrationality of American dissent. Some men who supported this protest were at pains to prove the rationality of the Destruction of the Tea by framing it this way with words. Even after they decided to use violence to destroy the tea, they did not abandon their original weapon of rhetoric to try to convince their opponents that their

dissent was justified. In 1873, the woman suffragists carried on in this tradition of justifying their dissent with reason. They strived to prove that their events were just as legitimate if not more legitimate than other centennial Tea Party celebrations happening at the same time. Thanks to the Boston Tea Party participants' legacy these women now had a potent public memory on their side. Because of the popular phrase, "No taxation without representation," the Boston Tea Party served as a perfect allegory for their position of disenfranchisement. Their rationale for dissent was found within history and in this way they carried on the use of reason to justify what others viewed as irrational dissent.

Although the woman suffragists carried on the history of American dissent, the Modern Tea Party Movement has transfigured this tradition. The Tea Parties of 1773 and 1873 were characterized by a balance between the rational and the irrational, but the modern movement has tipped the scale by being overcome by irrationality. They have lost this delicate balance. Like the women of 1873, they use the Boston Tea Party's memory to their advantage, but unlike the women, the people of the modern movement take this history for granted. They do not resort to reason, because they believe their dissent is justified simply because they are Americans. Unlike the previous dissenters discussed, who moved the country forward, these dissenters want to return to the way America used to be. I show that because their movement embraces inarticulateness, has been overcome by discrimination, and supports violent rhetoric, the Modern Tea Partiers have negatively transformed Boston Tea Party dissent. Instead of embodying the importance of reasonable rhetoric, they have been enveloped by irrationality. Thus, throughout American history, Tea Party dissent has transformed from a balance between rationalized protest and irrational ruckus to an uneven scale that favors the savage uproar.

For the purposes of this project I do not impose contemporary definitions onto the terms rationality and irrationality. My use of these terms stems from the texts of the case studies at hand. For instance, in 1773, the Whigs in Boston wrote of town meetings that they arranged and to which they invited the tax commissioners so that they could discuss the issues at hand. However, other Whig supporters threatened to tar and feather the commissioners. I consider the meetings rational rhetoric and the threats irrational rhetoric. When the woman suffragists planned their Tea Party the newspaper characterized their event as a “wail.”¹⁰ In this way, these women were framed as irrational. However, the speakers at the Woman Suffragist Tea Parties used rationality by making an analogy between the Boston Tea Party and their own predicament. People in the Modern Tea Party Movement use slogans such as “Obama bin Lyin.”¹¹ This is an example of what I label Tea Party irrationality.

Finally, the word savages arises as a synonym for irrationality in the protest of 1773. When the story of the Boston Tea Party was written down in 1773, the participants were often labeled savages. The term savage became representative of the irrational mask worn by a civilized man beneath. Civilized people use rational reasoning to defend themselves, while savages are defined by their irrational words and actions.

Rationale for Project

The Boston Tea Parties from 1773 to 2009 warrant critical attention for three main reasons. First, the eighteenth century Boston Tea Party is an iconic and important narrative of dissent in American history. Second, the Boston Tea Party has continued to have political importance for other dissenters throughout America’s history and into the present. Finally, despite the fact that this iconic event of dissent is ripe for rhetorical criticism, rhetoricians have paid little attention to it—perhaps precisely because it was an *act* of dissent rather than a speech.

The image of that fateful night—men dressed up as Indians throwing crates of tea overboard—has become representative of a fight toward freedom and an exalted example of civil disobedience. It has become a rhetorical icon persuading young school children to envy the foresight of their ancestors and all Americans to uphold patriotism. However, the Tea Party is not only iconic for the generations of Americans living after the revolution, but it was also a meaningful symbol for the revolution itself. As American Revolutionary historian Peter D. G. Thomas asserts:

No revisionist interpretation of the American Revolution has sought to discount the significance of the Boston Tea Party as the actual catalyst of the sequence of events wherein the colonies moved from resistance to revolution. It was a more direct and violent challenge to British authority than had occurred in the Stamp Act Crisis and the Townshend Duties Crisis.¹²

Thomas is not alone in this view. Labaree also states that: “The Boston Tea Party was the catalyst that brought about this revolutionary change.”¹³

Perhaps the Boston Tea Party is considered such a catalyst for change, because its meaning could not be ignored by the British. The Tea Act created by the British government was extremely important for two reasons. First, the East India Tea Company was having financial difficulties that would be solved by the act’s ridding them of competition. Second, the act represented England’s dominance over the colonies. It was meant to prove that the King *did* have a right to tax the colonies.¹⁴ However, this does not mean that the act was “conceived as a device to force taxed tea down American throats.”¹⁵ In their own eyes, the British Government was being reasonable, because tea would now be cheaper for Americans.¹⁶ Therefore, the British

could not disregard when 342 chests of their tea worth 9,000 *lbs.* were ruined in the Boston Harbor.¹⁷

Unlike the tension that had been unfolding in polite, reasoned documents like John Dickenson's "Letter From a Pennsylvania Farmer," the Boston Tea Party spit its defiance in the Mother Country's face.¹⁸ For one of the first times, the colonists refused to continue to conform to what James C. Scott has labeled the "public transcript," which entails acting in line with the way the "dominant group would wish to have things appear."¹⁹ Rather the participants in the Tea Party actively dissented and "ruptur[ed]" the public transcript unfurling a strong message that could not be ignored. Thus, the dissenters of the Boston Tea Party lit the wick of the bomb that would become the most massive event of dissent in America's history, the American Revolution.

As is evidenced by the protests of 1873 and 2009, the British weren't the only ones who had trouble ignoring the dissent of the Boston Tea Party. People have continued to keep the Tea Party alive by telling and re-telling this story. Not only was the Tea Party narrative meaningful for colonial Americans but also for Women's Rights Activists of the late nineteenth century and conservative Americans of today. The case studies I have chosen are unique for this reason—they span from just prior to the conception of America as a nation all the way to the present. Therefore in addition to tracing the meaning of the Boston Tea Party to different sets of people, the project also charts the meaning of the Boston Tea Party dissent throughout history. In fact, even as I write chapters on the original event and the 1873 event, the 2009-2010 Tea Party phenomenon continues to grow.²⁰

Given its undisputed historical importance, and its continuing invocation, the relative paucity of rhetorical scholarship is puzzling. One reason for this paucity of scholarship might be

that, unlike the Boston Massacre, which produced thirteen years worth of annual platform orations, and unlike the Revolution itself, filled with declarations, pamphlets a plenty, and, above all, *Common Sense*, the eighteenth century tea party has left us no acclaimed documents.²¹ In other words, when rhetorical scholars choose to study acts that led up to the revolution they usually choose to analyze concrete texts. For instance, instead of studying *the* Boston Massacre, scholars study the Boston Massacre Orations.²² Maybe this is one reason that the Tea Party is often neglected in rhetorical studies. In other words, perhaps it is overlooked because there is not a famous speech or pamphlet in the Revolutionary era concerning the Tea Party.

Method

I plan to do my research on the Boston Tea Party through the lens of Public Memory studies. The basic premise of Public Memory studies, at least as it exists in rhetorical studies, is that the events of history become meaningful and/or politically significant only as they are appropriated through rhetoric. Therefore, I will cross-pollinate the theory of Public Memory with the arguments presented in Hayden White's book *Tropics of Discourse*. For, more than most, White has a keen eye to the arbitrary relationships among events, discourse, and meaning. In order to further explain my method, I will first justify how I plan to look at these Tea Parties as rhetorical texts and then I will explain three guidelines that will direct my work when analyzing these texts.

Because the eighteenth century tea party left us no canonical texts and inaugurated no lecture series, I will have to be creative in order to read the party rhetorically. I will approach each Tea Party via a wide variety of texts that surround it: newspaper articles, speeches, slogans, etc. This may seem on its face to be a blatant confusion of text for context, but it is actually in keeping with public memory studies. For, as I will detail later in this section, public memory

studies take it as axiomatic that an historical event only exists as it is brought forward into the present. In short, it is through contexts that we can read the tea parties as a primary text.

Furthermore, my use of context is especially important for this study since I have chosen a non-traditional artifact as the basis of my research, the non-verbal protest of the eighteenth century Boston Tea Party. As Warnick states, “acts of nonverbal protest . . . may be explicitly fragmented and discontinuous and yet be amenable to rhetorical analysis.”²³ Robert J. Branham and W. Barnett Pearce further this argument when they write:

Not all texts are conventional, not all contexts are stable, and not all situations imply recognizable techniques or consensual standards of interpretation. Such rhetorical acts/situations require a more encompassing critical perspective, one which explicitly incorporates reciprocal implications between texts and contexts, and acknowledges that these implications are potentially incommensurate.²⁴

In other words, when a scholar chooses to examine a non-traditional artifact, he or she must often also be open to using non-traditional modes of criticism. Furthermore, due to the nature of examining “acts/situations” these non-traditional methods chosen must contain a basic assumption that when looking at these artifacts one cannot clearly delineate between nor separate text and context.

However, these specificities of my project (using public memory studies and the use of a non-traditional artifact) are not the only reasons that I choose to rely on context, for the importance of utilizing context in *all* rhetorical criticism has been espoused by many. According to Michael Calvin McGee, “the elements of ‘context’ are so important to the ‘text’ that one cannot discover, or even discuss, the *meaning* of ‘text’ without reference to them.”²⁵ An example of a writer who takes this statement to heart is Charles E. Morris III. For instance, in his article “The Responsibilities of the Critic’ F.O. Matthiessen’s Homosexual Palimpsest” he

specifically states that “the rhetorical contexts that inspire and equip us for the critical act must be balanced by a willingness and ability to situate a given text within the horizon of its own historical context.”²⁶ Furthermore, critics like Jay Fliegelman have taken this idea to the extreme. In his book, *Declaring Independence*, in which Fliegelman strives to shed light on the *Declaration of Independence* as a rhetorical as well as political text, nearly his entire book is focused on the context of the time surrounding this historic document including the type of chair Jefferson preferred to popular novels at the time like Susanna Rowson’s *Charlotte Temple*.²⁷ He “[assumes] an interactive culture in which political ideas are present in nonpolitical texts and vice versa.”²⁸ Although, I may not go to such extremes, my selection of artifacts is certainly based in a similar attitude about the importance of context.

I have stressed that texts and contexts are inseparable because of their interdependence. However, texts and contexts are also inextricably linked because, as Fredric R. Jameson explains, “context is itself little more than a text as well, one you find in history manuals or secondary sources, if not in that unexamined pop history or unconscious collective representation by which groups or classes or nations tend to organize their vision and their reading of individual events.”²⁹ In other words, contexts must come from texts often created by historians. As explained earlier, these contextual narratives are rhetorical, just like a normal speech text. Branham describes it well when he states:

Texts are constituted by their enmeshment in contexts, but contexts are themselves created and sustained by texts. This reflexive relationship violates conventional standards of logic based on the assumption that contexts should be kept separate from that which they contextualize.³⁰

For these reasons, as you will see in the layout of my plan of study, I will be using multiple artifacts, texts and contexts, which will inevitably cause me to create my own emplotments as I re-

contextualize these events through my choice and analysis of these artifacts. For, as Morris explains:

Reflectively engaging one's historical text, which at times may require us to swim against the very tide of our own theological or theoretical assumptions, seems not only judicious and responsible but valuable for the enhanced quality of critical judgment it affords.³¹

Due to this, even in the chapter on the modern movement where full speech texts are available, I will interweave a cacophony of rhetorical artifacts (including speeches, slogans, interviews, editorials, etc) together to make sense of their dissent. For, in the age of modern media, these fragments are more representative of how most Americans have rhetorically received this movement than a single speech text heard by listeners at a single rally.

Now that I have explained why I will focus on the texts I do, I will discuss the guidelines that will govern my analysis of these texts. First, I explain my critical assumption that events are not intrinsically meaningful; rather, rhetoric makes them so. White makes a convincing argument that history should be considered more of an art than a science.³² Specifically White argues that a historical account has much in common with a literary narrative. White states:

In point of fact, history—the real world as time evolves—is made sense of in the same way that the poet or novelist tries to made sense of it, i.e., by endowing what originally appears to be problematical and mysterious with the aspect of a recognizable, because it is familiar, form.³³

Therefore, due to its literary nature, history is fictive. Furthermore, White explains that history cannot escape this description, which may offend some historians, because of history's dependence of language. In order to fit together or make sense of a historical narrative, the historian or rhetor must choose a mode of emplotment and thus create meaning for the text.³⁴ Different historians will use different tropes—metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, or irony—

depending on the type of story he or she wishes to tell. In other words, the rhetor must determine whether the story is a romance, a tragedy, a comedy, etc. and what type of language he or she will use to convey this.

However, once one historian has chosen what White labels a mode of “emplotment,” another may re-plot the story in a new way, creating his or her own narrative. In this way the creation of historical narratives is essentially the same as public memory creation, for public memories are constantly emplotted and re-emplotted by different tellers. As Stephen Browne and Barbara Warnick explain in their article “Reading, Rhetoric, and the Texture of Public Memory,” “In one respect . . . there seems to be general agreement: public memory signifies and gets signified in multiple ways. This multiplicity can itself be daunting.”³⁵ John Bodnar expresses a similar sentiment in his book *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* when he writes, “Because numerous interests clash in commemorative events they are inevitably multivocal. They contain powerful symbolic expressions—metaphors, signs, and rituals—that give meaning to competing interpretations of the past and present reality.”³⁶ Most recently, Kendall R. Phillips writes that “. . . memories refuse to remain stable and immutable. Their appearance, often unbidden, within our cultural experience is like a mirage: vivid and poignant but impermanent and fluid. No matter their importance or revered place in our collective lives, we cannot grasp them fully nor fix them permanently.”³⁷ Due to the constant instability of history and memory, throughout my study I will focus on how specific rhetors emplot and re-plot the Boston Tea Party for particular reasons. For, as John R. Gillis states, “We need to be reminded that memories and identities are not fixed things, but representations or constructions of reality, subjective rather than objective phenomena.”³⁸

My second guideline is rooted in the assumption that the past must always be understood in terms of the present. In other words, public memories are always indicative of present politics as much as past events. As I mentioned above, different rhetors create different emplotments of the same event for their own particular reasons or, more cynically stated, their own agendas. In public memory studies, this is the major reason that the past cannot escape the motives or the politics of the present. In fact, this guideline is inherent in the way public memory scholars, at least in rhetorical studies, define public memory. As Browne states, “My analysis is intended to suggest not that commemorations are thus political; this much is general and obvious.”³⁹ In an article that appears in the book *Framing Public Memory*, Bradford Vivian echoes Browne’s statement: “In a fundamental sense, public memory is *political* memory.”⁴⁰ Bodnar also expresses this view: “Public memory is a system of beliefs and views that is produced from a political discussion that involves the fundamental issues relating to the existence of an entire society.”⁴¹ Finally, Neil Michel and Carole Blair sing this refrain as well when they write, “The situation of public memory practices is no small matter for politics, for culture, or for rhetoric. . . . Public memory is often the very battleground upon which are fought issues of contemporary concern.”⁴² Therefore, I will read my texts with an eye toward the notion that “memory is rooted in the conflict and interplay among social, political, and cultural interests and values in the present.”⁴³

Third, as I read the texts that surround and constitute the tea parties, I will refuse to critique them based on historical falsity. For, it is a working premise of public memory studies that the truthity or falsity of a particular memory is relatively unimportant. Vivian sums up this guideline nicely when he states, “I would like to suggest that evaluating public memories according to whether or not they accurately represent the past, or even aspire to a transparent communication of its meanings or lessons, indicates an investment in analytical principles contrary to the formation and perdurance of memory itself”⁴⁴ For, if the past is inaccessible through

language, what matters is how history is deployed, not whether history is correct. For example, it does not matter whether the woman suffragists' tellings of the Boston Tea Party are accurate, but rather why they chose to tell the story this way and how they use this narrative that they have constructed. This disregard for accuracy may be a concern to critics who wish to search for the facts or the truth. However, White astutely points out that the fictive nature of historical accounts should not be seen in a negative light.⁴⁵ Rather this fictive recognition will give the accounts of history "a higher level of self-consciousness than [they] currently occup[y]."⁴⁶

With this said, questions of accuracy will become important in the third chapter on the modern movement as the rhetoric surrounding the movement largely involves questions of the validity of their use of the Boston Tea Party. Opponents of this movement have tried to remove the foundation of its claims to the memory of the Boston Tea Party by pointing out inconsistencies in their use of this history. These texts make up a major body of the commentary on this movement and therefore should not be ignored. I analyze these texts and use them as evidence, but, as a rhetorical critic of public memory, I do not personally critique their version of the facts of history.

The Three Generations of Tea Partiers

This project will be broken down into four more additional chapters. The second chapter will focus on the tradition of dissent created by the rhetoric surrounding the Boston Tea Party of 1773. In this chapter, I complicate the memory of the Tea Party by discussing the different views and representations of this event found in colonial newspapers. In other words, I seek to uncover the genealogy of this historical narrative. I will guide the reader through three stages of the Boston Tea Party: how the colonists reacted to the Tea Act, their responses to the arrival of the British ships in the harbor, and descriptions of the act itself. Throughout I will examine

tensions between rationality and irrationality as the Boston Tea Partiers tried to justify their dissent. I argue that these Boston protestors created a tradition of American dissent in which dissenters must be rhetorically aware by constantly portraying their acts as having a basis in rationality. They must answer the cries of their critics with argument and reasoned persuasion rather than simple disregard or dismissal.

In the third chapter, I analyze the 1873 Woman Suffrage Tea Party protests to show how they use the public memory of the Boston Tea Party to carry on the tradition of balancing rational and irrational rhetoric in dissent. In order to do so, I contrast their Tea Party with other centennial anniversary celebrations that were planned by societies of Ladies. I argue that the parties planned by “ladies” sought to domesticate the Tea Party narrative, removing the event of its political possibilities while the woman suffragists used it precisely for its political power. Although people wrote off the Suffragists Tea Parties as an illegitimate and irrational use of the Boston Tea Party, the suffragists used rational rhetoric to illustrate that their predicament was almost identical to their forefathers who had dissented in Boston one hundred years earlier. Specifically they used the famed phrase: “No taxation without representation.”

In the fourth chapter I analyze the Modern Tea Parties to illustrate how the tradition of American dissent established by the Boston Tea Party has been transfigured in modern times. Similar to the last chapter, in this case study I illustrate how the Modern Tea Parties re-employ the Boston Tea Party narrative in order to add power to their own cause. However, I argue that the modern movement does not embrace the tradition of justifying their claims with reason, but embraces inarticulateness, a superficial use of the Boston Tea Party narrative, and discrimination.

In the final chapter, "Conclusion," I summarize my arguments concerning the tradition of dissent that arose out of the rhetoric of the Boston Tea Party and how this tradition has transformed as the memory of December 16, 1773 has been appropriated throughout America's history. I conclude with a discussion of implications and offer ideas for future research.

Notes

¹ Benjamin Woods Labaree, *Boston Tea Party* (New York: Oxford UP, 1964), 73; Merrill Jensen, *The Founding of a Nation* (New York: Oxford UP, 1968), 433.

² Labaree, *Boston Tea Party*, 118.

³ Ira Stoll, *Samuel Adams: A Life* (New York: Free Press, 2008), 115.

⁴ Young explains that “Americans have not always called this iconic event the ‘tea party.’” Alfred F. Young, *The Shoemaker and the Tea Party* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999), 88.

⁵ “The Boston Tea Party: Centennial Anniversary Tomorrow,” *New York Times*, December 14, 1873; “The New-York Woman’s Suffrage Society,” *New York Times*, December 17, 1873.

