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Barack Obama, the New Spirit of Capitalism and the Populist Resistance

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Introduction

The remarkable ascendancy of Barack Obama to the presidency of the United States of America, in the shadows of the financial crisis, was in no small part due to the effective discursive response to the ideological crisis of American neo-liberalism. With the disgracing of the once venerable Allan Greenspan and the irreconcilable gap between a strident neo-liberalism and the lived experience of working Americans, Obama's victory marked a moment of openness in the battle for America's political trajectory. The Obama campaign presented itself as a moral correction to the worst excesses of capitalism and adventurism under George W. Bush. This success was crucially dependent on formulating aspirational discourses about the redemptive qualities of American power and global leadership as well as the emancipatory and transformative power of a morally restored capitalism. It is in this critical ideological maneuver that Obama can be seen as the Third Way neo-liberal *par excellence*. In dealing with the harsh realities of neo-liberal financialization facing most Americans, the specific structures of political economy are displaced through an articulation of desired social and ecological outcomes.

What was properly transformative about Obama was the ability of his campaign to embody the commodity logic of the *new spirit of capitalism* (Boltanski & Chiapello 2005). The new spirit of capitalism can be defined as the attempt to incorporate an anti-capitalist supplement to neo-liberalism. The "theological niceties" (Marx 1887: 46) of the commodity

have been extended to incorporate what Lutz has described as the “socialist ideal of autonomy” (2009, 423). The Third Way’s rejection of market fundamentalism as the structuring principle of the social, in favor of instrumentalizing markets for social democratic outcomes, has allowed neo-liberalism to recast itself as a redemptive and emancipatory project. Responding to the desire for ‘authenticity’, Obama’s identity politics, his work as a community organizer and the organizational form of his campaign, were all used to capture and project the aspirational potential of a left politics. The expression of a progressive transformation of American civil society, embracing the internationalist causes of human rights and climate change, managed to supersede a left or anti-capitalist discourse of the financial crisis. This universalist and moral, as opposed to political, discourse of the economy belies the Third Way buttressing of financial class power and the ideological perfection of the commodity that is attained through evoking the socialist imaginary. The commodity fetishism of the new spirit thus not only engenders pre and post-capitalist fantasies but a civil society movement logic of political transformation.

The return of the political and antagonism in the space opened by the neo-liberal crisis has come in the form of the right wing populist resistance to Obama. It is in the delineation of a virtuous, besieged people against a radical outsider or other that populism speaks to the political, the ontological necessity of antagonism, the fetishistic character of populism and the interspersed economy among the sites of the political. I will return to these key theoretical categories shortly. Obama has been designated the radical ‘other’ of populist ire not just in racial terms but in a battle internal to capital over the spirit or ideological content of capitalism. In response to the Third Way’s discourse of a moral intervention to capitalist excess the Tea Party take the bait of what Žižek calls “liberal communism” (2006a) imagining Obama as a real communist. In reaction to this threat of the outsider, that in fact embodies neo-liberal universality, the populists retreat into a fetishized notion of the people, capitalism and the American revolution. The key metaphor for the people of the revolution is Thomas Jefferson’s yeomanⁱ laboring within a classical liberal, productivist and frontierⁱⁱ notion of private property. The Tea Party’s fetish of a capitalism that is a self-sustaining and moral system, allows it to displace any internal contradiction on to the outsider, who in this case is made alien simply by identifying capitalism’s moral failing. In this way the Tea Party typify populism as a political discourse in which antagonism is constitutive of political identity while placing economy, not as one site among others, but centrally within the realm of the political. What is properly fetishistic, de-politicizing and reactionary about populist identity is the ultimate vision of political closure in which the ontological is forever reconciled with an ontic form, in this case the fetish of frontier private property.

