

Ádám Hushegyi

M.A. Dissertation Evaluation

The Evolution and Political Impact of the Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street during Barack Obama's Presidency

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Ádám Hushegyi has written his M.A. dissertation about two populist movements in the United States, namely the *Tea Party* and *Occupy Wall Street*. The work is impressive and well researched. Ádám has divided his treatise into an Introduction, four main chapters, and a Conclusion. I will comment upon each individual part of the work in the ensuing paragraphs.

In the Introduction, Ádám explains how both the *Tea Party* and *Occupy Wall Street* came into existence during Barack Obama's presidency when the Great Recession was taking its toll on the United States. The emergence of both movements was the result of a desire of many Americans to vent their frustrations with the government and the financial establishment, both of which were responsible for the poor performance of the economy at the time. Ádám argues that, while both the *Tea Party* and *Occupy Wall Street* pitted the "people" against the "elites", this does not mean that they were equally grassroots in nature. Whereas the *Tea Party* had the support of many Republican-leaning voters and enjoyed some short-term electoral gains, it produced political division among Republicans. On the other hand, *Occupy Wall Street* was more a social movement, which, in its use of class warfare rhetoric, could be useful in electoral politics. Ádám then summarizes the content of each individual chapter. The section on methodology and the review

of the literature are quite extensive. Overall, I have no problem with the Introduction.

Chapter 1 represents a thorough discussion of the *Tea Party*. Ádám portrays the libertarian background of the organization and traces its origins back to Ron Paul, a Republican maverick opposed to President George W. Bush's interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as a critic of government-funded programs. When Paul launched his campaign for the presidency in 2007, he appealed on the anniversary of the Boston Tea Party for people to form grassroots conservative movements that would stand up to the Washington elites. Though Ron Paul's bid for the Republican nomination failed and Barack Obama was elected to the presidency in 2008, *Tea Party* supporters wasted no time showing their frustration with the Democrat and his proposed spending. In particular, the *Tea Party* focused on two spending bills that came into force shortly after Obama's inauguration, namely the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act and the Homeowner Affordability and Stability Plan. *Tea Party*-organized protests at first were labeled as evidence of grassroots conservative dissatisfaction with spending, but Ádám rightly points out that funding for *Tea Party* activities came from large, well-financed foundations, such as *Freedom Works*, *Americans for Prosperity*, *Heritage Foundation*, and the *Cato Institute*. In addition, the right-wing media covered *Tea Party* protests extensively and the main base of support turned out to be older, well-to-do whites fearful of change and of losing status under the first African-American President. Moreover, many of the supporters benefited from government-funded healthcare programs like Medicare. This chapter is very informative and I have no problem with it.

In Chapter 2, *Ádám* analyzes the origins and the goals of *Occupy Wall Street*. Unlike the *Tea Party*, *Occupy Wall Street* blamed the financial sector for the economic crisis and had somewhat global roots as well as global outreach. First of all, the original idea came from a Canadian nonprofit group called Adbusters led by Kalle Lasn. People were urged to take to the streets. Indeed, *Occupy Wall Street* was born on the streets of New York City and adopted the slogan “We are the 99 percent.” It definitely had greater grassroots origins than the *Tea Party* ever did. As *Ádám* writes, the movement did not seem to have any strong organization or leadership, nor did it set the realization of any specific political changes as its goal. Instead, *Occupy Wall Street* raised awareness of the problems of economic and social inequality and blamed the financial sector and its greed for the economic ills facing the United States. The most significant action taken by *Occupy Wall Street* was the occupation of Manhattan’s Zuccotti Park, which inspired people in other cities to protest and even attracted the support of public intellectuals like Slavoj Žižek . So, *Occupy Wall Street* did not offer any actual solutions, but raised questions. This chapter is of excellent quality.

Ádám’s comparison of the nature of both the *Tea Party* and *Occupy Wall Street* forms the content of Chapter 3. The similarity of both movements according to Michael Kazin’s definition of populism is acknowledged, but *Ádám* warns the reader that this is an oversimplification. The main difference lies in the identification of “oppressors” and “oppressed” by both movements. Whereas the *Tea Party* believes that the government goes against the interests of the majority, it also holds that there is a privileged group favored by the government at the expense

of the majority. On the other hand, *Occupy Wall Street* pits the 99 percent it claims to represent against the 1 percent, who are the alleged oppressors without claiming that there is any sort of favoritism towards other groups by the 1 percent. Also, the media support of conservative media conglomerates like Fox News helped the *Tea Party* make short-term gains at the ballot box, while *Occupy Wall Street* had nowhere near as much media support. *Occupy Wall Street*, however, as a social movement with its convincing slogan “We are the 99 percent” managed to change the dialogue in the United States, as well as the priorities of the Obama White House, and shifted the political discourse somewhat from a focus on government deficits to the problems of the 99 percent. This chapter is well argued and nicely written.

In Chapter 4, Ádám assesses the impact of both the *Tea Party* and *Occupy Wall Street*. Building upon earlier arguments, he concludes that the *Tea Party* managed to set political goals, successfully elect candidates to Congress, and, in turn, it became a force to be reckoned with (at least for a while) in the Republican Party. However, the *Tea Party* became more a source of gridlock than a purveyor of constructive change. When Obama’s second presidential term was nearing its end and a number of candidates competed for the Republican presidential nomination, *Tea Party* candidates lost out to Donald Trump, an inexperienced political novice who overcame staunch opposition from the Republican political establishment not only to win the Republican nomination, but also (and more importantly) the presidency of the United States, through his own brand of populism. *Occupy Wall Street* had no real political program, no big money behind it, and, at least initially, no success in mainstream politics. However, in 2016, Vermont socialist Bernie Sanders

fiercely competed with Hillary Clinton for the Democratic presidential nomination and gained the backing of *Occupy Wall Street* supporters. Though Clinton won the nomination, Sanders' candidacy testified to the strength of *Occupy Wall Street* as a social movement and to the relevance of supporters' concerns. I find this chapter very meaningful because *Ádám* really makes astute observations about populism in the contemporary United States.

Ádám's Conclusion recapitulates the main points made in the body of the dissertation and he claims that, though the *Tea Party* and *Occupy Wall Street* will most likely never be as popular as they once were in their organizational form, the ideas that led to the creation of both organizations will play a role in the American political discourse for the foreseeable future.

This M.A. dissertation is the product of admirable research, deep thought, and clever writing. I would like to raise the following question for the defense: Considering the current turmoil and division in the United States under the Trump Administration, what sort of populist movement(s) is/are likely to emerge next?

I recommend an **EXCELLENT** mark.

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