⁶ The phrase “vile bohea” comes from a song about the Tea Party that was written during the Revolutionary period. Francis S. Drake, ed., *Tea Leaves: Being a Collection of Letters and Documents Relating to the Shipment of Tea to the American Colonies* (Boston: A.O. Crane, 1884), CLXXVI.

⁷ Rick Santelli, “Rick Santelli: I Want to Set the Record Straight,” *CNBC*, March 2, 2009, <http://www.cnbc.com/id/29471026> (accessed May 25, 2010). A couple examples of the “frustration” mentioned can be found in Rush Limbaugh’s January 29th, 2009 *Wall Street Journal* article entitled “My Bipartisan Stimulus” (found at <http://online.wsj.com/>) in which he states, “This “porkulus” bill is designed to repair the Democratic Party’s power losses from the 1990s forward, and to cement the party’s majority power for decades.” Another example is a February 9th, 2009 protest that was held outside of the Fort Myers Harborside Event Center, where Obama was leading a Town Hall Meeting. Laura Ruane, “Those Outside Harborside in

Fort Myers had Plenty to See, Say,” *News-Press.com (FL)*, February 11, 2009, <http://www.news-press.com/article/20090211/OBAMA/90210068> (accessed May 25, 2010).

⁸ Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1978).

⁹ Stephen H. Browne, “Remembering Crispus Attucks: Race, Rhetoric, and the Politics of Commemoration,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 85 (1999), 169.

¹⁰ “The Boston Tea Party—Centennial Anniversary To-morrow,” *New York Times*, December 15, 1873, <http://www.proquest.com/>.

¹¹ “Tea Party Signs: The Most Outrageous Depictions From Tax Day Protests Across The Country,” *Huffington Post*, April 16, 2010, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/04/16/tea-party-signs-the-most_n_539770.html (accessed May 25, 2010).

¹² Peter D. G. Thomas, *Tea Party to Independence: The Third Phase of the American Revolution 1773-1776* (New York: Clarendon Press, 1991), 25.

¹³ Labaree, *Boston Tea Party*, viii.

¹⁴ John Anthony Scott, *Trumpet of a Prophecy: Revolutionary America, 1763-1783* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969), 64-65.

¹⁵ Thomas, *Tea Party to Independence*, 11.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 11. According to Thomas, the parliament’s Tea Act actually made tea even cheaper than smuggled tea (2s. 0d. a lb vs. 2s. 7d.). However, Labaree, *Boston Tea Party*, 77, states that other scholars have argued that there were smugglers that could sell lower than the Tea Act rate.

¹⁷ Thomas, *Tea Party to Independence*, 21.

¹⁸ John Dickenson, "Letter II from a Pennsylvania Farmer" in *American Rhetorical Discourse*, ed. Ronald F. Reid and James E. Klumpp (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, Inc, 2004), 92-107.

¹⁹ James C. Scott, *Dominance and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1990), 4.

²⁰ For instance, on September 13, 2009, the Tea Party Movement held their biggest even yet with "tens of thousands of participants" marching in Washington D.C. Gary Davis, "Tea Party Express Hits Washington D.C.; Monitored by Homeland Security," *Associated Content*, http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/2170283/tea_party_express_hits_washington_dc.html?cat=9 (accessed May 25, 2010).

²¹ Browne explains that there were annual orations from 1771 to 1783 in "Crispus Attucks," 171. Also, Bernard Bailyn writes about the outpouring of political writings during the revolutionary era. He states, "They wrote easily and amply, and turned out in the space of scarcely a decade and a half and from a small number of presses a rich literature of theory, argument, opinion, and polemic. Every medium of expression was put to use." Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution: Enlarged Edition* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 1992) 1.

²² For examples, see Celeste Condit, "The Functions of Epideictic: The Boston Massacre Orations as Exemplar," *Communication Quarterly* 33 (1985): 284-298; Browne, "Crispus Attucks," 169-187.

²³ Barbara Warnick, "Leff in Context: What is the Critic's Role?" *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 78 (1992): 233.

²⁴ Robert J. Branham and W. Barnett Pearce, "Between Text and Context: Toward a Rhetoric of Contextual Reconstruction," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 71 (1985): 19.

²⁵ Michael Calvin McGee, "Text, Context, and the Fragmentation of Contemporary Culture," *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 54 (1990): 283.

²⁶ Charles E. Morris III, "The Responsibilities of the Critic' F.O. Matthiessen's Homosexual Palimpsest," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 84 (1998): 278.

²⁷ Jay Fliegelman, *Declaring Independence: Jefferson, Natural Language, and the Culture of Performance* (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1993).

²⁸ Ibid, 4.

²⁹ Fredric R. Jameson, "The Symbolic Inference: Or, Kenneth Burke and Ideological Analysis," *Critical Inquiry* 4 (1978), 511.

³⁰ Branham and Pearce, "Between Text and Context," 21.

³¹ Morris, "The Responsibilities," 278.

³² White, *Tropics*, "The Historical Text as Literary Artifact," 81-100.

³³ Ibid, 98.

³⁴ White's description of the historian essentially makes historians into rhetors who possess the agency to color the past with their individual emplotments. Therefore, for the purposes of my study, these two words will be interchangeable.

³⁵ Stephen Browne, "Reading, Rhetoric, and the Texture of Public Memory," ed. Barbara Warnick, *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 81 (1995), 237.

³⁶ John Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century*, (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1992), 17.

³⁷ Kendall R. Phillips, introduction to *Framing Public Memory* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004), 9.

³⁸ John R. Gillis, introduction to *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1994), 3.

³⁹ Browne, “Crispus Attucks,” 170.

⁴⁰ Bradford Vivian, “‘A Timeless Now’: Memory and Repetition” in *Framing Public Memory*, ed. Kendall R. Phillips (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004), 190.

⁴¹ John Bodnar, “Public Memory in an American City: Commemoration in Cleveland,” in *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity*, ed. John R. Gillis (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1994), 75.

⁴² Neil Michel and Carole Blair, “The AIDS Memorial Quilt and the Contemporary Culture of Public Commemoration,” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 10 (2007): 596.

⁴³ David Thelen, “Memory and American History,” *The Journal of American History* 75 (1989): 1127.

⁴⁴ Vivian, “‘A Timeless Now,’” 204.

⁴⁵ White, *Tropics*, 99. White explains this when he states that “if historians were to recognize the fictive element in their narratives, this would not mean the degradation of historiography to the status of ideology and propaganda.”

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 99.

CHAPTER TWO

Establishing a Tradition of Dissent: A Genealogical Perspective of the Boston Tea Party

“On the cold evening of December 16, 1773, a large band of patriots, disguised as Mohawk Indians, burst from the South Meeting House with the spirit of freedom burning in their eyes. The patriots headed towards Griffin's Wharf and the three ships. Quickly, quietly, and in an orderly manner, the Sons of Liberty boarded each of the tea ships. Once on board, the patriots went to work striking the chests with axes and hatchets. Thousands of spectators watched in silence. Only the sounds of ax blades splitting wood rang out from Boston Harbor. Once the crates were open, the patriots dumped the tea into the sea . . . When all was through, Lendall Pitts led the patriots from the wharf, tomahawks and axes resting on their shoulders. A fife played as they marched”¹

Most Americans who have attended an elementary history class would immediately recognize this story from the Boston Tea Party Ships and Museum as *the* Boston Tea Party. Currently, this simple story of “patriots, disguised as Mohawk Indians” is a popular public memory of the event. No matter the variation, this is a story that Americans like to tell. After all, it is a family story—one that has been passed down to us by the founders.

It is commonly accepted that stories that are told and re-told throughout the ages, morph as they are passed from one mouth to another. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that the myth we know as the Boston Tea Party was not always the coherent narrative we recognize today. Rather, the meaning of the Tea Party was highly contested in its heyday. For instance, Alfred F. Young argues that the Tea Party was buried in private memory until the 1830s.² In fact, the name the “Boston Tea Party” was not printed on paper until a book entitled *A Retrospect of the Tea-Party*, a biography of George Robert Twelves Hewes, was published in 1834.³ This

means that for sixty years, this event that we think of as an American commonplace, went unnamed.

In this chapter I use the process of genealogy to uncover the many voices involved. It is important to understand that the use of the word genealogy re-emphasizes the purpose of this project, which is to disrupt the modern American public memory of the “Boston Tea Party” by re-animating it with the voices of the past. As Michel Foucault explains it, genealogy is “the emergence of different interpretations [that] must be made to appear as events on the stage of historical process.”⁴ In other words, the purpose of the genealogist is different than that of the historian who seeks facts in order to create a seamless, coherent narrative. Therefore, I hope to avoid the “historical past” that Hayden White describes as being “like our various personal pasts, at best a myth, justifying our gamble on a specific future, and at worst a lie, a retrospective rationalization of what we have in fact become through our choices.”⁵ Rather than striving to fashion or fabricate such a grand narrative by making clean links between causes and effects, I seek to “disturb what was previously considered immobile.”⁶ The Boston Tea Party desperately needs such reinvigoration. Its story has been calcified, its meaning settled, and its origin fixed. I seek to reveal the multiple roots of the Tea Party or what, for the purposes of this chapter, I call the “Destruction of the Tea,” (or the Destruction, for short) as this was how it was sometimes referred to in the eighteenth century.⁷ Fortunately, I have found the roots of the Tea Party nestled in an archive of colonial newspapers, which will serve as my texts.⁸

By analyzing these texts, I argue that throughout the narrative of the Destruction, there is a constant struggle between the rational versus the irrational—the civilized versus the savage. Specifically I illustrate that the people who discussed the Destruction, created a tradition in which American dissent is based on a balance between rationality and irrationality. In order to

demonstrate this tradition of dissent, I have divided this essay into three acts. The first section will address the colonists' reaction to the Tea Act, which was passed on May 10, 1773. This section serves as an introduction to the various arguments for and against the bill. The second act begins with the arrival to the tea ships to Boston, which took place on November 28, 1773. Throughout this section, the tensions grow and more opinions are fleshed out as the tea's presence and impending taxation becomes a reality. The final act is an examination of several different accounts or interpretations of the Destruction of the Tea, which occurred on December 16, 1773—two and a half weeks after the ships actual arrival in the harbor.

Act One: The Tea Act

Although the story of the Destruction of the Tea that is told today mainly revolves around one fateful night in Boston, in order to more fully grasp this story, we must begin further back in time. The Destruction was not just a spur of the moment happening predicated on a whim, but a planned outburst stemming from built-up frustration. Therefore, in order to more truly understand this outburst, we must first comprehend the frustration that started long before.

The American colonists were no strangers to taxation and for a long time had accepted this burden as part of their duty to their Mother Country. However, as the purposes for taxes shifted from trade regulation to raising revenue for England, so did the attitudes of the colonists. John Dickinson explains this in his famed *Letter from a Pennsylvania Farmer*, which was published in 1768 as a protest to the Townshend Act:

The Parliament unquestionably possesses a legal authority to regulate the trade of Great-Britain and all her colonies . . . I have looked over every statute relating to these colonies, from their first settlement to this time; and I find every one of them founded on this principle, till the Stamp-Act administration. All before, are calculated to preserve or

promote a mutually beneficial intercourse between the several constituent parts of the empire. . . . Never did the British Parliament, till the period above mentioned, think of imposing duties in America FOR THE PURPOSE OF RAISING A REVENUE. . . .

THIS I call an innovation; and a most dangerous innovation.⁹

Despite many Americans' efforts to protest this act by refusing to buy taxed goods, the British government refused to fully repeal the Townshend duties—including the tax on tea. During the time that the colonist's were fighting against these duties, the East India Company was becoming financially unstable. In order to solve their problems, the British representatives proposed that the current excess of tea that the company had been unable to sell and was therefore in storage be shipped to another location for a low price. In the end, the location that parliament decided upon was America. Despite the company's pleas to repeal the Townshend duty on tea in order to make this venture more successful, the duty remained.¹⁰ It was in this form that the Tea Act was passed on May 10, 1773.

Some colonists held out hope that the Tea Act would be amended. For example the *Boston News Letter* printed the following:

We have some expectations by letters from London, that the parliament will meet again the beginning of this month, agreeable to prorogation, in order to correct the imperfections on the late act for the regulation of the East-India affairs, and bring them to a judicious and permanent arrangement.¹¹

This formal sounding statement, clearly made by an educated person familiar with legislative jargon, encouraged people to trust in the government's ability to correct the defects of the act on their own. This is a calming discourse, which assumed—or at least hoped—that England will act prudently in re-examining the Tea Act.

This calm, hopeful discourse was soon to be interrupted and probably would have been refuted even sooner had it not taken so long for the details of the act to be printed in America. It was not until September 6, 1773 that the *New-York Gazette* (and later, on October 25, 1773, the *Boston Evening Post*) printed the Tea Act with the following summary prior to the full text:

An Act to allow a Drawback of the Duties of Customs on the Expiration of TEA to any of his Majesty's Colonies or Plantation in America; to increase the Deposit on Bohea Tea to be sold at the India Company's Sales; and to [give] power [to] the Commissioners of the Treasury to grant Licenses to the East-India Company to export Tea Duty free.¹²

Prior to this full printing it was very ambiguous as to whether the Tea Act would enforce the Townshend duty, which still stipulated that tea was a taxed good.¹³ Even this summary is confusing as it states that the tea will be "Duty Free." In order to understand that the tea *would* be subject to the tax (set out by the Townshend Duty) upon reaching America, one would have to read the fine print of the act and be able to comprehend the jargon used in stating British laws.

For instance, the act states:

Merchandise, to any of the *British* Colonies or Plantations in *America*, were to extend to the Whole of the said Duties of Customs payable upon the Importation of such Teas; may it therefore please your Majesty that is may be enacted; and may it be enacted by the King's most Excellent Majesty, by and with the Advice and Consent of the Lords Spiritual and Temporal, and Commons, in the present Parliament assembled, and by the Authority of the same.¹⁴

As this document was interpreted by those familiar with legal jargon, the news finally began to spread that the Tea Act *would* reinforce the Townshend duty.

Despite its unclear beginnings described above, Americans eventually simplified the nature of the Act with their own unflattering words, making it known how they felt about the Tea Act and its associated tax. In other words, this civilized legal document was soon translated into heightened language that could certainly be understood by the common American man or woman. For instance, the *Boston Post-Boy* characterized it as: “the mischievous Tea Act,”¹⁵ and, worse, “the yoke of slavery.”¹⁶ Not only was the act condemned, the tea itself was often presented as a contaminated item referred to as the “pernicious drug” and “baneful Weed” that “is said to be possessed of a corrosive quality strong enough to [hurt] the hands of workmen almost intolerably.”¹⁷ Such spirited characterizations spread a notion of terror to others that this act was an evil that they could not let become a reality on their soil.

Letters from overseas often made the news as well. For instance, an “Extract of a letter from London,” published in the *Boston Post-Boy*, warns that “The East-India Company have come to a resolution, to send 600 chests of tea to Philadelphia, and the like quantity to New-York and Boston.”¹⁸ The letter also brags that “Captain Cook” refuses to use one of his vessels to transport the tea and concludes with a statement that implies that the Tea Act is unjust: “What will be the consequence when it arrives, on your side the water, I know not; but suppose it is landed, you will hardly let it be sold.” The view espoused in this letter purports a scenario in which it would be unthinkable for Americans to buy tea while this act is in place. Therefore, the idea to decline the tea, was planted in the minds of the colonists months prior to its actual arrival.

The more realistic it became that the tea would actually arrive in America’s ports, the stronger the rhetoric rejecting the tea became; for, the issue of the Tea Act became one that many viewed as so unjust that it could not be ignored. For instance, as one person stated in a letter to the *Boston Evening Post*, “I am a person late retired from Business, but can’t remain an

unconcerned Spectator of what nearly affects the Liberties of my countrymen.”¹⁹ Even poetry was published in newspapers expressing the fear of the Tea Act’s affect on American liberty:

Defend your country while you may,
Destruction hovers in the skies.
And will pour down in floods of TEA
If not prevented, guard your coast
And act yourselves as heretofore:
If once this pois’nous weed be hous’d
Lost liberty you may deplore!...
Methinks I hear our father cry. . .
Tell us dear offspring, tell us why!
Fair LIBERTY you thus despise?²⁰

Others who agreed that the Tea Act endangered their liberties expressed their outrage against the British government. The *Boston Gazette* printed the following prediction from a citizen: “Should the Tea now shipping for Boston be returned to England, as it undoubtedly will, . . . Lord North will meet with a rebuff which will put his utmost firmness to the Trial.”²¹ A letter from London printed in the *Boston Gazette* contained a more severe and uncivilized possible outcome: “I hope the Yorkers will stand their Ground. I have told several of the Company that the Tea and Ships will be all burnt; which I really believe will be the Case, as I think you will never suffer an Act of Parliament to be so crowded down your Throats; for if you do its all over with you.”²² From looking at these predictions, which were printed in October of 1773, it seems as though it would have been more strange had some sort of destruction of the tea *not* occurred.

The commissioners, who were in charge of enforcing the tax, were lucky that nothing more severe did occur, for some chose to target them rather than the British government—after all, these people were within the objectors’ physical reach. On the mild side, one letter labels them “harpies” and hopes that they, “the odious Commissioners,” “may rot in Luxury.”²³ However, others go so far as to warn them that if they choose to sanction the Tea Act by collecting the duties then they are responsible for whatever harm may come their way.²⁴ Some of the letters are shockingly explicit in their threats against the commissioners:

It will be impossible to shield yourselves, from the many darts that will incessantly be leveled against your persons. You cannot readily become your own cooks, butchers, butlers, nor bakers: You will therefore be liable to be suddenly, and unexpectedly taken off, in the midst of your confidence and supposed security. By those whom you chance to confide in, and employ—Nay, those very guards, in which you may probably place your greatest trust and security, may, some time or other, become the sure and ready instruments of your destruction . . . A thousand avenues to death, would be perpetually open to receive and swallow you; and ten thousand uplifted shafts, ready to strike the fatal stroke.²⁵

Articles like these, further show that many colonists were ready to revolt in some violent way months before the Destruction took place. Again, this threatening, savage-like discourse reinforces the dichotomy between the technical legal documents presented by the British and the interpretation of these documents by Americans as a call for uncivil disobedience. Put into this context where actual lives were at stake, The Destruction no longer seems like such a radical move.

However, the commissioners did not stay silent in the face of these threats. They further heated the debate with a warning printed in the *Boston Evening Post*:

It is now proposed by [the] Merchants to prevent the Importation of Tea from the India Company, whereby that Article may be sold for less than half the Price they can afford it; who now call for our Attendance for that purpose at Liberty Tree. You are hereby advised and warned by no means to be taken in by the deceitful Bait of those who falsely [call] themselves the Friends of Liberty.²⁶

This statement illustrates a fight over who is truly concerned with the liberty of the people.

Although we typically remember *all* Americans as being opposed to the commissioners, thus making this decree seem weak, it should be remembered that some colonists supported the Tea Act, especially for economic reasons. After all, it is estimated that Americans would pay a lower price on tea (even with the tax) than they were currently paying even when buying from smugglers (2s. 0d. a lb versus 2s. 7d).²⁷ Even the fear that the East India Company would become a monopoly and raise prices seemed illogical to some. For instance, one writer tries to invalidate the fear that the East India Company will become a monopoly and therefore eventually employ high prices:

The price at the Sales here must necessarily be always low, or else it will not answer the End proposed by the East India Company, which evidently is, to prevent the consumption of Foreign Teas in the Colonies.²⁸

Both the notice from the commissioners and the writer above use a more rational tone than many of the people who are disgruntled by the Tea Act. Not only do both use less dramatic language, but they also base their arguments in the actual economic policy created by the Tea Act. For instance, the letter from the commissioners points out “that [the] Article may be sold for less

than half the Price they can afford it.” In looking at the contrast between this rational discourse and the uncivilized discourse set out by those against the legal act, we learn that for many, money was not actually at the heart of the matter when it came to the Tea Act. Although we may typically think of the colonists rebelling because the British were robbing them of their earnings with high taxes, this discourse reveals otherwise. Rather than seeing the strength in a rational, economic-based employment, the people against the act insisted on reading the Tea Act legal document through a political lens. They brewed their tea with politics, not economics. In other words, what seemed to be at stake from them was not money, but principal. This principal had to do with the question of dissent, as the colonists worked to figure out what style was appropriate for the questioning of power.