Populism and the Political

Having provided a quick sketch of the crucial political frontier of the post financial crisis epoch it is necessary to precisely theorize the political and populism. For Mouffe the political and antagonism are constitutive of social relations, more specifically antagonism is ontologically necessary for the construction of political identity. It then follows that antagonism may “emerge in different types of social relations” (Mouffe 2000: 101) and the political approaches its “most extreme point” in the “friend/enemy” (Schmidt 1996) demarcation. Laclau couples the notion of the political to populism specifically as the affective consequences of naming a people and a dichotomous division of the social space represents “political reason *tout court*” (2005: 225). Thus the signifier ‘people’ serves as the affective bond for chains of equivalence through the various sites of the social in a hegemonic project. This notion of the people is entirely negative in the sense that it shares only the antagonistic political frontier. For Laclau this is representative of the radical indeterminacy and heterogeneity of the social as there are “no a priori privileged points of rupture or contestation” (ibid: 150) from which a people or the political may emerge. Heterogeneity here accounts for the contingency and metastability of any hegemonic chain of equivalences as it returns as the antagonistic Real which shatters the static binarism of the frontier.

While it is essential to conceive of the political as this explosive, indeterminable heterogeneous force of the social we may still talk of a certain ontic residue born of a hegemonic “crystallization of power relations” (Mouffe 2000: 49). Whether a notion of the people has been constitutionally enshrined or ideologically supplements an institutional order, certain frontiers are more stubborn to dissolve or rematerialize more readily. It is here that Jefferson’s yeoman and the man of property retains an ideological currency as the measure of a virtuous people. As Foucault identifies in the *Birth of Biopolitics* (2008: 217) classical liberalism did not moderate existing state power, as in Europe, but was at the revolutionary core of America. Thus the revolutionary foundational notion of the American people couples “bourgeois autonomy” (Lutz 2009: 421) with a certain republican virtue “undergirded by sufficient property” (Rodgers 1992: 19). For the left-liberal who is bewildered by the rightward shift of populism from the late 20th century one need look no further than the centrality of this notion of the people. From Andrew Jackson, the Populist Party to the Tea Party, ‘the people’ has always served as a fetishized notion of capitalism in which a productive middle stands between a banking aristocracy and the teeming urban masses³. It is in this way that we can understand the ideological indeterminacy of Main Street/Wall

Street dichotomies or the notion that government and/or bankers have created an ersatz capitalism.

The nature of the fetish allows us to grasp the deadlocks of populism as a “negative phenomenon” (Žižek 2008: 268) that ultimately represents the mystification of the political. The populist reaction to the symptom of capitalist crisis has been to radically reinvest in the fetish, in this case a people who are virtuous, whole and reconciled. In the symptom/fetish logic of populism the parasitic outsider is reified into a “positive ontological category” (ibid: 278) whose existence is necessary for preserving the sanctity of the fetish. If we return to Jefferson’s yeoman, this virtuous embodiment of the man of property was counterposed to the “mobs” of the city who are described as a “cankorous sore” eating at the heart of the republic (217). While the rural/urban dichotomy still echoes this idea of a virtuous people threatened by a parasitic agent, whether government, subversives, welfare recipients or minorities, may be reanimated in innumerable variations while protecting the subject from the trauma of the political, which is that the people do not exist.

What the logic of the fetish entails here for the political is that there may be a certain blockage to the fluidity of hegemony as described by Laclau in the sense that the dissolution and recalibration of frontiers may be circumvented by a static binarism. In this case we are faced with the problem of how to account for the political as a heterogeneous force playing itself out. What Arditì identifies in Laclau is a dependence on “critical junctures”, organic crises and “de-institutionalization” (2010: 494) as the necessary pre-conditions for the radical people of populism to emerge. But as Arditì adroitly observes; “then the political would be subservient to those junctures, and therefore, its status would be derivative rather than constitutive” (ibid: 494). It thus becomes imperative to consider what may transform the political frontier and effectively de-institutionalizes the prevailing hegemonic project. In the battle between Obama’s Third Way discourse of liberal universality and a populism that revels in the simplicity of its fetishized notion of capitalism, the economic becomes crucial as a means to properly conceive of the political.

Economy is not understood here as the essential content of all struggles, nor as one site among others, rather as one site in a field that is cut through with political economy. This is analogous to labour as the “special commodity” (Marx: 66) that while experiencing itself as a particular serves as the basis for the universal exchange of commodities. Economy structures the populist/Third Way frontier in absentia as that which dare not speak its name. The populists gesture towards the political in the ritualizing of antagonism necessary to sustain their fetish of a people realized in private property, while the Third Way completely disavows antagonism and reduces economy to a site merely requiring technocratic oversight. One cannot help but notice here how the diminution of economy corresponds precisely to the domestication of heterogeneity in Third Way discourse. As Žižek has put it:

“global capitalism, with its dynamics of ‘deterritorialization’...has created the conditions for the demise of ‘essentialist’ politics and the proliferation of new multiple political subjectivities” (2000: 319). It is the direct confrontation with what is immovable in this frontier, what James Madison called the most “durable source of factions”, namely the “unequal distribution of property” (2008: 42), that might allow for the construction of a hegemonic project that could form substantive links through the different sites of the social and as such supersede the deadlock of the Third Way and its populist opposition.

The Bush Malaise and America’s Moral Crisis

Before advancing I wish to clarify the method of selection for the texts here examined. In delineating Obama’s Third Way/New Spirit discourse I have concentrated on the 2008 campaign, his own writings, his arrival on the national stage in 2004 and the early stages of his presidency. This selection is justified on the basis that Obama’s aspirational discourse of hope has subsequently been muted by the populist resistance and the strain put on his contradictory alliance of civil society and Wall Street. The timeline for populist texts is broader as it can be consistently tracked and identified from its crystallization in 2008 to the present political context.

The principle discursive response, formulated by the Obama campaign, to the neo-liberal crisis was that of a general condition of American complacency and moral degradation synonymous with the *Bush malaise*. While Obama evoked powerful images of American decline this discourse was limited strictly to politics on a “moral register” (Mouffe 2005: 75) in which problems are not about political choices and antagonisms but questions of morality. Obama’s frontier or notion of a people was strictly moral as opposed to political in the sense that an all-inclusive universal morality would restore American exceptionalism. This has to be contrasted to the Tea Party’s ethico-political demarcation of not just a specific antagonistic frontier and people but concrete practices and contexts of struggle and protest against government. To the extent that Obama *did* draw a frontier between the people and an outside, the toxic figure of Bush was most expedient to crucially spare the substance of neo-liberalism. Upon Obama’s election this frontier dissolved with the administration’s mantra of “looking forward not backward” (Krugman 2009b) and fatefully taking ownership of the US economy with the words; “give it to me” (Kuhnhehn 2009).

In campaigning Obama spoke in touching detail of the plight of American workers in the face home foreclosures, de-industrialization, shameless corporations and a complacent political elite. In one of his many vignettes he spoke of “a man in Indiana” who “has to pack up the equipment he’s worked on for twenty years and watch it shipped off to China, and

then chokes up as he explains how he felt like a failure when he went home to tell his family the news” (2008d). In positioning himself alongside the victims of neo-liberalization Obama articulates a vision of American reconciliation without cutting the financial and managerial classes adrift, imploring the need to restore prosperity “not just to the CEO but the secretary and the janitor; not just the factory owner but the men and women who work the factory floor” (2008e). Obama rejects the populist dichotomy of Main Street and Wall Street stating; “if this financial crisis taught us anything, it’s that we cannot have a thriving Wall Street while Main Street suffers – in this country, we rise or fall as one nation; as one people” (Obama 2008f). Wall Street firms as leading backers of his campaign (Centre For Responsive Politics 2008) escape sustained criticism, rather the crisis is discursively constructed as born of a moral waywardness. This evidenced in the “failure of responsibility – from Wall Street to Washington” to understand “that behind every dollar traded or leveraged, there is a family looking to buy a house, pay for an education, open a business, or save for retirement” (Obama 2010). In essence the American dream has been put at risk by suspect moral behavior which threatens the very substance of American exceptionalism.