Looking at the discussion surrounding the Tea Act itself as a piece of legislation prior to any official contact with the tea, illuminates several key issues. First, the controversy over taxation is rooted as far back as the Stamp Act and begins here not simply because it *is* a tax, but because the *purpose* of the tax to raise revenue. Second, often the people, whether for or against the Tea Act, may not have been fully aware of the actual contents of the bill, for its summary was confusing and its printing full of official jargon. Thus, many people who were swept up one way or the other were most likely reliant upon the other opinion pieces written in the papers such as the ones I have presented above. Finally, two major planes of argument are identified when looking at the discourse associated with the actual legislation of the Tea Act. One sought to parse out the financial issues contained in and implied by the act, while the other used a political lens, asserting that the taxed tea was a threat to liberty. These two discourses are illustrative of an initial dichotomy of rational rhetoric versus irrational rhetoric as the Boston Whigs prepared to organize their dissent. In this section it appears that the rational discourse is concentrated on

the side of those who are advocates of the Tea Act and that those against the act are reacting emotionally—creating what to a modern day reader might sound like conspiracy theory.

However, in the next section this bright line of contrast illuminating one rational side and one emotional side begins to dim as the protestors' positions develop with more complexity—as they begin to realize the importance of reason to justify dissent.

Act Two: The Arrival of the Ships

Now that I have illustrated the response to the Tea Act, there is one more period of time to be discussed, which took place prior to the Destruction of the Tea—the arrival of the ships in Boston beginning on November 28, 1773. Like the segment of time described above, our American memory of the Tea Party narrative does not usually include this three weeks between the arrival and the Destruction of the Tea. This time frame is crucial, as now the tea must be physically dealt with rather than just hypothetically debated. As a rule of law, the tea was not allowed to be shipped back to England from whence it came. Time was also of the essence, for if not paid for within twenty days the custom's officer could seize the tea. In other words, the issue of the tea had to be resolved by December 17, 1773.²⁹ Due to this, two major trends concerning dissent can be found in the newspapers of these three weeks. First, many opponents of the tea act tried to organize meetings in an attempt to bring the commissioners out to the open to answer their concerns. Second, the writings of the Whigs became even more inflated with grand claims about liberty and justice. Therefore this section will illuminate the growing tension between rational claims and irrational pleas.

Upon the arrival of the first ship, the *Dartmouth*, led by Captain Francis Rotch, the following notification was made:

Friends! Brethren! Countrymen!

That worst of Plagues the detestable TEA shipped for this port by the East India Company, is now arrived in this Harbour, the Hour of Destruction or manly Opposition as the Machinations of Tyranny stares you in the face; every Friend to his country, to himself and Posterity, is now called upon to meet at Faneuil Hall, at NINE o’Clock, THIS DAY, (at which Time the Bells will ring) to make a united and successful Resistance to this last, worst and most destructive Measure of Administration.³⁰

This call to Americans was widely published appearing in at least five newspapers such as the *Boston Evening Post*, the *Essex Gazette*, and the *Connecticut Journal*. This writing is representative of the two trends I spoke of above—inflated rhetoric and a call for a meeting. It reinforces and escalates pre-existing arguments against the tea. Not only does the writer label it detestable, but he also equates the arrival of the tea with a “Plague”—a word that had much more resonance for people only two generations removed from Vienna. He also equates the arrival of the tea with the “Machinations of Tyranny” and personifies this tyranny as “star[ing]” at the reader, which creates the image of a stand off. However, the announcement also serves the practical function of informing the inhabitants of the town of a meeting. Many of the publications following this describe the meetings held by the townspeople and the responses they received from the commissioners. These publications created a back-and-forth narrative in which the town of Boston held legal meetings and made requests of the commissioners and the governor, which were denied over and over. The following is an example of a response to the colonists from the commissioners that was presented to the town after a previous letter they sent was deemed unsatisfactory:

We are sorry that we could not return to the Town satisfactory Answers to their two late Messages to use respecting the Teas. . . We still retain a Disposition to do all in our

power to give Satisfaction to the Town, but as we understood from you . . . this can be effected by nothing less than our sending back the Teas, we beg Leave to say that this is utterly out of our Power to do.³¹

Clearly, for Whigs who viewed the Tea Act as a type of “tyranny,” this answer would yet again have been unsatisfactory as it evasively tried to counter the demands of the protestors. The commissioners’ avoidance of the requests of the Whigs, would only later serve to rationalize the actions of those who participated in the Destruction, for, in their eyes, they tried to solve the problem peacefully but were denied. For instance, one article states that the protestors are not killers out to get “victims,” but rather “out of great tenderness to [the ship captains] . . . were prevailed to adjourn to the next morning nine o’clock.”³² Therefore although the rhetoric of those against the Tea Act was becoming more and more inflated to due the urgency of their situation, at the same time they tried to make themselves more appealing by arguing that they were reasonable, patient, and kind. These organized and requested meetings show that even within the rhetoric against the Tea Act there existed a dichotomy between the rational and the irrational as their cries simultaneously advocated for civilized meetings and, as seen in the previous section, called for uncivilized acts of violence.

Even those who had been known for their rationality were not immune to participating in ratcheting up the rhetoric against the Tea Act. For instance, under the name RUSTICUS, John Dickinson makes the argument that the Tea Act is reducing the colonists to slavery.³³ This is a radical shift from his defense against the Townshend Duties mentioned earlier in which he does not wish for revolution, but that taxes only be levied to regulate trade rather than raise revenue for Britain. For instance, in his letters from a Pennsylvania farmer, Dickinson usually sticks to calm, rational albeit firm claims with a few inserted emotional cries here and there:

HERE then, my dear countrymen, ROUSE yourselves, and behold the ruin hanging over our heads . . . I think this uncontrovertible conclusion may be deduced, that when a ruling state obliges a dependant state to take certain commodities from her alone, it is implied in the nature of that obligation; is essentially requisite to give it the least degree of justice . . . in order to preserve any share of freedom to the dependant state; tat those commodities should never be loaded with duties.³⁴

There is a clear shift in Dickinson's rhetoric as his letter from RUSTICUS is tense with urgency. His style flip-flops as he contains more irrational appeals than rational. He is no longer calm enough to do much of the "deducing" that he mentions above. He encourages:

"BEWARE OF THE STEP" will be allowed to be a commendable caution in all proceedings of moment; therefore, hope my countrymen will demonstrate to the world, that they have patriotism and spirit enough to beware, and prevent, this pernicious and baneful *step* of the East-India Company . . .this has been done . . . in order to facilitate the landing and vending this most abominable and destructive article, which will, in all probability . . . reduce it to a state of abject SLAVERY.³⁵

However, even within this passionate letter from RUSTICUS, he does not completely abandon all rationality. There is one small plea for dealing with the Tea Act through legal channels:

Upon the arrival of the ship in the harbour of Newport, with the detestable TEA on board, they will immediately call a legal town meeting of the inhabitants of the town . . . to consult upon measure to prevent the unloading, receiving, or vending of the detestable tea.³⁶

However, by the end of the letter inflated rhetoric takes back over and the possibility of dealing with the tax in a civilized manner seems lost:

O liberty! Oh servitude! How amiable, how detestable are the different sounds!—Rouse, my countrymen, and townsmen, from your lethargic supineness! And convince your sister colonies, that the glorious spirit of patriotism and liberty . . . is revived, and let the noble spirit of freedom inspire your hearts, that your breasts may glow with the same unfulfilled sentiments of heroic patriotism, displayed in the instructions given to your representatives, A. D. 1765.³⁷

Clearly this dramatic appeal to past patriotism is meant to stir the emotions rather than rouse the mind to create potential reasoned conclusions or solutions. The idea that the John Dickenson, who is presently famed for having had such a rational perspective on the tax problems between the British and the colonies, moved to using such inflamed rhetoric about the Tea Act is quite startlingly and provides a strong representation of shifts and struggles between rational and irrational appeals. It seems that in his letters from a Pennsylvania farmer he believed that rational argument could save the Americans from such taxation, but upon realizing the failure of his plan, the Tea Act sent him over the edge along with many others.

As tensions steadily rose with time running low before a decision needed to be made about the tea, the Whig's hatred of the duty and the commissioners was spread toward anyone who was involved in "the aiding or assisting in procuring or granting any such permit for landing, the said Tea . . . or in offering any Permit . . . must betray an inhuman Thirst for Blood, and will also in a great Measure accelerate Confusion and Civil War."³⁸ They further threatened such people by naming them "Enemies of this Country, that will be . . . treated as Wretches unworthy to live, and will be made the first Victims of our just Resentment." Other states that feared to be faced with the same predicament as Boston made similar threats to those in charge

of receiving the ships at port. For instance, the following warning was published in the *Newport Mercury* by “The Committee for Tarring and Feathering”:

But all agree, that *tar* and *feathers* will be his portion who pilots [the ship] in this harbour. And we will answer for ourselves, that, whoever is committed to us as an offender against the rights of *America*, will experience the utmost exertion of our abilities.³⁹

These threats were not empty, for it was reported in the *Essex Gazette* that “one of the Tea Commissioners it is said narrowly escaped a Tarring and Feathering one Day last Week—Presumptuous Men to think of gaining footing in this Town again—so says every Man, high and low, rich and poor.”⁴⁰ Once again, these threats show how uncivilized discourse was on the rise and that compared to these potential emplotments, in retrospect the Destruction seems like a rather calm alternative.

This section illustrates two major points relevant to the two competing voices, the civilized and the uncivilized, which make up the Tea Act discourse dealing with dissent. First, this dichotomy is often illustrated by rational appeals to law versus irrational appeals rooted in the emotions of patriotism. For instance, on the one hand the Whigs try to use the legal system by summoning the commissioners to their meetings, while on the other, they physically threaten those involved with aiding the Tea Act under the defense that they are fighting for liberty. Second, unlike the last section, the competing voices of rationality and irrationality are no longer separated only in opposing positions. In the previous section, the rational discourse found in the British legal documents was contrasted with the Whigs’ uncivilized cries. However, in this section, the Whigs began to see it as a potentially fruitful tactic to appeal to reason and the law while simultaneously ratcheting up their earlier rhetoric with even more passion and zeal. It is

important to remember however, that the appeals to legal channels published by the Whigs were, like all the discourse involved, rhetorical constructions. To expect the tea commissioners to attend a legal meeting being held by the disgruntled Whigs (many of whom were probably involved in the publishing of some of the more uncivilized messages seen above) is an unrealistic expectation. Even if the people holding the meetings promised to remain civil, there was danger in even transporting the commissioners from their homes to these meetings, for several citizens were out for blood (or tarring and feathering). In the next section I will show how the Whigs use these rhetorically constructed appeals to legality to justify their uncivilized act of dissent—the Destruction.

Act Three: The Destruction of the Tea

The meetings in Boston continued and it was following one of these gatherings, held on Thursday, December 16, that the Destruction of the Tea occurred. Several descriptions came out characterizing the events on that day in Boston. Most generally start off with the story of the ending of that night's meeting at which "Mr. Rotch [the captain of the first tea ship that arrived in the harbor] . . . informed the Body that the Governor could not grant a Pass to his Ship till a Clearance was obtained from the Custom-House. The Scheme of sending the Tea from whence it came being then despaired of, the Body was dissolved, previously voting Mr. Rotch's Conduct satisfactory." This emphasizes the same notion discussed earlier that the protestors strived to achieve their ends through reasonable and legal channels, but after several failed attempts, the Destruction was the only option available to them. One colonist, Marchmont Nedham, further exemplifies this point when he states, "THE PEOPLE have been mild and considerate: they have been temperate and patient. When their mildness was called timidity and their consideration want of courage, they did not cease to reason and entreat."⁴¹

After trying to set up the protestors as civilized and reasonable, the narratives usually move into the description of the participants as Mohawk Indians. For instance, an early article states that “Immediately upon the Disolution of the Body a Number of very dark complexioned Persons (dressed like Mohakws or Indians) of grotesque Appearance approached the Meeting where the People were assembled . . .”⁴² From this description of the Indians, one can assume that the people who appeared at the meeting were not in fact Indians. However, other accounts are not so clear:

Previous to the dissolution, a number of Persons, supposed to be the Aboriginal Natives from their complexion, approaching near the door of the assembly, gave the War-Whoop, which was answered by a few in the galleries of the house where the assembly was convened; silence was commanded, and a prudent and peaceable deportment enjoined.

The savages repaired to the ships.⁴³

This description is puzzling and I imagine would have been confusing to a reader hearing about this story for the first time, because it makes little sense why Indians would become involved in the controversy when there had been no mention of them thus far in reference to the protests against the Tea Act. Despite this ambiguity, it is more important to note that the “savages,” as they are named in some accounts, were not in attendance at the meeting. It was only *after* the legal meeting fails, that the savages arrive. Clearly, this represents the dichotomy between the civilized and the uncivilized. It depicts how the Whigs were forced into such savagery.

Although the true reason for the protestors’ Indian disguise has always eluded scholars, this gives us some insight into its rhetorical function. This use of the Indian was not unique to the Destruction as the New-York Rivington Gazatteer published a letter protesting the enslavement of the colonies by the tea tax that was signed as bring from “THE MOHAWKS.”⁴⁴ With both

the description of the Indians' presence following the failed meeting and the reference in this Whig letter, the Mohawk or Indian clearly functions as a rhetorical symbol of the savagery. Rather than take on such an uncivilized role themselves, the Whigs used the Indian disguise to free themselves from the laws of civilization. Only camouflaged as Indians were civilized Americans able to act irrationally and destroy the tea.

The war-whoop the "Indians" made that was mentioned earlier as, "a most hideous Noise," seems to be a consistent facet in The Destruction narrative in revolutionary and modern times.⁴⁵ The specific phrase "war-whoop" still appears in many modern descriptions and stays alive in our public memory of the event.⁴⁶ For some reason, this is a phrase that continues to hold resonance throughout time. However, following the war-whoop, descriptions begin to diverge from one another.

According to one account, following the war-whoop, the Indians "proceeded immediately to Griffin's Wharf, where three Ships lay that contained the East-India Company's Teas, which they boarded without Ceremony."⁴⁷ Others create a story with more interaction stating that the war-whoop "was answered by a few in the galleries of the house where the assembly was convened; silence was commanded, and a prudent and peaceable deportment enjoined. The savages repaired to the ships."⁴⁸ Consistent with this version, another writes that the war-whoop "rang through the House, and was answered by some in the Galleries, but Silence being commanded, and a peaceable Deportment was again enjoined, till the Dissolution: The Indians as they were then-called, repaired to the Wharf where the Ships lay that had the Tea on board."⁴⁹ The first description in this paragraph and incidentally the one printed earliest creates an image of men taking care of the business at hand, for they "proceeded immediately" and there was nothing ceremonious about their actions. The latter two descriptions create a community

narrative in which those dressed as Indians receive vocal support from the people attending the meeting making everyone into a hero or at least a supporter. Also, they try to add a degree of civility to the war-whoop as it “commanded” silence and a “peaceable Deportment.” While the first description indicates that the participants made haste in making their way to destroy the tea, the second and third romanticized descriptions make it seem as though the participants acted with calm prudence. Oddly, they simultaneously pair this supposed prudence against terms like savage serving as a constant reminder of the dual-identity of the participants as rational citizens forced to become violent savages after reason has failed them.

Once the Indians reached where the “three Ships lay that contained the East-India Company’s Teas . . . [they] immediately proceeded to disburthening of, at which they were so dexterous, that from 7 to 9 o’Clock, they broke open 342 Chests and discharged their Contents over board.”⁵⁰ This down-to-business account is contrasted by other writers who state that “the savages . . . had began their ravage previous to the dissolution of the meeting and [then] in the space of about two hours broke up 342 chests and discharged their contents into the Sea.”⁵¹ In the first description, the participants are applauded for their ability to take care of the task with efficiency, implying that this event was a rational necessity done with the civility of a gentlemen. The words “dexterous” in the first description is starkly contrasted with the term “ravage,” found in the second. Thus, the battle over the reasonableness of the Destruction continues.

Another interesting thing about almost all of the descriptions of the Destruction from revolutionary to modern times, is that nearly all storytellers recognizes that there were 342 chests destroyed.⁵² I find this consistency starting at the very birth of this story surprising and impressive. After having looked at so many of the narratives, it is as though this number has been taken over by these stories. Furthermore, the consistency in the use of this number suggests

that other discrepancies in the stories told were not due to mistakes or sloppiness, but rather done for a rhetorical purpose.

Another commonplace among the Destruction narratives is a “watch” that “was stationed to prevent embezzlement, and not a single ounce of tea suffered to be purloined by the populace.”⁵³ This detail shows that the protestors were serious about not having any of the tea on their soil and were willing to enforce their earlier threats toward anyone who welcomed the tea. This description also prevented Tories from accusing protestors of stealing tea. These notions are re-affirmed in other stories like one printed in the *Boston Evening Post* and the *Norwich Packet*, which notes that “One or two persons being detected in endeavoring to pocket a small quantity were stripped of their acquisitions and very roughly handled.”⁵⁴ Furthermore, this story is yet another appeal to the essential lawfulness of the participants over the depiction of them as mere raging savages. Although they may handle people “roughly,” they only do so to enforce their fundamental principles.

Storytellers also sought to reinforce the reasonable nature of the participants with descriptions of their kindness toward all peoples involved. The “impartial observer” stated:

It is worthy remark that although a considerable quantity of goods of different kinds were still remaining on board the vessels, no injury was sustained; such attention to private property was observed that a small padlock belonging to the Captain of one of the Ships being broke, another was procured and sent to him.⁵⁵

This description again characterizes the destroyers of the tea as being concerned with fairness and law. This narrative shows that the protestors were not interested in punishing the captains, who were merely performing their jobs (especially Captain Rotch who made an effort to receive a pass from the Governor to send the tea back to England), but only wished to rid themselves of

the “vile Bohea.”⁵⁶ They were not looters or mad rebels without a cause, but civilized persons trying to save themselves from the “enslavement” of this “public evil.”⁵⁷

Also, in most illustrations the participants are described as heroes, not villains, for “the next Day Joy appeared in almost every countenance, some on Occasion of the Destruction of the Tea, others on account of the quietness with which it was effected.”⁵⁸ Furthermore, as the news of the event spread, supporters of the protestors’ cause reported to be pleased with the event:

We learn, That when the Inhabitants of that City, [New-York], received the Intelligence, they were in high spirits, and vast Number of the People collected, on and all declaring that the Ship with the Tea on board designed for that Port, should on her Arrival, be sent back, or the Tea destroyed: That they highly extolled the Bostonians for what the People have done here; and immediately forwarded the Account to Philadelphia.

The participants are now portrayed as leaders of a bigger movement—they are representatives of America. The author uses the trope of synecdoche, conflating the portion of Bostonians who participated in the act with all Bostonians. In this instance, the use of this trope serves to create a unifying effect, as if all were present at and agreeable to the Destruction.

Although the above author sought to discursively create an image of unity, other accounts of the Destruction disturb this picture. An article written under the name of Poplicola, or friend of the people, makes several rational arguments against the actions of the protesters. For instance, he asks “When the Tea is exposed to Sale by AUCTION, need any man purchase it, except when he *chooses*? And can any man be said to do that *without consent*, which he chooses to do?”⁵⁹ The implication of these rhetorical questions is that the Tea Act would not steal the liberty of the people, because they still possessed free will. Near the end of his argument Poplicola uses a parental metaphor. Poplicola appeals to his reader by referring to England as

the “*parent country*.” This metaphor implies that one should obey England like he obeys his parents and furthermore respect and appreciate them. By the time the revolution arrived, this was a well-worn and much contested metaphor. For instance, in *Common Sense*, Thomas Paine turns Poplicola’s use of the phrase on its head by using the metaphor as proof that America was being mistreated. First, America was no longer a child in need of parenting and second, England was a bad parent abusing her children worse than would “savages” or “brutes.”⁶⁰

Also, although many inhabitants of Boston were working to portray the reasonableness of the participants in the Destruction, Tories, who were still loyal to England, characterized them in directly opposite terms:

Whenever a factious set of People rise to such a Pitch of Insolence, as to prevent the Execution of the Laws, or destroy the Property of Individuals, just as their Caprice or Humour leads them; there is an end of all Order and Government, Riot, and Confusion must be the natural Consequence of such Measures. It is impossible for the Trade to flourish where property is insecure.⁶¹

In other words, the people who destroyed the tea were not victims of the commissioners and the Tea Act established by England, rather they were victimizers of the law and trade. Stringing together this argument with Poplicola’s it is clear that some viewed the protestors as insolent children, immaturely acting out because they did not get their way. Another anonymous writer agreed and went so far as to urge the people of Boston to “Pay for the Damages.” He argues as “a British American, who is a lover of Peace” that the “Publick of Boston” should consider “whether or not be their wisest Course in the present critical Situation of Affairs, to raise immediately, by Subscription, a Sum equal to the estimated Value of the drowned Teas.”⁶² Again, this writer treats the protestors as children. Acting as a parental figure he implores them

to make things right again—much like a parent would have a child return a stolen toy and apologize to the storeowner. These descriptions suggest that while many Whigs attempted to frame the Destruction as a story about rational heroes carrying out their last resort in a noble and civilized manner (only acting savagely through their Indian persona), the Tories' vision of the event was characterized by violence, riot, and confusion caused by lawbreakers who wreaked private property.

In this section, I have illustrated that there was a fundamental anxiety about the reasonableness of the Destruction and thus, the reasonableness of dissent. The Whigs fought to produce a rational rhetoric about the Destruction by grounding it in the failed legal meetings. Simultaneously they had to avoid taking the heat for the uncivilized actions of the participants by depicting the destroyed tea as the work of the savage Indian persona. The Tories fought in the opposite direction trying to pull the rug of rationality out from underneath the Whigs' feet. It appears that eventually everyone, even the dissenters, wanted to be on the side of reason.

Epilogue: The Boston Tea Party

As is made clear from the three acts above, the Destruction narrative of dissent was characterized by a constant struggle between the rational and the irrational. It is as if all sides felt that the Destruction depended on how it was rhetorically constructed. Americans are able to remember this story as representing the notion that dissent is patriotic, because of this rhetorical struggle, in which the Boston dissenters actively participated. For the Boston Tea Partiers, rational rhetoric was necessary to win the day.

Furthermore, this tradition of anxiety over reasonableness was a theme that would carry on as people like Thomas Paine and Thomas Jefferson also sought to claim the side of rationality in justifying the American Revolution. Due to this rhetorical competition, the Destruction story

was not the boiled down version we hear today, but was an actual struggle with myriads of emplotments interacting with one another. Despite the fact that in modern times this event is so prominent that it is often credited as the spark that spawned the American Revolution, it is perhaps this rhetorical rivalry that caused the Destruction to remain nameless until 1834; for, how could the colonists agree on a name for this story when they could not even agree on its plot or the morality of its characters?

I contend that it was some sixty years later when, through the act of naming, the “Boston Tea Party” was solidified as a historical event embedded in our cultural narrative. As Hannah Arendt describes, “One way to date the actual birth of such general historical phenomena as revolutions—or for that matter nation-states or imperialism or totalitarianism and the like—is, of course, to find out when the word which from then on remains attached to the phenomenon appears for the first time.”⁶³ In other words, sometimes memories are born into society through the mere act of naming, which Kenneth Burke labels the “magic decree.”

The emplotment provided in this essay illustrates some of the commotion that was lost when this “magical decree” occurred in 1834. Burke describes the moment of “magical decree” as “Let there be’—And there was,” for “the mere act of naming an object or situation decrees that it is to be singled out as such-and-such rather than as something-other.”⁶⁴ When what I have been referring to as the Destruction was crystallized in name, it was also crystallized into America’s public memory. The babel surrounding the Destruction became one voice when it was finally decreed, “Let it be called the Boston Tea Party and from there it was.” No longer were Americans concerned with rationality or irrationality of this event, but rather gave it a celebratory name—it was a “party.”

Although, the American tradition of dissenters having to justify their protests with rationality has been carried throughout the centuries, the competing memories of the eighteenth century have mostly died off along with our revolutionary ancestors. Luckily, their discursive constructions are still available and by creating this emplotment, which focuses on rhetorical constructions of rationality, I have resurrected the genealogy of the Destruction. This disturbs the Boston Tea Party.

Notes

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- ¹ “Boston Tea Party History,” *Boston Tea Party: Ships and Museum*, <http://www.bostontepartyship.com/history.asp> (accessed May 25, 2010).
- ² Alfred F. Young, *The Shoemaker and the Tea Party* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999), 88.
- ³ Young, “The Shoemaker,” 88.
- ⁴ Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History” in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard, trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1977), 152.
- ⁵ Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*. (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1978), 39.
- ⁶ *Ibid*, 147.
- ⁷ For instance, see *Connecticut Courant*, December 21, 1773, no. 470, p. 2.
- ⁸ All of the newspaper items used in this chapter were found in the Archive of Americana: America’s Historical Newspapers unless otherwise specified.
- ⁹ John Dickinson, “Letter from a Pennsylvania Farmer,” in *American Rhetorical Discourse*, ed. Ronald F. Reid and Jim Klumpp, (Long Grove IL: Waveland Press, 2005), 93-95.
- ¹⁰ Benjamin Woods Labaree, *Boston Tea Party* (New York: Oxford UP, 1964), 70-1.
- ¹¹ “New York Sept. 13,” *Boston News Letter*, September 23, 1773, no. 3651, p. 2.
- ¹² “The Tea Act,” *New York Gazette*, September 6, 1773, no. 1141, p. 1; “The Tea Act,” *Boston Evening Post*, October 25, 1773, No.1987, p. 1.
- ¹³ Labaree, *Boston Tea Party*, 88-9.
- ¹⁴ “The Tea Act,” *New York Gazette*, September 6, 1773, no. 1141, p. 1; “The Tea Act,” *Boston Evening Post*, October 25, 1773, no.1987, p. 1.

¹⁵ “New-York June 10, 1773,” *Boston Evening Post*, June 21, 1773, no. 1969, p. 3.

¹⁶ “Philadelphia, September 29—Extract of a Letter from New-York, September 27,”
Boston Post-Boy, October 4, 1773, no. 842, p. 3.

¹⁷ “Messi’rs FLEETS,” *Boston Evening Post*, October 25, 1773, no. 1987, 2; “From the
BOSTON EVENING POST: To the Printers,” *Pennsylvania Chronicle* 7, November 8, 1773, no.
42, p. 378.

¹⁸ *Boston Post-Boy*, October, 4, 1773, no. 842, 3; *Essex Gazette* 6, October, 5, 1773, no.
272, p. 43.

¹⁹ “Mess’rs Fleets,” *Boston Evening Post*, October 18, 1773, no. 1986, p. 2; “From the
Boston Evening-Post, October 18,” *Essex* 6, October 12, 1773, no. 272, p. 47.

²⁰ “Poem,” *Massachusetts Spy* 3, November 4 1773, no. 144, p. 4.

²¹ *Boston Gazette*, October 18, 1773, no. 667, p. 3; “THURSDAY, October 21
BOSTON,” *Massachusetts Spy* 3, October 21, 1773, no. 142, p. 3; “Extract of a letter from Fort-
William in Scotland dated Aug. 20, 1773,” *Providence Gazette* 5, October 23, 1773, no. 511, p.
3.

²² “New York October 7: Extract of a Letter from London,” *Boston Gazette*, October 18
1773, no. 667, p. 3

²³ “Messi’rs Fleets,” *Boston Evening Post*, October 18, 1773, no. 1986, p. 2.

²⁴ *Boston Gazette*, November 1, 1773, no. 969, p. 1.

²⁵ *New-York Journal*, October 21, 1773, no. 1607, p. 2.

²⁶ *Boston Evening Post*, November 12, 1773, no. 1990,p. 3; *Norwich Packet* 2, November
25, 1773, no. 8, p. 3; *Essex Gazette* 6, November 9, 1773, no. 277, p. 64; *New-London Gazette*,
November 19, 1773, no. 523, p. 2.

²⁷ Scott, *Trumpet of a Prophecy*, 64-65.

²⁸ “Messr’s FLEETS,” *Boston Evening Post*, no. 1987, p. 2.

²⁹ Labaree, *Boston Tea Party*, 119.

³⁰ “BOSTON, Monday November 29,” *Essex Gazette* 6, November 23, 1773, no. 279, p. 71; *Boston Evening Post*, November 29, 1773, no. 1992, p. 3; *Boston News-Letter*, December 2, 1773, no. 3661, p. 3; *Connecticut Journal*, December 3, 1773, no. 320, p. 2; *Essex Journal* 2, December 4, 1773, no. 1, p. 3.

³¹ “Monday Nov. 29th, 1773,” *Boston Post Boy*, November 29, 1773, no. 850, p. 1; “Monday Nov. 29th, 1773,” *Connecticut Courant*, November 30, 1773, no. 467, p. 3; *Massachusetts Spy* 3, December 2, 1773, p. 3; *Boston Evening Post*, December 6, 1773, no. 1993, p. 2; “Monday, Nov. 29th, 1773,” *New-York Gazette*, December 13, 1773, no. 155, p. 1.

³² “THURSDAY, December 2. BOSTON,” *Massachusetts Spy* 3, December 2, 1773, no. 148, p. 3.

³³ Labaree explains that RUSTICUS is John Dickenson in *Boston Tea Party*, 101. For the specific letter he wrote see “Mr. Southwick,” *Newport Mercury*, December 20, 1773, no. 798, p. 3.

³⁴ Dickinson, “Letter from a Pennsylvania Farmer,” in *American Rhetorical Discourse*, p. 97.

³⁵ “Mr. Southwick,” *Newport Mercury*, December 20, 1773, no. 798, p. 3.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ “The same Day the following Notification was spotted up in several Parts of this Town,” *Essex Gazette* 6, November 29, 1773, no. 280, p. 75; “BOSTON: Friday Morning the

following was posted up in many Parts of this Town.” *Boston News-Letter*, November 29, 1773, no. 3662, p. 1; “The same Day the following Notification was spotted up in several Parts of this Town,” *Boston Evening Post*, December 6, 1773, no. 1993, p. 4; “The same Day the following Notification was spotted up in several Parts of this Town,” *Massachusetts Spy* 3, December 9, 1773, no. 149, p. 1.

³⁹ “To the DELAWARE PILOTS,” *Newport Mercury*, December 20, 1773, no. 798, p. 1.

⁴⁰ *Essex Gazette*, January 17, 1774, Vol. VI, No286, p. 3.

⁴¹ “NEDHAM’S REMEMB’RANCER, [NO 1],” *The Boston Gazette*, December 27, 1773, no. 977, p. 1; “From the Boston Gazette, Dec. 20, 1773, NEDHAM’S REMEMB’RANCER, [NO 1],” *Essex Gazette* 6, December 28, 1773, no. 284, p. 90.

⁴² “BOSTON, December 20,” *Boston Post Boy*, December 13, 1773, no. 852, p. 2. This is the date provided for this article by the Archive of Americana: America’s Historical Newspapers, but it must be listed incorrectly as a telling of the “Destruction of the Tea” could not have been printed in an article published prior to December 16. This article was also published under the same title in *Connecticut Journal*, December 23, 1773, no. 323, p. 2.

⁴³ “Messi’ers PRINTERS,” *Boston Evening Post*, December 20, 1773, no. 1995, 2; “From the BOSTON EVENING POST,” *Norwich Packet* 2, December 20, 1773, no. 13, p. 2.

⁴⁴ *Rivington’s New-York Gazetteer*, December 2, 1773, no. 33, p. 3.

⁴⁵ “BOSTON, December 20,” *Boston Post Boy*, December 13, 1773, no. 852, p. 2; “BOSTON, December 20,” *Connecticut Journal*, December 23, 1773, no. 323, p. 2.

⁴⁶ For examples see Willard Sterne Randall, *Alexander Hamilton: A Life* (New York: HarperCollins Publisher, 2004), p. 74; Arthur D. Pierce, *Smugglers’ Woods: Jaunts and Journeys in Colonial and Revolutionary New Jersey* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers, 1960), 137.

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- ⁴⁷ “BOSTON, December 20,” *Boston Post Boy*, December 13, 1773, no. 852, p. 2;
“BOSTON, December 20,” *Connecticut Journal*, December 23, 1773, no. 323, p. 2.
- ⁴⁸ “Messi’ers PRINTERS,” *Boston Evening Post*, December 20, 1773, no. 1995, p. 2.
“From the BOSTON EVENING POST,” *Norwich Packet* 2, December 20, 1773, no. 13, p. 2.
- ⁴⁹ *Connecticut Courant*, December 21, 1773, no. 470, p. 2.
- ⁵⁰ “BOSTON, December 20,” *Boston Post Boy*, December 13, 1773, no. 852, p. 2;
“BOSTON, December 20,” *Connecticut Journal*, December 23, 1773, no. 323, p. 2.
- ⁵¹ “Messi’ers PRINTERS,” *Boston Evening Post*, December 20, 1773, no. 1995, p. 2.
“From the BOSTON EVENING POST,” *Norwich Packet* 2, December 20, 1773, no. 13, p. 2.
- ⁵² For example see Ira Stoll, *Samuel Adams: A Life* (New York: Free Press, 2008), 115;
- ⁵³ “BOSTON, December 20,” *Boston Post Boy*, December 13, 1773, no. 852, p. 2;
“BOSTON, December 20,” *Connecticut Journal*, December 23, 1773, no. 323, p. 2.
- ⁵⁴ “Messi’ers PRINTERS,” *Boston Evening Post*, December 20, 1773, no. 1995, p. 2.
“From the BOSTON EVENING POST,” *Norwich Packet* 2, December 20, 1773, no. 13, p. 2.
- ⁵⁵ Ibid.
- ⁵⁶ The phrase “vile bohea” comes from a song about the Tea Party that was written during the Revolutionary period. *Tea Leaves: Being a Collections of Letters and Documents Relating to the Shipment of Tea to the American Colonies*, ed. Francis S. Drake (Boston: A.O. Crane, 1884), CLXXVI.
- ⁵⁷ “For the Massachusetts SPY,” *Massachusetts Spy* 3, January 6, 1774, no. 153, p. 1.
- ⁵⁸ *Connecticut Courant*, December 21, 1773, no. 470, p. 2.
- ⁵⁹ “TO THE Worthy inhabitants of the city of NEW-YORK,” *Rivington's New-York Gazatteer*, December 2, 1773, no. 33, p. 1.

⁶⁰ Thomas Paine, *Common Sense*, ed. Edward Larkin, (Oakpark, NY: Broadview Press Ltd., 2004), 63.

⁶¹ David A. Copeland, *Debating the Issues in Colonial Newspapers: Primary Documents on the Events of the Period* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2000), 300.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin Group, 1963), 25.

⁶⁴ Kenneth Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1941), 3-4.

CHAPTER THREE

Tea Steeped in Suffrage: How Women Appropriated the Boston Tea Party

After its naming in 1834, the Boston Tea Party became a staple to America's memory of the revolution. Although the multiple variations of the story described in the last chapter were reduced to a much more simplistic narrative, the power of the event resonated strongly with the American people. This became especially apparent when it came time for the Boston Tea Party's centennial anniversary. Not only did multiple papers publish the story of that sacred day, but celebrations were also planned across the United States from Boston to New York to Salt Lake City. This national celebration is perhaps unsurprising, as we too are familiar with the weighty significance of the Boston Tea Party as the spark of the American Revolution. For, as public memory scholar John R. Gillis states, "National memory is shared by people who have never seen or heard of one another, yet who regard themselves as having a common history."¹

However, what is interesting about the centennial celebrations of 1873 is that not all Americans chose to memorialize the Boston Tea Party in the traditional fashion of nationalistic tributes and flag-waving. Specifically, woman suffragists appropriated the public memory of this narrative for political purposes beyond unification. While societies of "ladies" were busy planning traditional celebrations of patriotism, suffragists were arranging protest meetings invoking a main message of the revolution: "No taxation without representation." Thus, rather than celebrating the Boston Tea Party as an eloquent reminder of the country's greatness, the suffragists resurrected the voices of these protestors to remind people just how much of that greatness was not yet achieved.

In this chapter I argue that the woman suffragists went beyond just adopting the name and ideas of the Boston Tea Party for their events, but also enacted the Boston Tea Partiers

tradition of dissent. The suffragists carried on in the tradition of trying to frame themselves rationally as even the popular media labeled them irrational. Their use of reason was quite striking in comparison with the more frivolous Tea Party commemorations planned by groups of high society ladies. Thus, in order to support my argument I will compare the different appropriations of the Boston Tea Party for the centennial celebration of the event in 1873—the celebratory events prepared by the proper ladies of society versus the protests planned by the suffragists. For, as Browne writes:

The contest over the meaning of the past is not limited to *objects* of commemoration alone, but includes the *act* of commemoration itself. Here the stress is not just on who gets remembered but who gets to do the remembering.²

Due to this focus, this chapter also explores how the meaning of the public memory of the Boston Tea Party varies depending on who plans the “*act* of commemoration.” While the Ladies were domesticating the narrative, robbing it of its political potential by, as it were, writing savagery out of the story, the Suffragists were seeking to preserve the story as resource for radical politics.

In this chapter I will describe the cultural meaning of tea, the planning of the tea parties, and the events themselves. As in the previous chapter, the texts I choose to focus on come from newspapers and other public interpretations of the event, including discussions of the Suffrage protest published in “The Woman’s Journal.”

The Rhetoric of Tea Time

Judging just by the roots of the Boston Tea Party itself, there is little doubt that Americans brought over from England a love of drinking tea. Thus, despite some abstinence from the product while under the reign of British taxation, tea has always been a staple American

beverage. More noteworthy than its taste, is its history as a cultural symbol in creating friendly relations and discussing gossip. According to Lorinda B. R. Goodwin, drinking tea in England (the country that provided the roots of America's tea habits) "was strongly engendered as feminine,"³ for as Beth Kowaleski-Wallace points out, women were described as meeting "to tea and scandal, according to their *ancient* custom" as early as the year 1694.⁴

However, teatime was not solely female-time. Tea-get-togethers were also a place for males and females to interact when men were brought to the house for company and entertainment. Kowaleski-Wallace writes, "the tea-table is a powerful focal point for gender relations,"⁵ where women served as hostesses and, as Goodwin states, "gallant politeness was the order of the day" for both sexes.⁶ Furthermore, tea was a symbol of status. Mary C. Beaudry points out that in England and North America, the cumulative average of money spent on teacups in the nineteenth century was eighteen percent higher than plates and thirty-one percent higher than bowls!⁷

This brief lesson on the culture of tea provides two important insights to this essay. First, the 1834 naming of the Destruction of the Tea as the Boston Tea Party not only codified this event into our national narrative but also changed its fundamental character. The events of 1773, which involved people dressed as "savages" violently breaking open tea chests with axes, was now ironically named after a symbol of propriety, civility, and femininity. Second, whereas men were in charge of the Destruction of the Tea in 1773, women would be responsible for the planning of the centennial tea party celebrations. This time, rather than destroying the tea, they would be ingesting it.