Reclaiming American Exceptionalism

What is necessary to disavow the structural antagonism of neo-liberalism between the secretary and the CEO is a potent discourse of universality which is crucially tied to the new spirit of capitalism (Boltanski & Chiapello 2005). This will be developed further in the coming section suffice to say for now this pertains to inscribing in capitalism and the commodity new emancipatory potential. In framing the financial crisis as born of the complacency, arrogance and the moral decline of America under Bush, Obama claims privileged access to the values of American exceptionalism. Obama’s personal story and rise to prominence are held as evidence of the revolutionary universality of America as not merely a nation state but the embodiment of liberal democratic ideals. In 2004 Obama was propelled into the national spotlight, at the Democratic Convention, where he spoke of his father’s humble origins “herding goats” in Kenya, and states that “I stand here knowing that my story is part of the larger American story...and that in no other country on earth is my story even possible” (Obama 2004). The articulation of the ‘authentic’ and personal account of the global reach of American values allows Obama to stand in as the transcendent figure of American exceptionalism as “the global affirms nation rather than contradicting it” (Toal 2009: 382). For Obama, the ability to transcend domestic and international divisions rests in America’s unique leadership potential in embodying universal principles; “our ideals: democracy,

liberty, opportunity, and unyielding hope” (Obama 2008f). In addressing post 9/11 American foreign military engagement he echoes Lincoln stating that “The America I know is the last best hope for that child looking up at a helicopter...We can be what that child needs us to be: the relentless opponent of terror and tyranny, and the light of hope to the world” (2007a). What is poignant here is through his own improbable story as a global citizen we are led to feel as though that child could be him and he is therefore equipped to renew American power in global affairs even after the disasters of neo-conservatism (2007b). This confident re-articulation of American exceptionalism is crucial to maintain America’s global economic leadership ensuring the dollar’s status as reserve currency, the role of Wall Street in recycling petro-dollars and US hegemony in supranational financial institutions.

It is the confluence of both restoring America’s global leadership from the strident imperialism of Bush and disavowing antagonism through a discourse of universality that Obama embodies the logic of *Empire*ⁱⁱⁱ (Hardt & Negri 2000) and Third Way neo-liberalism. I use Hardt & Negri’s notion of Empire interchangeably with the Third Way in that they are both accompanied by discourses of the liberal-democratic end of history, cosmopolitanism, “global civil society” and a “new transnational democracy” (2000: 7). NGOs, human rights and civil society groups are integrated into this new order playing the crucial ideological role of acting as the “moral” agents (ibid, 37) of global capitalism. Obama has positioned himself as a leader drawn from the ranks of those moral agents, as a community organizer, who is able to re-instill in global capitalism redemptive and emancipatory potential, while securing the ultimate interests of finance capital. Obama has sought to characterize his project as building “bottom-up prosperity” (2008b) while also being capable of restoring a global sense of purpose in “come(ing) together to save this planet” (2008c) and in addressing global humanitarian concerns^{iv}.

What is crucial in this ideological re-calibration or moral restoration of neo-liberal capitalism is the precise manner in which a cosmopolitan politics of heterogeneity is coupled to the subtraction of economy from the political. Working with Harvey’s (2005) definition of neo-liberalism as the restoration of financial class power, as opposed to a principled theoretical practice, the Third Way represents the “culmination” (Harvey 2009) of the neo-liberal project. While the financial crisis has forced state interventions that have been dubbed neo-Keynesian, including Obama’s modest stimulus^v, the power of central bankers has been dramatically expanded. Little has been done to effect a substantive class compromise or to re-finance the state through progressive taxation, effectively ushering in the second round of the crisis in the sovereign debt panic. While it may be a tired point to make that Obama’s economic team of Geithner, Summers, Rubin, Volcker and Goolsbee have hardly recanted their ideology, it is indicative of a consolidated Third Way neo-liberalism. Obama thus has to be seen as the embodiment of Empire’s neo-liberal universalism in sustaining the vital

interests of finance capital through a discourse which disavows antagonism in the economic and places aspirational potential within global capitalism. The revulsion against precisely the ideological tenets of Empire and actually existing neo-liberalism is what allows us to observe in the Tea Party the return of the political, in relation to the site of economy, even if this is in inverted and fetishized terms.

The New Spirit of Capitalism

Obama's moral discourse of the economy can be understood as ideologically necessary not merely in its disavowal of antagonism but in its correspondence to the new spirit of capitalism. Boltanski & Chiapello's (2005) remarkable sociological study of the field of management and the reorganization of work in the face of the struggles by new social movements, is understood here as the delineation of a critical historical rupture which marks a distinct ideological turn in capitalism. Beginning with the struggles of '68 they identify two salient critiques of capitalism; the 'artistic critique' of students and new social movements, and the 'social critique' of trade unions. What was crucial for capital in finding new "moral supports" and "mechanisms for justice" (27) was the harnessing of new energies through the partial embrace of the artistic critique. In response to centralized industrial planning of the Ford/Taylorist economy, the artistic critique denounced "alienation", "in-authenticity", "hierarchical power", "the absence of creativity" and the "poverty of everyday life" (170). In contrast the social critique associated with unions, social democrats or communist parties could not transcend the model of state paternalism, increasingly attacked as authoritarian. Thus the New Spirit or ideological configuration of neo-liberalism has allowed capital to reinvent itself as a moral and social project, creating a "libertarian way of making profit... transcending capitalism, thereby transcending anti-capitalism as well" (201).

What is essential for our purposes is an understanding of this rupture and ideological recalibration as inscribed and materialized in the new commodity fetishism. For Boltanski & Chiapello the ideological force of the new spirit lies in the promise of the common good that coincides "with people's moral experience of daily life" (14) and secures a rational consent to an "economic humanism" (Chiapello & Berland 2003: 143). What this reading of the new spirit as a humanist project frustrated or co-opted fails to grasp is that this "displacement is original and constitutive" (Žižek 1999). The demands of '68 themselves are not reducible to an essential content, humanist or otherwise, but are as Laclau would put it "catachrestical" (72), embodying the indeterminacy of heterogeneity as the Real. Any demand or signification of notions such as justice or equality are incomplete and are only accorded meaning in

relation to a political frontier. Thus the demands of '68 may be thought of as either anti-capitalist or embodying the new spirit depending on the particular articulation of economy.

What is offered in the new commodity and what makes it properly fetishistic is the realization of these demands for authenticity, self-fulfillment and the common good in the commodity itself. Boltanski & Chiapello have identified in the new commodity the ability to invoke a sense of authenticity and higher purpose through imbuing "hidden meanings and qualities" (446), a certain uncoded openness in its determinations and suggestion of pre-market relations. Žižek's well known examples of organic food and Starbucks are illustrative of the new consumer who is implored to buy a product as the "authentic fulfillment of my true Self" (2009: 53). The new commodity at this point while placing "the most specific qualities of human beings...directly in the pursuit of profit" (Boltanski & Chiapello: 465), elicits the subject's desire for "socialist autonomy" (Lutz: 422). Lutz writes that as capital expands the range of consumption it develops the "aesthetic sensibilities" of the subject approaching the "many sided relationship to the world" (423) of socialist autonomy. In channeling the aesthetic concerns of the artistic critique the socialist imaginary is inscribed in the fetishistic promise of the new commodity. This ideological maneuver is squarely opposed to the inauthentic bourgeois notion of autonomy of "show[ing] others who you are by consuming" (Resnick & Wolf 2010: 176) and the crass commodity fetishism that presents capital as "the very fount of human freedom" (Lutz: 421). Thus the efficacy of the new commodity fetishism lies in the appearance of transcending of capital.

It is worth emphasizing here that the commodity does not merely reify displaced humanist aspirations but at the height of fetishism practices a demystification of the commodity. As Žižek writes the "secret" of commodity fetishism is not the "hidden kernel" the form belies but the persistence of the form itself (1989: 4). Thus the rational bourgeois subject knows very well that "the commodity-money is nothing but a reified form of the appearance of social relations" (1999) but nevertheless treats the commodity as its own special entity of "sublime materiality" (1989: 12). The fetishistic disavowal of the new spirit lies in a certain critique of commodity relations that knows very well of the inauthenticity, environmental degradation and deprivation born of commodification, but nevertheless imagines the new commodity as building global solidarities and a better world. Thus the new commodity fetishism not only elicits the socialist imaginary but feigns a self-reflexive critique of commodification. The co-option of critique and its culmination in the new commodity form is not thought of here as an unproblematic even development within capital. However any genuine reclamation of the demands of '68 will have to deal with the stubborn persistence of the fetishized commodity form and construct an antagonistic frontier that traverses the site of economy.