Tea Party Planning: A Lady's Brew

Three days prior to the centennial anniversary of the Boston Tea Party (December 16, 1873) the *Massachusetts Ploughman and New England Journal of Agriculture* published the following:

Boston is not addicted to the habit of forgetting public events as their anniversaries occur, and it is the last city to omit duly to celebrate the centennial return of the famous “tea party” that broke up in the acts of making a teapot of the harbor. Accordingly she will proceed to celebrate, which will be a sort of introduction to a series of centennial performances.⁸

Americans were proud to remember their patriotic history so much so that they planned “performances” to celebrate. They would not let this time pass without orchestrating some sort of rite that provided people a place to praise the past. It is not enough for our history to be taught, it must also be celebrated.

So how does one go about remembering or performing the famed Destruction of Tea by “savages”?—With dignified tea parties of course. According to the *Farmer's Cabinet*, the Ladies' Executive Committee of the Centennial would “commemorate this act by a grand tea party at the Philadelphia Academy of Music”⁹ and according to the *Boston Journal*, “there should be a general celebration of the day in the way of social tea-parties.”¹⁰ The *New York Times* adds, “The occasion will be observed with characteristic dignity and decorum. Orations, poems, ‘brief addresses,’ are the principal features, but we are told ‘tea and simple refreshments will be provided, also music.’”¹¹ Even though some more historical events, like one held by the Minnesota Historical Society, used its eighteenth century name of the “Destruction of the Tea,” most popular celebrations would commemorate what they knew to be the Boston Tea Party. In

other words, they would celebrate a more gentle—or genteel—version of the history of that day or, as the *Christian Union* described it, that day on which “some well-filled tea-chests belonging to British Merchants were *tipped* into the harbor” [emphasis added].¹² This is typical of how public memory emerges in popular society. As John Bodnar writes, public memory involves “the restatement of reality in ideal rather than complex or ambiguous terms.”¹³ Thus, rather than recognizing the violence involved, the force applied to the merchants and the hatchets used on the chests, people of the nineteenth century celebrated the “tipp[ing]” of the tea, as if the white-gloved participants of the eighteenth century calmly nudged it out of the British ships while nibbling on crumpets and sharing the latest gossip.

In describing the popular tea party celebrations to take place in Boston (of which there were at least three), the *Massachusetts Ploughman and New England Journal of Agriculture* wrote, “The affair is in the hands of the ladies, of course.”¹⁴ Thus unlike the Destruction of the Tea, women rather than men would be the planners of the 1873 tea parties. At the main celebration in Faneuil Hall in Boston, the ladies planned a distinguished event. The *New York Times* states that it was to include “addresses by prominent men and women and a superior order of music, a portion of which will be furnished by a select choir of 200 children from the public schools” and that the tea will be served by “pretty young women.”¹⁵ Another *New York Times* article described that the Philadelphia Tea Party was to be equally as refined:

The china-ware to be used at the party will be engraved with emblems illustrative of Revolutionary events . . . [and] the tea will be served by the wives and daughters of [their] best families, who will be attired in the styles fashionable in the days of lady Martha Washington.¹⁶

These parties defined by their style of eighteenth-century kitsch, were clearly planned to be celebrations of patriotism and national identity. There was even to be “a small souvenir tea-chest, filled with real Bohea tea, [which] will be given to each person present by the young men in ‘ye olden costume’ and young Mohawks in the dress of the native tribe.”¹⁷ Just like its name coined in the nineteenth century suggests, this was to be a commemorative *party*, not really a remembrance of destruction.

The *Massachusetts Ploughman and New England Journal of Agriculture* claimed that “the old times will be resuscitated,” but with all their “costumes, furniture, cookery, etc.” these parties were more like masquerades of history rather than resuscitations.¹⁸ This is not meant to be a necessarily negative commentary, for these tea parties performed their function well. They brought people together in celebratory patriotism. As Bodnar writes, “The symbolic language of patriotism is central to public memory discussion in nations like the United States because language has the capacity to mediate both vernacular loyalties to local and familiar places and official loyalties to national and imaged structures.”¹⁹ Even the reporters of the nineteenth century seemed eerily aware of the function of public memory as they explicitly recognized the event’s nationalistic purpose: “The patriotic memories of the Past [will] be linked to the kindly service of the present.”²⁰ Furthermore, regardless of their purpose, as Bradford Vivian points out, there are no “incorrect ways to remember.”²¹

The ladies’ tea parties were not much different than one might expect from the descriptions already provided. According to the *New York Times*, “The oldest families were fully represented and the school children contributed vocally to the entertainment of their elders.”²² The main speech was given by the president of the Massachusetts Historical Society named Robert C. Winthrop, a descendent of John Winthrop. He began his speech by reinforcing

the purpose of the celebration as a social rather than a political affair: We are here . . . to spend a social evening in recalling the events which have rendered this anniversary so conspicuous in our Colonial history.” He also described the involvement of the ladies stating that some had come to the event “to take a commemorative cup of tea with the ladies of Boston” and appropriately labeled the hall in which they gathered as a “domestic roof.”²³

Winthrop also speaks of the colonist Josiah Quincy, Jr., who “loved liberty so well and so wisely, that he was reluctant . . . to have the sacredness and the lustre of its cause in the slightest degree dimmed or tarnished by any outbreak of irresponsible violence.”²⁴ According to Winthrop, Quincy “vindicate[d] the town from the charges of riot and disorder.” Winthrop even quotes Quincy as challenging any enemies “to point out any one step of the town of Boston . . . that was tumultuous, disorderly, and against the law.”²⁵ This speaks directly to the colonists’ need in 1773 to justify their acts with rationality. As described by Winthrop, Quincy denies any irrationality involved in destroying the tea. From this, Winthrop concludes, “It is thus, I think, rather with the great principles of freedom which led to the Destruction of the Tea, than the act itself, that [Quincy’s] name is ever to be associated.”²⁶ In this way, Winthrop tames the memory of the Boston Tea Party by calling on his audience to remember the Tea Party for its principles rather than any bad name one may give it due to the destruction caused.

Another portion of his speech was devoted to pointing out that America was not at odds with England. Thus, serving the public memory function of shaping events to fit “the politics of culture,” showing that, as Sacvan Bercovitch writes, “Culture is how people interpret and what they believe.”²⁷ For instance, according to *The Albion, A Journal of Politics, News, and Literature*, Winthrop stated:

We delight . . . to remember Old England, this day and every day, as our mother country, and we thank God that she, of all nations, was our mother country. It was from her history and her example that we imbibed those great lessons of freedom, which led to independence.²⁸

In a somewhat ironic rhetorical move, Winthrop thanks the country that the men who destroyed the tea called tyrants, because in the current political climate, England and America were not warring nations, but countries that realized it was in their best interests to appear seemingly friendly with one another.²⁹ Clearly, this did not mean that Winthrop placed any blame on the Americans involved either. Rather, in true democratic fashion, he attributed guilt to the monarch: “The British policy which produced a revolution in this country was, in fact, the work of a blundering though well-meaning monarch.”³⁰

Furthermore, he explains that they “have not come to Faneuil Hall to-day to arraign or reproach anyone, whether tyrants abroad or Tories at home.”³¹ Rather he argues that now through “the clam, clear light of history” it becomes clear that this happening was a divine act illustrated by God. It is precisely because this event was orchestrated by an “overruling god” that the people at the celebration “may well afford to recall all [their enemies’] memories without infusing a particle of bitterness in our cup of tea.” Similar to how Abraham Lincoln had tried to depoliticize the Civil War a few years earlier in his second Inaugural by labeling it an act of God, Winthrop tried to divorce the Boston Tea Party from possessing political significance by bestowing upon it the label of divine act. He also simplifies the story by using synecdoche:

A single tea-leaf, if it could be plucked up from the huge mass which furnished strange food for the fishes at Griffin’s wharf, a hundred year ago—one fossilized tea-leaf, if it could be found, would furnish him an ample clue to the whole story.

Rather than discussing the tensions happening during the time of the Boston Tea Party, he boiled down the entire memory of this event to the symbol of the tea-leaf.

At the celebration put on by the Minnesota Historical Society, Judge Aaron Goodrich mocked the notion that the Bostonians of 1773 could have been anything but patriotic. Although at first it seemed that he “endeavored to show that the destruction of the tea was got up by some smugglers who had contraband of their own to sell, and wished to corner the market” by “induc[ing] the crowd to destroy it by exciting their passions and prejudices,” the *American Historical Record* reveals that this piece was “written in a vein of bitter satire” that “provoked much merriment.” Thus, Goodrich’s retelling teased the audience with the idea that the founders were savages—an idea which the audience received with light-hearted glee finding it laughable that their ancestors could be anything but civilized patriots.³²

All around, from the planning the ladies did to the speeches like the one described above, the popular centennial tea parties celebrated a polite version of history. There were no longer any true villains in the story of the Boston Tea Party, only heroes—even the monarch was characterized as “well-meaning.” As an attendee of a Philadelphia tea party celebration wrote, “Nature’s peace and power, are preferable to the historic memories of war and its attendant miseries.”³³ In contrast, the suffragists wanted people to remember the oppression the colonies overcame. They were not concerned with being politically correct in the traditional sense as the ladies’ tea parties were. Rather, the suffragist wished to use the memory of the Boston Tea Party to help correct the political system that dictated their current reality.

Woman Suffragists Plan Protests

Other women were hard at work planning another type of tea party that was not concerned with costumes or mini-toy tea chests. A *New York Times* article described one that

was to take place in Faneuil Hall on December 15, the day before the true centennial date, as this would have conflicted with the popular celebration scheduled in the same venue the next day:

The celebration of throwing overboard of the obnoxious tea in Boston Harbor, will begin to-morrow by a meeting, with speeches and tea in Faneuil Hall under the direction of the Woman Suffragists. This will be sort of a wail, as they claim that they are in the same position precisely as our forefathers who protested taxation without representation.³⁴

Unlike the ladies' tea parties, which were lauded for their plans, the Suffragist celebrations were not everyone's cup of tea. For instance, after the description of the suffragist tea party quoted above, the article moves on to talk about the Ladies' tea parties, transitioning with: "Tuesday, however, will be a great day."³⁵ This statement is rather explicit in its favoritism toward the ladies' tea parties over those of the suffragists—one being a "wail" and the other being a "great day."

However, the *New York Times* did publish a call from the President, Clemence S. Lozier, and Secretary, Lillie Devereaux Blake, of the New-York Woman's suffrage society:

A call has been issued to the tax-paying women of New-York to unite in a mass-meeting, to be held at the Union League Theater on the occasion of the centennial of the "Boston Tea Party," Tuesday evening, Dec. 16, "to protest against the tyranny of taxation without representation."³⁶

Thus, although both the ladies societies and the suffragists were technically planning tea parties for the same commemorative event, the suffragist's rhetorical purpose was more pungently political than the ladies' patriotic celebrations. Although they used the same basic history, the suffragists were more worried about the present and the future than the past. While the ladies' societies were creating affairs to further inculcate the status quo, the suffragists planned their

events hoping to point out blatant hypocrisy in order to effect change. As Bodnar writes, “The major focus of [public memory] is not the past, however, but serious matters in the present such as the nature of power and the question of loyalty to both official and vernacular cultures.”³⁷

David Thelan reinforces this when he states, “The struggle for possession and interpretation of memory is rooted in the conflict and interplay among social, political, and cultural interests and values in the present.”³⁸ This could not more clearly line up with the way the suffragists appropriated the public memory of the Boston Tea Party, for the sole purpose of their tea parties were to argue for women’s rights. Without this purpose, these tea parties would not have taken place.

At the Suffragist Tea Party in Boston, some of the accounts of the Boston Tea Party were quite similar to the ones invoked at the ladies tea parties. For instance, Wendell Phillips, who is most well known for his work as an abolitionist, gave a speech in which he referred to the participants as having merely “tipped” the chests “into the sea.”³⁹ In comparison to the descriptions provided one hundred years ago (especially by the Tories), he further understates the damage done by the participants stating, “It was a very small act, a very small amount of treasure was wasted.”⁴⁰ However, at the same rally, James Freeman Clark, an American preacher, gave an oration in which he pointed out the lawlessness of the Boston Tea Party. He states, “It was an illegal proceeding, it was breaking the law. It was plainly a riot.”⁴¹

Despite their differences, the refurbishing of the Boston Tea Party narrative by these two speakers and others were used for very different ends than the speakers at the popular tea party celebrations. Phillips recognized the activeness of the past in the present moment, for he spoke of the “duty of history, which is to pick out the lesson and the inspiration of a hundred years ago, not putting our foot down actually in their track, but doing what they would have done if they

stood here today.”⁴² Thus, Phillips called upon the spirits of the past to justify the suffragist spirit of the present. He even stated that if Sam Adams “could speak to-day . . . he would have three or four principles” to extol to modern America including “woman’s voting.”⁴³ Clark also recognized the power of the past to inform the present in his description of why they were commemorating this event at all. He states, “New occasions teach new duties. Because they apply old precedents to new necessities.”⁴⁴ In other words, this present occasion will serve to show that the principles put forth by the participants in the Boston Tea Party, such as “no taxation without representation,” must be applied to the current reality.

Another way that the Suffragist tea parties diverged from the popular celebrations was in their characterization of the British. Unlike the speeches at the ladies’ tea parties that sought to neutralize the history of Anglo-American relations, like their Whig ancestors, the suffragist speakers still characterized the British as oppressors. This was a clearly rhetorical move, as the suffragist supporters were comparing the British treatment of Americans to the American’s treatment of women. For instance, Clark stated:

Great Britain, the mother country, like a cruel step-mother, asks her children, what they cannot consent, to remain without the essentials of freedom—they are to be taxed and have no voice as to what they shall pay . . . Having no votes in the British Parliament how are they to make their influence felt? . . . They are looked down upon as an inferior race. All the power is in the hands of those who oppress them.⁴⁵

The parallels between nineteenth century women and the colonists are woven throughout this description, as the suffragist lack freedom, a voice and vote to determine what they will be taxed, and are looked down upon as inferior. The purpose of this comparison is to show that women’s rights were already embedded in the principles established by America’s founding. An article in

the *Woman's Journal* was written in response to a man who tried to point out the imperfections in the connection suffragist were making between 1773 and 1873. The author of the article, T. W. H., countered him with the following:

See how well our friend's statement of political philosophy reads—"A legislative body qualified to tax a community [*of women*] should consist of persons [*or include a reasonable number of persons, for the American revolutionists did not demand a separate Parliament*] belonging to that community, [*of women*] acquainted therefore with its conditions and sympathetic with its interests." Could anything be framed which should better state the argument for Woman Suffrage?⁴⁶

Again, this reinforces the notion that woman's suffrage is accounted for in history and law and thus downplays anyone who would call the woman suffragist movement radical or progressive.

The woman suffragists were calling upon the past to show present hypocrisy. This is an exemplar of how history is "inscriptive, rather than descriptive, serving particular interests and ideological positions."⁴⁷ Women were carving out a place for their rights in the public memory of the Boston Tea Party. Not only did they strive to make clear that people who denied women suffrage were breaking a sacred national covenant fought for one hundred years earlier, but they also wanted the memory of women's involvement in the Boston Tea Party remembered.

According to Clark's speech at the Woman Suffrage protest in Boston: "Five hundred and thirty-six women of Boston took a pledge of abstinence from tea till the tax was repealed."⁴⁸ Thus, women too sacrificed for the American cause, but were not rewarded for their actions. The "founder of the feast" in Boston, activist Lucy Stone, similarly pointed out that women were still sacrificing and fighting for America, but were treated as unequal:

Last Monday . . . Jefferson Davis was restored his political rights. But the great army of loyal women, who nursed in hospital camps, who tore bandages and scraped lint, who worked all day and all night, over and over again, to furnish sanitary supplies to your soldier boys, are still counted politically with the fools!⁴⁹

Building on this, suffrage supporters went beyond stating, as Susan B. Anthony did, “what was true of the colonists one hundred years ago was true in regard to the women of America to-day.”⁵⁰

Although in the beginning of her speech, Stone remarks that the purpose of the rally is to make clear that “the taxation of women without representation is as great an injustice as was that done to men in the olden days,” she quickly shifts to stating that the current treatment of women is in fact *worse* than the British treatment of the colonists.⁵¹ She states:

The wrong done to men a hundred years ago, by the government of England, bears no comparison to the injustice and wrong done to women by the government of this country day to-day . . . Great Britain never dared to do to the colonies what Massachusetts does to the women of this State to-day . . . O men of Massachusetts, how can we make you know that the injustice and wrong you are to-day doing to women is greater than that which your fathers resisted, and that it calls as loudly for repeal?⁵²

Rather than reinforcing cultural hegemony, like the ladies’ tea parties did, in statements like the one above Lucy Stone and other suffragists used the public memory to unsettle the foundation of societal norms and laws. Painting the American government as more ruinous to human rights than the British’s behavior toward the colonists, was an anti-nationalistic sentiment in stark contrast to the patriotic celebrations. At the tea party protest in New York City, Susan B. Anthony even described women as being in a “position of slavery.”⁵³ An article in the *Woman’s*

Journal also recognizes the female case for representation as being stronger than that of the colonists:

The argument for the inability of Englishmen alone to legislate for Americans was a weaker and less permanent position, than is the argument for the inability of men alone to legislate for women.⁵⁴

Through these examples, it is clear how strikingly similar narratives of the same event can be employed for different, even opposing purposes creating divergent public memories—the one presented at the ladies’ tea parties versus the way the suffragist commandeered the story to advocate for women’s rights. As Browne and Warnick write, “public memory signifies and gets signified in multiple ways.”⁵⁵

Because the suffragist tea parties were more about making change in the present than celebrating the past, they not only had to tell the story of the Boston Tea Party but also put forth suggestions as to how women attending the rallies could help effect change. For instance, the secretary of the New York meeting, Lillie Devereux Blake’s statement was described in the *New York Times* as follows:

She did not advocate the proposition that women should refuse articles upon which they were unjustly taxed . . . by throwing them overboard, but she thought the time had come when the tax collectors themselves might be thrown overboard . . . She said that of course, only figuratively. What she desired was that women would not consent to pay taxes until they are represented.⁵⁶

Unlike the articles advocating violence written in the eighteenth century, Blake’s statement is merely a joke and automatically treated as such. This creates an interesting dichotomy—according to people like Stone, the woman’s situation is worse than that of the colonist and yet

the measures they plan to take to combat the problem are less radical. This serves two functions. First, this comparison of the woman's situation with the colonist's makes the woman's response seem much more reasonable relative to the course of destruction taken in 1773. Second, it inspires women to participate in the protest—if the men of 1773 could defy the British, then they can also defy are their government. Lucy Stone has a similar message:

The women of the old time threw away their tea. But I would live on crusts, and take a great deal of hard treatment, if . . . thereby every wife could sell her land and give valid title, as every man is free to do . . . I would take a great deal of hard treatment if thereby the principle of “the consent of the governed” could be applied to women.⁵⁷

Through this statement Stone once again embraces the significance of her cause as being even greater than the cause of the Boston Tea Party. Whereas the participants of 1773 gave up tea, she would give up food altogether if it would make a difference. However, Stone and the other suffragist leaders would not ask for such a great sacrifice on the part of the women to whom they spoke. Rather, they wanted them to create and participate in an anti-tax league, a group that would refuse to pay taxes.