Obama and the new Commodity Logic

The campaign of Barack Obama showed a keen sensitivity to the new commodity logic in presenting his candidacy in the terms of redemptive authenticity and self-fulfillment. Brand Obama has been described by business magazine *Fast Company* as open to “the way consumers communicate with one another” while recognizing “their desire for ‘authentic’ products” (McGirt 2008). Obama is described as an “Open Brand” that is “personal”, “engaging” and networked so that consumers “get constant feed back from the campaign and each other” (ibid). Literary critique David Pease (2009) has similarly identified in Obama an openness that functions as a depository of aspirations and desires:

Barack Obama is a man of dreams, a figure who solicits fantasy work. He knows how to transpose waking dream work into a recognizable representation of a goal...he condensed all of those dream objects into a person whereby he did not have to do anything except address the audience as you. “You.” However you project me, I will be that projection, that fantasy projection, for you.

It is no wonder then that the Obama campaign and its floating signifier candidate claimed two top prizes at the world’s largest advertising awards (Sweney 2009). The authenticity and redemptive power of the Obama brand stems from his remarkable personal story, his experience as a community organizer and the articulation of a grass-roots movement logic, particularly in the online realm. The phenomenal online apparatus developed around his campaign, which facilitated an unprecedented amount of small donations and enlisted the services of thousands, was described as the creation of a new grass-roots community, online and beyond. In facilitating the active participation and creative engagement of supporters through MyBarackObama.com^{vi} and other social networking sites, the campaign positioned itself as part of the “free and open-source software movement” with Obama, “the first real ‘wiki-candidate’”, serving as a “conduit for decentralized collaboration” (Cohen 2008). In merging the innovative organizational form of his campaign with his personal story, Obama is able to explain his candidacy as the fulfillment of a generation. The campaign’s slogan ‘Yes We Can’ perfectly embodied the logic of self fulfillment as Obama represents the best of ourselves. Throughout the campaign’s victories Obama constantly reiterates an inspiring movement logic that marks it as a transcendent and authentic political moment. At the Democratic National Committee (DNC) he reinforces a sense personal agency, “this election has never been about me. It’s about you” (2008d), while on election night we are told that “this is your victory” (2008e). Perhaps the most evocative statement of Obama’s politics of personal redemption is the Native American Hopi maxim, “we are the ones we’ve been waiting for” (2008a). Here we receive the message that emancipation is

ours to be had, through our own ambitions that are reflected in the vehicle of his candidacy. In embodying the commodity logic of the new spirit, Obama invokes all of the aspirational qualities of America, offers a privatized, civil society and voluntarist mode of political action and mobilization that is palpable and instills in the consumer/individual the message that “we (You) are the change we seek” (2008a).