Some women were already protesting in this way. For instance, at a meeting held in preparation for the tea parties, Matilda Joslyn Gage told the story of Susan B. Anthony's refusal to pay taxes and her trial for refusing to do so.⁵⁸ In her own speech, Anthony warned the American government stating, “Women would never submit to taxation without representation.”⁵⁹ However, the description of the meeting that Gage was leading showed results to the contrary. According to an article in the *Chicago Daily*, when asked how many were willing to participate in an anti-tax league, “two hands were raised,” for they were worried about losing their property.⁶⁰ Despite these concerns, the end of the meeting concluded with a

resolution to form an anti-tax league. However, how they finally came to this consensus is unclear as to calm their fears about breaking the law by refusing to pay taxes, it was then stated that “protest and agitation were all that anybody could expect of them.”⁶¹

Regardless of its practical effects, the commemoration the suffragists held was rhetorically smart in its use of public memory. They used history to call upon a higher law that their ancestors had called upon one hundred years earlier. As Clark states:

It was the breaking of a lower law for a higher law. No evil passion, no low motive, only a stern sense of duty actuated the patriots in that solemn hour, and so the illegal act was purified, sanctified, enabled by the high spirit in which it was performed.⁶²

In the same way, any law-breaking performed for woman’s suffrage, such as a refusal to pay taxes, would one day be washed away by the tides of time and be remembered as a call to fundamental principle.

The suffragist tea parties also questioned the true success of the Boston Tea Party, for in their eyes it did not truly achieve its main credo of “No taxation without representation.” Stone emphasizes this in the opening to her speech: “The principle involved, which made the Tea Party so worthy of celebration, hangs unsettled in the scale to-day.”⁶³ Furthermore, the notion that women paid taxes and thus should be allowed to vote sets up a more practical, legal argument that would be continue to be employed in rhetoric for women’s rights over eighty years later.⁶⁴

Carrying On the Tradition of Dissent

Michael Schudson writes, “The past is not only the stories people tell of it; it is the claim of events that set the conditions about which people feel compelled to tell stories.”⁶⁵ This is clearly realized in the case of the 1873 Woman Suffragist Tea Parties. The suffragists in Boston

and New York decided to tell the story of the Boston Tea Party expressly because it coincided with their political purposes. They were quite unconcerned with the social aspect of their event—so much so that they did not even plan well enough to provide tea for everyone present. They were not commemorating these acts to bolster patriotism. Quite the opposite, they wished to point out America’s hypocrisy—how could people celebrate and think so highly of an event whose principles were not upheld in modern society? Furthermore, how could women, who were expressly denied the rights for which the Boston Tea Party represented, plan these grand parties of patriotism?

The juxtaposition of these sets of tea parties provides an interesting case of public memory, for it is not often that the same memory is simultaneously used for such oppositional purposes. Through their centennial commemorations, the speakers at the popular Tea Parties sought to depoliticize the Boston Tea Party by remembering its principles over the possible irrationality that could be found in the acts. They surrounded their participants in an atmosphere of blind patriotism in which they were served tea by multiple Martha Washingtons. Contrastingly, the woman suffragists wanted people to remember the Boston Tea Party precisely because of its political nature. They reminded their attendees of the wrongs Americans suffered and how they had stood strong together to overcome governmental oppression. Thus, within the same story some saw a tale representative of current principles while others saw a narrative that could shed light on their own government’s hypocrisy. This story was the rationale for their argument that they too deserved the right to vote. For the woman suffragists, the Boston Tea Party served as an allegory for their own predicament or perhaps a cautionary tale of what happens when people are denied the right to vote and control their own property. Despite other’s claims that they illegitimately appropriated the Boston Tea Party, the woman suffragists used this

allegory to balance the scale of rationality. In this way, they kept within the tradition of American dissent set out by the people of the Boston Tea Party.

Notes

¹ John R. Gillis, introduction to *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1994), 7.

² *Ibid*, 169.

³ Lorinda B. R. Goodwin, *An Archaeology of Manners: The Polite World of the Merchant Elite of Colonial Massachusetts*, (New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers, 1999), 179.

⁴ Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace, *Consuming Subjects: Women, Shopping, and Business in the Eighteenth Century*, (New York: Columbia UP, 1997), 23.

⁵ Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace, "Tea, Gender, and Domesticity in Eighteenth Century England," *Studies in Eighteenth Century Culture* 23 (1994), 142.

⁶ Goodwin, *An Archaeology of Manners*, 181.

⁷ George L. Miller, "Classification and Economic Scaling of Nineteenth-Century Ceramics," in *Documentary Archaeology in the New World*, ed. Mary C. Beaudry (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1988), 180.

⁸ "The Tea Party," *Massachusetts Ploughman and New England Journal of Agriculture* 33, December 13, 1873, no. 11, p. 2, Archive of Americana: America's Historical Newspapers. Note that any reference found in Archive of Americana: America's Historical Newspapers is part of an online archive that can be found at <http://www.newsbank.com/>.

⁹ *Farmer's Cabinet* 72, November 12, 1873, no. 18, p. 2, Archive of Americana: America's Historical Newspapers; *Massachusetts Ploughman and New England Journal of Agriculture* 33, November 22, 1873, no. 8, p. 3, Archive of Americana: America's Historical Newspapers.

¹⁰ Quoted in “Occasional Notes,” *Christian Union* 8, December 10, 1873, no. 24, p. 477, Archive of Americana: America’s Historical Newspapers.

¹¹ “The Boston Tea Party—Centennial Anniversary To-morrow,” *New York Times*, December 15, 1873, <http://www.proquest.com/>.

¹² “Occasional Notes,” *Christian Union* 8, December 10, 1873, no. 24, p. 477, Archive of Americana: America’s Historical Newspapers.

¹³ John Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century*, (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1992), 13.

¹⁴ “The Tea Party,” *Massachusetts Ploughman and New England Journal of Agriculture*.

¹⁵ “The Boston Tea Party—Centennial Anniversary To-morrow,” *New York Times*.

¹⁶ “Philadelphia, Labor Agitators Active—Riotous Demonstrations Expected—The Centennial Tea Party,” *New York Times*, December 20, 1873, p. 3, <http://www.proquest.com/>.

¹⁷ “The Boston Tea Party—Centennial Anniversary To-morrow,” *New York Times*.

¹⁸ *Farmer’s Cabinet* 72, November, 12 1873, Archive of Americana: America’s Historical Newspapers; *Massachusetts Ploughman and New England Journal of Agriculture* 33, November 22, 1873, Archive of Americana: America’s Historical Newspapers.

¹⁹ John Bodnar, “*Public Memory in an American City: Commemoration in Cleveland*,” in *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity*, ed. John R. Gillis (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1994), 76.

²⁰ “Occasional Notes,” *Christian Union*.

²¹ Bradford Vivian, “‘A Timeless Now’: Memory and Repetition” in *Framing Public Memory*, ed. Kendall R. Phillips (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004), 204.

²² “The Tea Party. Day of Historical Reminiscences,” *New York Times*, December 17, 1873, <http://www.proquest.com/>.

²³ Robert C. Winthrop, Mr. Frothingham, Mr. Waterston, Dr. Ells, Dr. Holmes, T. C. Amory, and Mr. Davis, “Special Meeting, 1873. Tea Party Anniversary,” *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society* 13 (1873-1875), 151.

²⁴ Ibid, 154

²⁵ Ibid, 154-5

²⁶ Ibid, 155.

²⁷ Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Rites of Assent: Transformations in the Symbolic Construction of America* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 12.

²⁸ “The Tea Party: Day of Historical Reminiscences,” *New York Times*, December 17, 1873, p. 5, <http://www.proquest.com/>.

²⁹ On October 27, 1865, the *New York Times* published in article entitled “Our Relations with England The Unwarrantable Pretensions of the British Government,” in which the author describes the countries’ relationship: There is every reason why we should be on friendly terms with Great Britain, and the single consideration of the terrible evils which would follow an interruption of friendly relations between the two countries, is weighty enough to forbid the thought of such an event except in the last resort.”

³⁰ “The Tea Party. Day of Historical Reminiscences,” *New York Times*, December 17, 1873, p. 5, <http://www.proquest.com/>.

³¹ Ibid.

³² “Societies and Their Proceedings,” *American Historical Record* 3 (1874), no. 25, 39.

³³ “The Philadelphia Tea Party,” *Woman’s Journal*, January 3, 1874,
<http://gerritsen.chadwyck.com/>.

³⁴ “The Boston Tea Party—Centennial Anniversary To-morrow,” *New York Times*.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ “The New-York Woman’s Suffrage Society,” *New York Times*, December 17, 1873, p.
5, <http://www.proquest.com/>.

³⁷ Bodnar, *Remaking America*, 15.

³⁸ David Thelen, “Memory and American History,” *Journal of American History* 75
(1989), 1127.

³⁹ “The Tea Party. Celebration by the Women of New-England,” *New York Times*,
December 16, 1873, p. 5, <http://www.proquest.com/>.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ “Tea and Milk,” *Woman’s Journal* 5, February 7, 1874, no. 6, p. 41,
<http://gerritsen.chadwyck.com/>.

⁴⁷ Gillis, *Commemorations*, 4.

⁴⁸ “The Tea Party. Celebration by the Women of New-England,” *New York Times*,
<http://www.proquest.com/>.

⁴⁹ “The Tea Party Twenty Years Ago,” *Woman’s Journal* 24, December 16, 1893, no. 50, p. 394, <http://gerritsen.chadwyck.com/>.

⁵⁰ “The New-York Woman’s Suffrage Society,” *New York Times*.

⁵¹ “The Tea Party Twenty Years Ago,” *Woman’s Journal*.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ “The New-York Woman’s Suffrage Society,” *New York Times*.

⁵⁴ “Tea and Milk,” *Woman’s Journal*.

⁵⁵ Stephen Browne, “Reading, Rhetoric, and the Texture of Public Memory,” ed. Barbara Warnick, *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 81 (1995), 237.

⁵⁶ “The New-York Woman’s Suffrage Society,” *New York Times*.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ “Tea and Taxes,” *Chicago Daily*, December 17, 1873, p. 3, Archive of Americana: America’s Historical Newspapers.

⁵⁹ “The New-York Woman’s Suffrage Society,” *New York Times*.

⁶⁰ “Tea and Taxes,” *Chicago Daily*.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² “The Tea Party. Celebration by the Women of New-England,” *New York Times*.

⁶³ “The Tea Party Twenty Years Ago,” *Woman’s Journal*.

⁶⁴ Angela G. Ray and Cindy Koenig Richards, “Inventing Citizens, Imagining Gender Justice: The Suffrage Rhetoric of Virginia and Francis Minor,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 93 (2007), 390.

⁶⁵ Michael Schudson, "Lives, Laws, and Language: Commemorative Versus Non-Commemorative Forms of Effective Public Memory," *Communication Review* 2 (1997), 5.

CHAPTER FOUR

Refiguring Tea Party Dissent: Inarticulateness, Discrimination, and Violence

In her article “Reading the Past Against the Grain: The Shape of Public Memory,” Barbie Zelizer points out that public memory is “unpredictable,” because it “is not necessarily linear, logical, or rational.”¹ Therefore, memories often “pop up precisely where they are least expected.” Unlike the Woman’s Suffrage Tea Parties, which were somewhat predictable due to both the time in which they took place, the centennial anniversary, and the logic of the use of the slogan “no taxation without representation,” which fit their predicament as disenfranchised taxpayers, a new movement has unexpectedly laid claim to the memory of the Boston Tea Party.

This movement was unpredictably spawned, as it developed from a seemingly unplanned television tirade by CNBC newscaster, Rick Santelli, on February 19, 2009.² According to the *Chicago Tribune*, whose video of Santelli’s broadcast was labeled “Rant of the Year,” Santelli expressed outrage at the bailout plan from the Chicago Board of Trade and President Barack Obama’s stimulus plan.³ Santelli complained, “The government is promoting bad behavior . . . This is America! How many of you people want to pay for your neighbor’s mortgage that has an extra bathroom and can’t pay their bills?”⁴ In order to protest the Obama administration, Santelli stated that Americans should hearken back to the values espoused on December 16, 1773 and hold a Tea Party in Chicago: “We’re thinking of having a Chicago Tea Party in July. All you capitalists that want to show up to Lake Michigan, I’m gonna start organizing.”⁵ Some listeners took his suggestion to heart and planned a Chicago Tea Party rally. According to their website:

Tea Party Patriots Chicago is made up of individuals who believe in liberty, constitutional principles and fiscal responsibility. We are a non-partisan, grassroots group of people committed to freedom and united by the core values and principles found in the

Declaration of Independence, the U.S. Constitution and the Bill of Rights. Tea Party Patriots Chicago welcomes all conservatives, libertarians, centrists, Republicans, Democrats and Independents who stand for freedom and individual rights.⁶

However, the Chicago Tea Party was only the beginning. Tea Parties with similar mission statements swept the nation sometimes using “TEA” as an acronym for “Taxed Enough Already.”

In fact, by March 1, 2009, only eleven days after Santelli’s statement, at least forty tea party demonstrations had taken place in different cities nationwide.⁷ Because of their aversion to taxation, even more protests were planned for Tax Day (the deadline for Americans to submit their taxes), April 15. There were approximately seven hundred rallies that day with at least 100,000 Americans involved.⁸ Unlike the Boston Tea Party of 1773 and the Woman’s Suffrage Tea Parties, these Tea Parties would not take place on a singular day in history. Rather, Tea Parties have already been held on different dates and different cities for over a year now and show little signs of stopping in the near future (they have already planned their second national convention to be held in Las Vegas from July 15 to July 17, 2010). Their rallies mainly consist of people carrying signs, speakers spreading the message of their movements, and, sometimes, live music specifically created for to support Tea Party politics. The movement’s other major dates of protest have occurred on July 4, 2009 to coincide with Independence Day, September 12, 2009 to coincide with 9/11, February 4-6 for their first national convention, mid-March 2010 in protest of healthcare reform, and April 15, 2010 once again to coincide with Tax Day. They also had a bus tour entitled “The Tea Party Express,” which traveled across the country beginning on March 7, 2010 and ending on April 15, 2010 upon reaching Washington D.C.

According to a nonprofit organization study, there are approximately 67,000 official tea party activists in America as of April 2010.⁹

Due to the large number of people, protests, and purposes, pinning down the meaning of the movement is difficult. However, on April 15, 2010, the movement unveiled a manifesto that is the closest one can come to a statement truly representative of the Tea Partiers (many of whom are very attached to the grass roots nature of the organization and thus opposed to making specific claims that may alienate members who disagree). The document is entitled “The Contract from America,” and its contents were determined by an online voting process by members of the group.¹⁰ Specifically, the contract states that the Modern Tea Partiers call for congress to “identify the specific provision of the Constitution that gives [them] the power to do what the bill does” in order to “protect the Constitution”; a rejection of cap and trade; a balanced budget by requiring a “two-thirds majority” for any “tax hike;” the “adopt[ion] [of] a simple and fair single tax-rate system;” limited government and limited government spending; the repeal the healthcare bill passed in 2010; more exploration of energy sources in order to decrease America’s dependency on “foreign energy sources;” the prevention of earmarks until the budget is balanced; and the government to “permanently repeal all tax hikes.”¹¹

Despite the difference in goals between this Tea Party Movement and the ones discussed in the previous two chapters, there is a striking resemblance in the tensions and complexities of this movement in comparison to both the Tea Party of 1773 and 1873. All three revolve around questions of whether protestors are violent extremists or true patriots and thus, the debate over the rationality of holding a Tea Party has remained a staple in the public memory construction of the Destruction of the Tea for over two hundred years now. Like it always has been, the Tea Party remains, in part, a referendum on the form and function of rhetorical dissent.

In America's current memory of the Boston Tea Party, protestor and patriot are somewhat synonymous. No one has thought more about the question of dissent vis-à-vis America's mythic past than Sacvan Bercovitch. Across two books, Bercovitch argues that when Americans find something wrong in their society or feel like an outcast (a Jeremiah), they typically cast their dissent in an American rite of passage commonly called names like the "American dream," the "American Way," or the "American mission."¹² For instance, in *The American Jeremiad*, Bercovitch uses the American writer as an example of someone who feels like an outsider yet embraces the rite: "American writers have tended to see themselves as outcasts and isolates, prophets crying in the wilderness . . . simultaneously lamenting a declension and celebrating a national dream."¹³ Building off a similar sentiment between the ironic tensions the American Jeremiah faces, in *Rites of Assent: Transformations in the Symbolic Construction of America* Bercovitch points out that America has a counter-intuitive history of protest in which the progressives are ironically the true conservatives, whose "characteristic strategy [is] to displace radical alternatives with an indigenous tradition of reform."¹⁴ In other words, because there exists a tradition of dissent in American society that includes some who are now considered patriots, radicals can be placed within an American convention. However, despite its status as a convention, defining legitimate dissent has become a common topoi in the discourse surrounding the current tea party.

As illustrated in the previous chapters patriotic dissent is characterized by a productive tension between the competing discourse of rationality and irrationality. The Tea Party protests of 1773 and 1873 were characterized by precisely this balance, and this balance in turn was the source of their dissent's rhetorical power. For, without this balance, their movements' rhetoric would have been overtaken by irrationality and thus both groups would have lost much of their

legitimacy. In this chapter, I argue that the modern movement has rejected this balance. They may have appropriated the Tea Party, but they have rejected the tradition of dissent that these Tea Parties embraced. Therefore, I use the rhetoric surrounding the Modern Tea Party Movement to show that their protests have reshaped America's tradition of dissent by analyzing their strategy of incoherence, their opponent's claims that the movement superficially uses the Boston Tea Party's history, their racism and homophobia, and violent rhetoric.

Exposing Eloquence: Incoherence as Strategy

The Tea Party Movement is difficult to boil down because the people involved are extremely attached to calling their organization a grass roots movement that does not claim a party or any specific agenda. In a statement to *The Washington Times*, Tim Phillips, president of Americans for Progress and "one of the movement's many informal leaders," stated, "It's a genuine grass-roots movement, so I think you will continue to see an array of grass-roots protests giving voice to their concern that they have of losing their freedom."¹⁵ The article goes on to comment, "There appears to be no unanimity among the disparate groups around the country about the various rally dates."¹⁶ Similarly, the *Christian Science Monitor* states, "No single person leads the tea party movement."¹⁷ Although some skeptics worry (and, some critics hope) that such a fractured and disorganized group cannot sustain itself, many Tea Party leaders use their disorganization as evidence for the authenticity of their movement and as justification for why it represents the true American person. For instance, Mike Huckabee, Governor of Arkansas, argues that the Tea Party can exist without a formal leader, citing that National Rifle Association as a group that is "not really identified with a particular political figure."¹⁸ He also states:

They are very clear, it doesn't matter if you are Democrat or Republican -- if you are with them on the second amendment, they are with you. If you are against the second amendment they are against you. It is pure. It's the way it ought to be.¹⁹

However, others have denied this so-called “purity” stating that they are an “AstroTurf” movement, a fake grass roots movement, built from the top down, not the bottom up. Paul Krugman writes:

It turns out that the tea parties don't represent a spontaneous outpouring of public sentiment . . . In particular, a key role is being played by FreedomWorks, an organization run by Richard Armey, the former House majority leader, and supported by the usual group of right-wing billionaires. And the parties are, of course, being promoted heavily by FOX News.²⁰

Furthermore, as the *Christian Science Monitor* explains that they are “pitched as a non-partisan protest, but dominated by conservatives and libertarians.”²¹ Although the Tea Party advertises itself as an outlet for the common person of America, even many of their own members have pointed out some of the hypocrisy embedded within their organization. For instance, David Weigel of the *Washington Independent* writes:

The self-described grassroots activists in Tea Party Patriots and the American Liberty Alliance see the Tea Party Express as a sham organization, using the political heft of the movement to push a bland, partisan Republican agenda.²²

Members also spoke out against the high fee charged in order for people to attend the first national convention. There seems to be a break down in reasoning when one of the major political complaints a group makes is that the government's overspending is causing the average American money troubles while they themselves reportedly spend 100,000 dollars on their

keynote speaker, Sarah Palin.²³ How could the common American be expected to pay “549 dollars per ticket and a 9.95 dollar fee, plus hotel and airfare” in order to attend this event?²⁴ It seems like they are as authentically representing the common man as much as a hipster authentically represents counter culture by spending three hundred dollars on a pair of ripped jeans.

The Modern Tea Party Movement’s authenticity is also defined by their lack eloquence and their inarticulateness. For instance, opponents of the movement have begun vehemently documenting the misspellings that frequently appear on signs at Tea Party rallies. It has even been granted the name of “TeaBonics,” a play on ebonics, which the *New York Daily News* website defines as, “A new dialect of the English language created by sign wielders at Tea Party protests. Some call it 'creative spelling,' others call it carelessness.”²⁵ Examples of these misspellings include slogans like, “Lets keep the Tea, Dump the Polititions,” “Make English America’s Offical Language,” and “Thank You FOX News for Keeping Us Infromed.”²⁶

Their signs are only the beginning to the inarticulateness of the Tea Party Movement that has become popular fodder for their opponents. A correspondent from the *New Left Media* attended the organization’s 2010 Tax Day Tea Party Rally and interviewed people present to find out their opinions. One woman told him that she was concerned with the “Socialist agenda, tyranny,” but when asked specifically, “What are some of the things they are doing that make you think they are moving toward a tyrannical or socialist government?” she had a hard time finding an answer. She stated, “Well the Health Care, Mandatory Health care is one thing, uh I dunno. . .” Another man had a similar problem. He said he believed “it’s going to be the end of the life as we know it in America,” but when pressed for specific issues as evidence for his claim, he vaguely answers, “Well, the socialist angle” and “The tyranny of the government.”²⁷

Clearly, the point of the video is that the Tea Partiers are unaware and misinformed of the details of what is going on in government. There is an indication that the people of the movement are somewhat brainwashed by leaders who use words like socialism and tyranny to make them angry and afraid.

However, this embrace of inarticulateness is not only on the ground floor of the Tea Party Movement. Some of their leaders also believe that inarticulateness signifies the sincerity of the common person. For instance, Sarah Palin, former vice presidential candidate and former Alaskan governor, was mocked by opponents when she used notes written on her hand to remember simple talking points like “lift American spirits”²⁸ when speaking at the National Tea Party Convention in Nashville, Tennessee. However, for Palin and her Tea Party fans, this inarticulateness only served as further proof that Palin has the authenticity of the common American. In a smart rhetorical move, after the writing-on-her-hand-incident she stated, “You know, writing on my hand, well, that's a poor man's version of a teleprompter”²⁹ and, “Hey, if it's good enough for God, scribbling on the palm of His hand, it's good enough for me, for us.”³⁰ Even in her speech given that day she criticized Obama’s eloquence, “This is about the people. And it's bigger than any king or queen of a tea party. And it's a lot bigger than any charismatic guy with a teleprompter.”³¹ As Dave Tell points out, when people reside in a tradition in which eloquence equals untrustworthiness, eloquent “articulation would suggest manipulation or the strategic presentation of . . . self.”³² Thus in an ironic twist, Palin strategically presents herself as inarticulate or, if she is actually inarticulate, is able to frame this weakness as a strength.

Furthermore, Sarah Palin’s speech at the Tea Party National Convention typifies the movement’s pride in being a movement supported by everyday Americans rather than a movement full of stuffy intellectuals. She states, “I look forward to attending more tea party events in the near future. It is so inspiring to see real people, not politicians—not inside the

beltway professionals come out and stand up and speak out for commonsense, conservative principles.”³³ The implication in this statement is that politicians and professionals are somehow untrustworthy. Her use of the word “politico” is quite inarticulate in itself. The Oxford English Dictionary defines “politico” as “a person holding strong political views or acting with political motivation,” which would seem to describe Palin as well as most of those in the movement she represents at this event.³⁴ She goes on to define the movement by referring to Scott Brown, a Massachusetts senator, “Now in many ways Scott Brown represents what this beautiful movement is all about. He was just a guy with a truck and a passion to serve our country.” In other words, one does not need to be a fancy intellectual to change the country, but a common person with “passion.” For Palin, it seems, passion is more important than reason.

Also at the convention, Andrew Breitbart, a conservative media commentator, gives a speech in which he builds his credibility not by speaking of his accomplishments but by explaining to the audience that in order to get some legal advice for James O’Keefe, who was guilty of wire-tapping a senator’s office, “I [had] to talk to, like, my fancy business partner, who is Stanford Phi Beta Kappa,” because “I was a C student.”

He also complained about the direction of academia:

The left walked in like they did at the modern academy and said no more English department with the greats, the great poets, no more history department. We are going to get into gender studies and Chicano studies we’re going to get into all this post-structuralist nonsense and make sure your children are sufficiently unprepared for the workforce³⁵

Clearly, Breitbart sees little to no value in programs that help to problematize our ideas of minority groups or promote high theoretical thinking skills, for this stuff is “nonsense.” He

wants the curriculum to remain static rather than to promote the kind of critical thinking that may lead one to become an intellectual. Furthermore, even within his appeal to the idea of the things the common working-man needs to learn, his statement is somewhat contradictory or incoherent. If he believes that a department like gender studies is unimportant in preparing children for the workforce, it seems that reading about Homer or Yeats would be equally unproductive.

The Tea Party Movement prides itself on being ordinary because for them it is precisely their anti-elitism that makes them credible to speak on the topic of returning to the principles upon which America was born. They believe it is precisely their ordinariness that makes them extraordinarily qualified to rebel. As activist Via Parma, also known as Liberty Belle, stated in a speech at a Tea Party rally in Pasadena, CA: “We are all just ordinary people. We live ordinary lives. But not today. Today is extraordinary. Today it seems that we have all become revolutionaries!”³⁶ Overall, the Tea Party Movement’s ethos and their rhetoric can be defined by its inarticulateness. They claim their members to be common people and yet they charge them a high price to attend their national convention during a time of economic hardship. They try to establish credibility through their ordinariness and thus people, like Palin and Breitbart, even embrace their inarticulateness and lack of intelligence as evidence of their integrity. Because of this inarticulateness, the rhetoric of the Modern Tea Party Movement often falls on the irrational side of the scale of rational dissent.

“Take Back America”: A Self-Centered Ideology

In his essay entitled *Ideology and Myth*, Kenneth Burke explains that myth is the poetry of ideology.³⁷ In other words, groups can use the “resources” of myth to strengthen their ideology. The Tea Party Movement has appropriated the myth of the Boston Tea Party in order to provide a foundation for their ideology, which is best characterized by their slogan, “Take

Back America.” However, many critics of their movement have illuminated their use of the Boston Tea Party myth as being a superficial label to justify for their protests. These critics claim that they ignore the complexities of the myth and whether it is consistent with their claimed position of governmental abuse. Thus, these opponents seek to show that rather than truly carrying on the tradition of the Boston Tea Party where Americans realize the importance of a principle of rationality in backing what others may see as irrational, the Tea Party Movement uses the name of the Boston Tea Party as a superficial shield to defend their ideas. Simultaneously, the Tea Partiers constantly espouse their supposed ties to the Boston Tea Party. Consequently, as they redefine this myth, they redefine dissent.

Benjamin L. Carp, an assistant history professor, describes this phenomenon in an article in the *Washington Post*. He explains that although both the Boston Tea Party and the Modern Tea Party Movement are about taxes and money troubles, “the similarities between the past and the present only go so far.”³⁸ According Carp, “it was the feisty rebelliousness of the Tea Party tale that made it so appealing [to the modern movement].” In other words it was the irrationality of savages destroying tea that was appealing because this is what they see as justifying their own actions. The Tea Partiers themselves also make this clear. For instance, Rand Paul (the son of Ron Paul) made a speech at a Tea Party in Bowling Green, KY in which he states:

About two hundred years ago, Sam Adams and a bunch of rabble-rousers, kind of like this crew here, got together and brewed some tea in Boston Harbor. They were quite mad about a few things and Sam Adams famously said, “It doesn’t take a majority to prevail, but it takes an irate, tireless minority keen to set brushfires in the minds of men.”³⁹

They are proud to be “irate rabble-rousers,” because they believe this is what it means to be truly committed to a cause like their forefathers were. Unfortunately, their movement is more about

this general anger than a coherent argument for their rights. Carp points out the inconsistency in the movement's use of the Boston Tea Party as their namesake:

The United States is not a monarchy -- if we don't like our tax rates or how the revenue is spent, we have the power to peaceably "throw the bums out." Colonial Americans lacked that power -- and the Revolution was born of the resulting discontent. But the fact that we now have taxation with representation wasn't enough to satisfy some of the protesters.⁴⁰

Unlike both the people of 1773 and the women of 1873, these people, who are mainly in the demographic of white male, *are* represented.⁴¹ According to V. William Balthrop, "An important element in [the] justification [of an ideology that feels attacked] is often a renewed sense of history, one that organizes events into a scenario consistent with other cultural elements . . ." ⁴² The Tea Partiers aim to foster this renewed sense of history, but their critics how that they fail to be consistent within their own arguments and their own culture.

An article written by Andrew M. Wehrman points out that healthcare is not a new radical, idea in America.⁴³ If the Tea Partiers wish to take back America based on the way the founding fathers wanted it to be, then, according to this article, they should embrace health care. Wehrman explains that in 1774, "scarcely a month after the famous Tea Party in Boston," Massachusetts residents burned down a brand new town hospital as a protest mechanism, but not against a tea tax. He states, "the act was the calculated result of long-simmering anger over the cost and politics of smallpox inoculations in one of the largest and most prosperous towns in the Colonies." While Tea Party activists try to paint government intervention in items such as health care as an overstepping of what the founding fathers intended, their opponents make clear cases that history suggests otherwise; or, as Wehrman reveals, health care is not "an issue that could

force a profound shift in national identity.”

Because they wish to use whatever history serves their purpose, the Tea Party Movement conflates the purpose of the American Revolution with the Boston Tea Party. For instance, in a speech at a Tea Party rally in Charlotte, NC, John David Lewis characterized December 16, 1773 as being about the “rights of man,” who deserved “life,” “liberty,” “the pursuit of happiness,” and “property.”⁴⁴ However, these rights are mentioned in the Declaration of Independence, not the Boston Tea Party. Even if these were Boston Tea Party sentiments, they are not rights that this movement—which (according to a 2010 poll) is made up of mainly white males over the age of forty-five—suffer from ever having been without.⁴⁵ Further evidence that most Tea Partiers have felt little hardship and discrimination comes as Lewis emphasizes *pursuit* in the phrase “pursuit of happiness,” arguing that “rights to things” such as “food, clothing, healthcare, and diapers” were not included in the inalienable rights set forth by the founders. Here we see inconsistency within a single speech of the movement. After all, since it is clear that the Tea Partiers do have representation by their freedom to vote and other liberties, their argument seems to stem from the notion that supposed over-taxation is constricting this freedom. This argument is exactly parallel to an argument that some Americans lack food and or access to doctors and, thus, healthcare and other government programs are necessary to provide these people with a right to life, much less liberty.

The Tea Party Movement’s belief that there has been a fundamental shift in how the American government functions informs their ideology that America needs taking back. For instance, Rick Manning claims that there is a “real war” on “dissenters [who] seek to stop Obama's policies that are designed to radically change our nation forever.”⁴⁶ Thus, according to *TakeAmericaBack.org*, their goal is to “get the word out that Americans are standing together to

regain control of our government and our country.”⁴⁷ They even provide a pre-written letter for people to send to their representatives accusing the government of “legal treason.”⁴⁸ They admit that “legal treason” is a phrase that they themselves created and therefore provide the following definition:

Legal treason is when an elected or appointed individual or group pushes a policy or law for their own benefit, even though they know it will have adverse affects on the citizens of this country. By law or their position they are legally able to do it, the fact that they do is legal treason against the American people.

Not only is the phrase “legal treason” an oxymoron in itself but its definition contradicts their opinions mentioned earlier in the speech by Paul that poor people should not have things like health care. Clearly, a lack of public health care would have an “adverse” affect on many Americans, but the Tea Party Movement wishes to avoid such a policy because it is more beneficial for them. Therefore, they too are committing legal treason by being a “group [that] pushes a policy or law for their own benefit” despite “adverse affects.” Thus, in examining their superficial use of the Tea Party, the few “rational” arguments made by the movement quickly crumble as their self-centered and incoherent ideology overcomes their reason. As Charles M. Blow states:

This at a time when the country is becoming more diverse (some demographers believe that 2010 could be the first year that most children born in the country will be nonwhite), less doctrinally dogmatic . . . You may want “your country back,” but you can’t have it. That sound you hear is the relentless, irrepressible march of change. Welcome to America: The Remix.⁴⁹

In other words, the Tea Partiers want to take back the America of 1773, not because it lived more

soundly by its principles, but because it was a time when wealthy white men were the represented and the representatives.

Furthermore, Tea Partier's feel that their grasp of history is so firm, that they believe getting America back to its principles is a simple task. For instance, at a Tea Party rally in Greenville, SC Bob McLain states, "When it comes to the constitution of the United States, when all else fails, read the user's manual!"⁵⁰ In her Pasadena speech, Varma similarly referenced the constitution: "Every word was carefully chosen, every point carefully thought out to create the perfect set of instructions. All we had to do was follow it."⁵¹ Furthermore, Varma believes that the Tea Party sentiments are "mandated by [the] forefathers." Unlike most dissenters, who seek to modernize government in some way, the Tea Partiers claim to want a return to the purity of the past. Parma stated, "I bet Mr. Jefferson never thought that two hundred and thirty three years later we would be repeating these same important words for the same reasons." However, despite this recourse to American history, in many speeches at Tea Party rallies there is a cry for independence from America. Varma quoted Jefferson as stating, "Sometimes in the course of human events it becomes necessary for a people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them," but ends with stating that America is not "something that we cannot let slip away." In this way the Tea Party dissenters are perhaps representative of one of the potent embodiments of Bercovitch's claim that dissent in America is inherently conservative, for they simultaneously promote a new revolution while seeking an old America.

Take Back America from Whom?: Racism and Homophobia

The most obvious racism in the Tea Party Movement appears in the signs that some protestors use at their rallies. Although some Tea Party leaders argue that these people are mere fringe parts of the movement, the number of pictures and quotations of people at their rallies

participating in this behavior are too overwhelming to be written off or excused with a statement like this one from Michigan leader Joan Fabiano: "If there's any sort of hateful and racist signs, that is something the Tea Party in general would disavow."⁵² For instance, even some signs that are listed on a website specifically geared to provide Tea Partiers with sign slogans, *TeaPartySlogans.com*, provides clearly prejudice statements like "Speak for Yourself, Obama! We ARE a Christian Nation!" and "What Has a Muslim Nation Done for You Lately?"⁵³ Clearly these signs are derogatory toward people of different cultures as both play off the misconception (and fear) that Obama himself is a Muslim and the belief that he is too soft on terrorism. Other more blatantly racist signs and images from the 2010 Tax Day Tea Party include: "Obama bin Lyin," a man marching while wearing a bloodied Obama mask, "Go back to Kenya," and "Congress = Slave Owner, Taxpayer = Nigger."⁵⁴ Some Tea Party leaders do not deny that signs like these are racist and realize that being racist (or, at least appearing racist) is bad for the reputation and power of their movement. Cynthia Tucker reports that the director of Freedom Works, a major financial backer and supporter of the movement, stated, "Being a racist is one of the worst things you can be in this society. No one wants to be labeled this."⁵⁵ The choice of words here is quite telling. The director does not say that racism is in itself bad, only that it is bad according to our societal standards. The director does not say that no one should be racist, only that no one wants to be labeled as such. The Tea Party is constantly more concerned with image over principle and anger over progress. Ironically, some signs label Obama as Hitler implying that he is a Nazi and dictator, when not only is he their legitimate representative, but he is also much less comparable to a Nazi than people of the movement who are racist.

The Tea Party Movement's leaders spend some of their energy toward denying that any of their group members are "violent racist teabaggers."⁵⁶ For instance, at his convention speech,

Breitbart states any media claim that the movement is racist “is a form of intimidation that the mainstream media does. It’s a form of intimidation that they do the second your kid walks onto a college campus. They sit down in their Freshman orientation and they say ‘Your racist, your parents are racist, you’re patriarchal, your parents authority is over.’”⁵⁷ Furthermore, in an article entitled “Smearing the Tea Party; ‘Dissent is the Highest Form of Patriotism’” Jeffrey T. Kuhner writes, “They have tried to portray [the Tea Party] as a group of malcontent racists, extremists, homophobes, white supremacists and old people secretly nostalgic for the days of Jim Crow. This failed.”⁵⁸ Despite Kuhner’s argument to the contrary, some of the Tea Party’s major speakers have said statements in stark contrast to his claim.

For instance, in the Tea Party convention keynote speech, Tom Tancredo almost explicitly references a need for a return to the old Jim Crow law of literacy tests:

Then something really odd happened, mostly because I think, uh, we do not have a civics literacy test before people can vote in this country. People who cannot even spell the word ‘vote’ or say it in English put a committed socialist ideologue in the White House whose name is Barack Hussein Obama.⁵⁹

These literacy tests were used to keep uneducated blacks from being able to vote in the South until 1965 when a Voting Rights Act was passed. This idea of requiring literacy tests stands in fundamental opposition to be a movement for the common man. After all, based on the signs their protestors carry, Tancredo’s literacy test would not only knock out many non-native speakers from voting, but also disqualify members of the Tea Party Movement from voting.

Tancredo is not the only leader of the movement who has suggested a return to a Jim Crow law. In an interview with Rachel Maddow, Rand Paul denounced Title II of the civil rights act saying it violated first amendment rights by “dealing with private institutions.”⁶⁰ Although he is against any “governmental racism,” he refuses to directly answer Maddow’s question of

whether he would support private business owner's who wanted to segregate a place they owned such as a restaurant. Paul argues that by allowing government to require desegregation in private businesses creates problems with other issues. For instance, when Maddow asks whether he would have supported the "desegregation of lunch counters," Paul responds:

Well what it gets into then is if you decide that restaurants are publicly owned and not privately owned, then do you say that you should have the right to bring your gun into a restaurant even though the owner of the restaurant says 'well no,' . . . Does the owner of the restaurant own his restaurant? Or does the government own his restaurant?

For Paul, the rights of the private business owner seem to trump the immorality of racism. His statements imply that he would rather risk resegregation by allowing private business owners to employ racist practices than sustain that it is illegal to do so. Again, this points to the Tea Party Movement's wish to return to the past, not necessarily to a past when there was segregation but to when establishment owners were free of all government intervention.

Not only does the Tea Party Movement present racist rhetoric, but some sects also use homophobic language. The website *HowToTakeBackAmerica.org* presents a statement on what they call the "Homosexual Extremist Movement." After the writer of the statement, Jared Barber, explains that people who are anti-homosexual do not deserve to be called "intolerant" or labeled as "oppressors," he goes on:

This is a problem, grave and immense. This rationale seeks, in its innermost, to undermine the ability of others to challenge these beliefs. By setting themselves up as minorities, people in this realm make disagreement "hatred," "bigotry," "judgment." In reality, it is statement of fact. Morality is what it is. To attempt to rationalize it away is lunacy.⁶¹

Again, we see discontinuity in the argument of a Tea Partier. Although he is supposedly arguing that the “ability of others to challenge” ideas is a good thing, he himself shuts off conversation with the other side of the issue when he states that to attempt to “rationalize” homosexuality is crazy. For him morality is not rational or irrational, it is fact. Thus, rather than showing that his view is justified, Barber’s argument is non-argument. For him homosexuals are bad because in his mind they just are. It is a fact and therefore, no argument is necessary. If his statement makes anything clear, it is that he fits all the negative labels he denies, “intolerant,” “judgment[al],” and “oppressive.” Republican Ron Kirkland exemplified this intolerance even further when he spoke at a May 2010 Tea Party forum. In reference to Obama’s support of the repeal of the military “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy, Kirkland explains that when he fought in the Vietnam War, gays “were taken care of.”⁶² The phrase “taken care of” is not meant in its literal sense here, but rather implies that gays were treated poorly so that they would hide their sexuality to avoid further persecution. Corroborating Kirkland’s statement a conservation house member, Randy Smith, stated, “I definitely wouldn’t want to share a shower with a homosexual. We took care of that kind of stuff, just like [Kirkland] said.” How can the Tea Partiers deny their affiliation with bigots when such public figures directly associated with their movement are so clearly intolerant? Just like the claim that they are not inarticulate, claims that the Tea Party Movement is not afraid of blacks and gays seem hard to deny unless one is able to ignore the discontinuity within the movement and its views.

Some of the racism and homophobia of the movement has been shoved in the face of politicians. For instance, *The Washington Times* reports:

Over the weekend, as the House was preparing to vote, protesters reportedly spat on a black lawmaker and shouted a racial epithet at another. Another protester called openly

gay Rep. Barney Frank, Massachusetts Democrat, a “faggot.”⁶³

Civil Rights hero John Lewis was reported to be one of the people who had the “n” word shouted at him. In 2010, Blow explains that he believes this hatred comes out of the recent progress in the diversification of political representatives. He uses the health care issue to make his point:

A woman (Nancy Pelosi) pushed the health care bill through the House. The bill’s most visible and vocal proponents included a gay man (Barney Frank) and a Jew (Anthony Weiner). And the black man in the White House signed the bill into law. It’s enough to make a good old boy go crazy.⁶⁴

Due to the recency of this *New York Times* opinion piece and blatant evidence from the rhetoric of some of their major leaders, it seems that Kuhner is wrong when, as quoted at the beginning of this section, he states that arguments calling the Tea Party Movement prejudiced are inaccurate and have failed. Rather than using reasonable rhetoric, they Tea Party leaders play on some American people’s fear of otherness and other people’s explicit racism to gather dissenters to join their movement.

Violent Rhetoric

Just like they have attempted to disavow their inarticulateness and bigotry, the Tea Party Movement has tried to distance itself from any violent words or actions with which they are associated. Some Tea Party organizations, such as the Virginia Tea Party and the Florida Movement have issued anti-violence statements. For instance, on their website, the Virginia Tea Party states, “The Virginia Tea Party does not suggest, condone, promote, incite, overlook or tolerate acts of violence towards any persons or property.”⁶⁵ However, when looking deeper into their rhetoric it seems that these claims are quite superficial. Even within the Virginia Tea Party statement just quoted, the announcement goes on to implicitly warn against being taken in by claims from liberal leaders and media that violence has been encourage or has occurred: “In

the meantime, we strongly encourage all individuals concerned about any reported incidents to rely *solely on reliable factual information before forming an opinion.*” This statement suggests that Tea Partiers are more interested in saving face than actually deterring violence.

The strong anger of the movement has provoked the Tea Partiers to use violent words that encourage and may result in violent actions. Many slogan suggestions offered to protestors to use at rallies clearly promote violence: “A Call to Arms,” “We're Asking Nice This Time - Don't Make Us Ask Again!,” “RISE UP - RELOAD – REVOLT,” “Join the NRA - Join the Resistance,” and “God, Guts, and Guns Bought Our Freedom and Is Needed to Keep It.”⁶⁶ Furthermore, public figures are setting about as good example on the violence front as they are on the racism and homophobia front. For instance, FOX news channel personality, Sean Hannity, told people to “Join the Mob” by attending a Town Hall health care debate.

Also, Sarah Palin’s statements on the issue are strikingly inconsistent. Earlier I illustrated that Palin recognizes the power of language by using a rhetorical strategy of inarticulateness to her advantage. However, on the violence front, Palin rejects the power of words, especially metaphor. For instance, Palin warns Tea Partiers not to use violence by stating, “Anyone who uses threats of violence will be in my crosshairs.” As if implying that she would shoot anyone who threatened to be violent was not hypocritical enough, she goes on to blame the media for blowing Tea Party violence way out of proportion: “In Alaska, you know what we do with people like that? We hunt 'em down and shoot 'em between the eyes!” Palin pulls the same tactic of denying violence while using a violent metaphor at another rally as well: “We’re not inciting violence . . . violence isn’t the answer . . . our vote is our arms.” While I do not assert that Palin wishes to incite violence, her belief that metaphoric violence does not have the power to influence people to act violently is rhetorically naïve. The Bostonians of 1773 realized the importance of metaphor when they disguised themselves as savages and called

themselves Mohawks in the newspapers. They sought to use metaphor to separate themselves from violence rather than to highlight it.

In a speech to the National Rifle Association Pia Varma applauds the importance of guns, stating, “There is nothing I appreciate more than a man with a loaded gun in his pocket.”⁶⁷ Furthermore, Varma invokes the need for guns to make rebellion a reality: “How, after all, can we defend our rights without the means to do so?” This rhetoric teaches supporters that using a gun is okay if one is fighting for their rights and somewhat legitimates violence against the government. She even labels it “a symbol, perhaps the ultimate symbol, of liberty.” Ironically, it is a more common rhetorical assumption that guns are symbolic of violence and oppression rather than liberty. According to Parma the forefathers endowed Americans with the right to use force to keep their liberties. She implies American’s are in danger of such a recall of their liberties in the near future:

So I ask you now, if that day comes, will we cower, or will we rise to the challenge, knowing that freedom is more important than accepting any temporary security that our government wishes to give us? Our right to bear arms is all the security we need.

She sounds like a general, preparing a group of new troops to enter a potential battle. Her speech encourages listeners to go out and buy guns and be prepared to know how to use them. They do not need argumentative weapons like reason or rationality to secure their freedoms, but real guns with real bullets. The 1773 Tea Party recognized the fundamental necessity to use rhetoric to frame themselves as rational and anti-violent, whereas the current movement is overwhelmed by hatred, irrationality, and, at least, rhetorical violence.⁶⁸

Transforming Tea Party Dissent

Any protest movement is open to the criticism of being irrational and self-serving and it is

likely that almost all protest movements will possess members that act irrationally or out of self-interest. However, irrationality should never become the dominating theme of a movement. When people feel so self-righteous in what they believe that they stop paying attention to their words, protest movements becomes chaotic and dangerous. This is especially true of a movement that uses a powerful, foundational myth like the Boston Tea Party to support their ideology.

The Boston Tea Party set up a precedent of overcoming attacks of irrationality by being rhetorically aware of both their words and deeds. Many of the Boston Tea Partiers recognized that violence and destruction were negative, and thus realized the importance of explaining their action, which they constructed as their only option. They were in a constant struggle to justify their ideology. Remember, only camouflaged as savages could the Bostonians of 1773 destroy the Tea. Tea Partiers today, however, feel little need for masking their irrational words and actions. Although the original Whig request to meet and reason with the tax commissioners may have been unrealistic, at least they asked. Modern Tea Partiers do not even make such requests.

Due to the efforts of people like the initial destroyers of the tea, the people of the modern movement have a right to speak their minds. However, their lack of concern for rhetoricizing themselves as rational, shows that they lack any self-reflexivity. They have no reason to question or prove their ideology, because “it just is.” As Blow states, “[The Tea Party Movement] may have some legitimate concerns (taxation, the role of government, etc.), but its message is lost in the madness.”⁶⁹ The Tea Party Movement has refigured dissent from its 1773 form of a struggle for reasonableness to a movement dedicated to inarticulateness, discrimination, and violence. They take their forefathers sacrifices for granted as the appropriate the Tea Party name to justify a movement based in irrational rhetoric.

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CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion: The Descent of Dissent

What transpired in Boston on the night of December 16, 1773, is one of our first major narratives of American dissent leading up to the American Revolution. This was the time when colonists unknowingly influenced what dissent would mean for the future generations of Americans. Furthermore, because dissent is so fundamental to America's culture, their radical behavior informed what it would mean to be an American. Sacvan Bercovitch explains that, according to the history described by classic American authors, to be American is "by definition to be radical."¹ Yet, Bercovitch continues, "And at the same time to be radical as an American was to transmute the revolutionary impulse, in some basic sense: by spiritualizing it . . . , by diffusing or deflecting it . . . , or most generally by accommodating it into society." The Boston Tea Party is clearly illustrative of Bercovitch's words, for they created a tradition of American dissent in which radical actions had to be balanced by a rationalizing of their revolutionary actions.

In Chapter Two of this study, I illustrated that this tradition can be found within the rhetoric surrounding the Boston Tea Party. In order to examine the documents of this event I used the process of genealogy. The task of genealogy, as explained by Foucault, requires the critic to examine "the emergence of different interpretations" as they unfold "on the stage of historical process."² Thus, I divided the rhetoric concerning the Boston Tea Party into three acts, the passing of the Tea Act, the arrival of the ships carrying tea, and the Destruction of the Tea. Throughout these three acts, I display the dialectical tension that developed between the rationality and irrationality of their rhetoric. When the Tea Act was passed the rhetoric of the Whigs was largely dominated by irrationality as they vilified the Tea Act and began threatening

the tax commissioners. However by the time the tea arrived, reason began to be infused with their irrational cries. They added more complexity to their dissent by holding town meetings to which they invited the tax commissioners. Even after the Destruction of the Tea had transpired, people sought to rationalize the actions of these radicals by describing their expediency and disguising them with the label of savage. Thus, the records of the rhetoric of the Boston Tea Party reveal radicals obscuring their savagery with reason.

Chapter Three picks up one hundred years later. By this point, the public memory of the Boston Tea Party has become an important patriotic narrative in American culture and two sets of females set out to plan celebrations of its memory, the proper society ladies and the woman suffragists. In this chapter I analyze their different uses of the public memory of the Boston Tea Party. The ladies planned parties that domesticated the tradition of dissent with toy chests of tea, women dressed like Martha Washington, and speakers who espoused America's exceptionalism. Meanwhile, the woman suffragists appropriated the narrative of the Boston Tea Party precisely for its political message of radical dissent. They framed their dissent as rational by using the memory of the Boston Tea Party slogan, "No taxation without representation." They sought to show the similarities between their predicament and the predicament of the colonists who dealt with the Tea Act. Despite statements that the Woman Suffragist Tea Parties were illegitimate, the past became an active rationale for their present protests. Thus, they continued the tradition of balancing what was labeled as irrational dissent with rational rhetoric.

Chapter Four jumps to the present day where Americans are still using the memory of the Boston Tea Party in their dissent. However, I argue that their dissent transfigures the tradition set up and carried on in the previous Tea Parties discussed. Specifically, their rhetoric tips the scale of rationality toward the irrational rather than striving for balance. I have divided their

rhetoric into four categories: inarticulateness, their opponents claims that they irrationally use the Boston Tea Party as the label of their movement, racism and homophobia, and rhetorical violence. First, this movement embraces inarticulateness as a means to prove their authenticity as average-Joe Americans or *real Americans*. By doing so, their incoherence is justified by their persona and thus they feel little need to explain or clarify their disorderliness. Second, the movement's critics have argued that their use of the Boston Tea Party narrative is quite superficial. These opponents of the movement seek to illustrate that what they embrace from the Boston Tea Party is the angry rabble-rouser, not the actual messages that rationalized the 1773 movement. Third, people in the modern movement, including some leaders, are clearly racist and homophobic. I contend that using discrimination to appeal to people in a movement does not facilitate rationality. As in the previous two categories discussed, the modern movement is often concerned with delineating between real Americans and fake Americans who are staining what they view as a once pure nation. As Bercovitch points out, "To condemn 'false Americans' as profane is to express one's faith in a national ideology. In effect, it is to transform what might have been a search for moral or social alternatives into a call for cultural revitalization."³ Thus rather than moving the nation forward to greater liberty like the colonists of 1773 and greater acceptance like the woman of 1873, this movement seeks to revitalize a past culture in which Americans were predominately white and forced to remain in the closet. However, the most extreme and dangerous category of their irrationality is their violent rhetoric, which I argue could very easily turn into actual violence. Even some of their major leaders embrace violent metaphors and believe the gun to be a symbol of liberty rather than oppression. In short, rather than finding balance between rationality and irrationality, they have been overcome by savagery.

Implications

This study of the public memory of the Boston Tea Party has three implications in rhetorical studies. First, this study has reinforced the power of public memory as a political tool. In chapter two, I illustrated some of the complexities of the Boston Tea Party that are perhaps lost in America's public memory in order to show how this narrative was manipulated for political purposes in Chapters Three and Chapter Four. In Chapter Two, my analysis of the ladies' and the woman suffragists' Tea Parties showed how both groups retold the story according to their purpose. The speakers at the popular Tea Parties sought the narrative only for the purposes of patriotism and thus toned down any controversy in the story, whereas the speakers at the Suffragist Tea Parties sought to highlight discord and dissent to illustrate the hypocrisy which informed their everyday lives—they were taxed, but had no representation. In chapter four, I illustrated how the modern movement has received considerably more media attention for illegitimately using the Boston Tea Party's memory and furthermore, how their embrace of inarticulateness keeps them from strongly reasoning against such accusations. Thus, not only do I reinforce the idea that public memory can be used for political purposes, but I show that public memories are often so sacred that their use is contested.

Second, this study has been an experiment in using an abundance of texts and media to support my assertions as a rhetorical critic. I have shown how this type of criticism is sometimes necessary, especially in social movements that are too large and diverse to be represented by a few speeches. Furthermore, I strived to show the importance of interweaving context next to text rather than beginning with a context section. In social movements of all ages and stripes it may be more productive to conduct criticism in this way for two reasons. First, because social movements often develop over time rather than in a single speech, context unfolds side by side

with their rhetoric and often informs it. Thus, it is organizationally to the advantage of the critic and the reader, as this will help the criticism to develop naturally. Second, in social movements text and context are almost inseparable. For instance, at first thought colonial newspapers would seem to inform context rather than serve as text, but, as I have shown, they were the rhetorical texts of this movement.

The most important implication for rhetorical studies in this thesis is my contribution to American dissent. The case studies I chose presented me with a unique opportunity to trace dissent through movements that paralleled each other in their creation and use of the public memory of the Boston Tea Party. As I waded through the texts in the Boston Tea Party, I noticed the pattern of the balance of rationality. The rest of this study developed inductively as well. In every chapter I discovered this rhetorical tradition organically rather than going in with a notion of what I hoped to find. Thus, what began as just a study on public memory also became a rhetorical analysis of dissent. In this thesis, I have exposed a theory of American dissent in which dissenters are constantly negotiating the rationality and irrationality of their actions and ideas. The importance of this negotiation as part of dissent leads me to my next implication, which concerns the tactics employed by the Modern Tea Party Movement.

My study of dissent has important implications for the Modern Tea Party Movement. First it shows that despite their insistence that they are acting within America's tradition of dissent, they are transfiguring it. People in this movement need to realize the importance of reasonable rhetoric. First, if eloquence keeps someone from being an authentic American, then many of the forefathers they claim as pillars of their movement would not be *real* Americans. Thus they need to abandon their embrace of inarticulateness. Second, they need to firmly reject any racism and homophobia from their movement if they truly wish to improve America. In line

with the dissent of the woman suffragists, they need to work harder to actively embrace all Americans as equal; for, American dissent has always lived in a tradition of broadening acceptance, of giving freedom to all. Their movement will become more reasonable and more effective, if they live by this tradition. They must tone down their use of violent rhetoric. After the American Revolution, dissent has served as a safeguard against revolt. By allowing people to freely dissent, Americans are able to have their voices heard without having a gun in their hand. Embracing violent metaphors only takes away from the legitimacy of their movement as their opponents see them as highly irrational. Furthermore, if violence moves beyond that of the rhetorical kind, their movement will likely lose all credence. The modern movement needs to step back and reevaluate their strategies. Dissent worked for both the Boston Tea Party of 1773 and the Women's Tea Party of 1873, because these protestors sought to show their reasonableness. Inarticulateness, discrimination, and violence are counterproductive in almost all contexts, but especially when it comes to trying to change a nation that was founded on the reason of the enlightenment and that espouses freedom and equality for all.

Ideas for Future Research

This study opens up several avenues for future research. First, it encourages more rhetorical research to be done on the Boston Tea Party. As explained in the introduction, rhetorical scholars have largely ignored the Boston Tea Party. However, as I have illustrated, the Boston Tea Party has informed the rhetoric of multiple social movements. There is certainly more to be studied when it comes to this important historical narrative. For instance, a project that delves further into why they disguise themselves as savages could illuminate our rhetorical use of this word throughout history. There are also visual texts of the Boston Tea Party that can be studied by those interested in visual rhetoric and argumentation.

Second this study creates a space for future research on public memory. Rather than examining a memorial, a museum, or a ceremonial speech, I analyze public memory as it has been appropriated by movements that are explicitly political. Further research in this direction would be fruitful to public memory studies. I also point out the crossover between genealogy and public memory by using the process of genealogy in my second chapter. The use of this method helped to illustrate the greater multiplicity of meanings that the Boston Tea Party possessed at the time of creation but lost throughout its appropriations in history. Thus, public memory scholars may consider doing more research looking at the intersection between the descent of a movement or event and its public memory.

This project clearly opens a door to rhetorical scholarship on the American tradition of dissent. In the future scholars could examine patterns of dissent in other early colonial protests and the American Revolution for multiple purposes. First, they could address a limitation of my study, which is my sole focus on the Boston Tea Party, to see if this tradition of American dissent transcends Tea Party protest. If they find the same pattern of rationality and irrationality, they could also trace this throughout other movements in America's history. However, if they found this balance to be off in other movements, they could discuss how the tradition of dissent they uncovered competed with the tradition of dissent set out in this essay.

Finally, much work still needs to be done on the Modern Tea Party Movement. There are several other angles and lenses through which one could analyze their rhetoric. However, more importantly, this movement is still growing. When it has died out, a rhetorical critic will be able to better assess the arc of the movement and make more definitive conclusions on how to describe their rhetoric.

Conclusion

The Boston Tea Party has remained a potent American memory full of rhetorical and political possibilities. I have argued that the rhetoric surrounding the fateful night of December 16, 1773, is characterized by its balance between rationality and irrationality. This tradition has been passed down to American dissenters throughout the ages as they too strive to strengthen America's goal of freedom and opportunity for all. However, this custom has been negatively transformed as the Modern Tea Party Movement becomes submerged in irrational rhetoric. Rather than drowning in this irrationality, it is time for them to resurface, to give their movement at least the air of rationality.

Notes

¹ Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978), 203

² Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History” in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard, trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1977), 152.

³ Bercovitch, *American Jeremiad*, 179.

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