The Populists Shrugged

The extent to which Obama’s candidacy can be read as the embodiment of the new spirit of capitalism is discernible by the populist backlash which explicitly rejects the ideological contortions necessary to sustain neo-liberalism. It is here that we encounter the limits of the new spirit’s emancipatory gesturing and the problem of the political. The populists are principally opposed to Obama’s moral discourse of the crisis of capitalism and all inclusive notion of reconciliation, preferring instead a fiercely antagonistic political discourse. Despite the ultimate mystification of the political in the Tea Party’s fetishistic attachment to a frontier notion of property, they speak to “the ontological need to express social division” (Laclau: 88). This has to be contrasted to the abstract universalism and morality of the Third Way, which engages in the expansion of rights without antagonism. The populists delineate a specific people who are engaged in antagonistic struggle with economy central to its ontology. While the Tea Party discourse is political in opposing the post-politics of the Third Way it is populist in the strict sense of the fetishist inversion of the site of economy. The populist backlash opposes actually existing neo-liberalism only in the sense that it threatens their fetish of a people reconciled in a frontier notion of private property. It is in this way that we can understand the Obama/populist frontier as a battle for the ideological content of capitalism as the Tea Party reject the ideological perfection of the commodity which imperils the sanctity of their fetish. The Tea Party are those who are invested in “Freedom, Equality, Property and Bentham” (Marx: 121) as a fully reconciled moral and political system. The Third Way/new spirit’s disavowal of the vulgar bourgeois notion of autonomy which is embodied in the commodity fetishism of “unlimited consumption and material enrichment” (Lutz: 421), is precisely what provokes the fetishist to denounce the Third Way as outsider and socialist. While the populist othering of Obama as socialist clearly encapsulates a certain cultural anxiety in conservative America, it has to be seen within the symptomatic logic of reifying the parasitic agent that threatens the fetish. Thus the fetishist inversion of the Tea Party designates the political crisis at the heart of capitalism as the perceived socialist conspiracy of neo-liberal Empire.

The crystallization of the populist opposition to Obama as a convergence of social conservatism and bourgeois autonomy emerged out of the Wall st bail-out and the nomination of Sarah Palin as the Republican vice presidential candidate. Palin's appeal lay in her frontierswoman image, later explicitly rendered in the reality TV show 'Sarah Palin's Alaska' where the traditional patriarchal family, the second amendment and the promise of the frontier (particularly oil in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge) are celebrated as quintessential Americanism. Palin was thus instrumental in the cultural *othering* of Obama and expanding this culture war to embody the defense of free market capitalism and the republic. The particular productivist ideal of the yeoman and property even allowed Palin to appropriate a working class discourse^{vii}, understood here strictly as a privileged cultural content, in the fight against Obama's socialism. The red state/blue state dichotomy which Obama famously aspired to transcend at the 2004 DNC, was turned into a question of who is "pro-America" or from the "Real America"⁸ (Stein 2008). Further slander of Obama ranged from a lack of patriotism, being a terrorist sympathizer and John McCain's rhetorical question that laid the groundwork for the birther movement; "who is the real Barack Obama?" (Cooper 2008). That this campaign of delegitimization represented an unprecedented extreme in modern American politics was evidenced in the various crowd outbursts of "terrorist", "liar"(Cooper 2008), "treason" (Weiner 2008) and "kill him" (Millbank 2008). While on election night McCain preformed the ritual concession speech aimed at cooling passions, his audience loudly booed the mention of President Obama (Gardner 2008). It was clear from this point that civility would not be restored in American politics⁹ with the construction of a populist political frontier of an embattled people defending free market capitalism and the republic.

What marked the expansion of the traditional culture war tactics of the Republican party towards something approaching the political in inverse terms, that is antagonism at the site of the economic, is the manner in which Obama's identity and civil society politics as a moral agent of Empire are held as proof positive of a socialist plot. Obama's work as a community organizer and the anti-poverty group ACORN soon came to symbolize the fundamental corruption of the republic and capitalism. Following the Karl Rove political playbook of trumping up charges of voter fraud McCain in the last presidential debate brazenly attempted to link Obama to ACORN and claimed the group was "on the verge of... destroying the fabric of democracy" (Obama & McCain 2008). For the populists the conspiracy to throw the election to Obama was part of an overall plan to use the state to destroy American capitalism. In delineating this conspiracy the populists return to the new left community organizers Saul Alinsky, Richard Cloward and Francis Fox Piven who spoke of organizing the poor to make demands of the state. The "original sin" (O'Hara 2010) of the so-called 'Cloward-Piven' strategy is identified as the Community Reinvestment Act of 1977,

which was created to provide poor and minority communities with better access to home loans and was underwritten by the Federal Reserve, itself an invention of this same liberal progressivism (Beck 2010). From this, nefarious civil society groups such as ACORN, funded by George Soros, were able to force state sponsored mortgage lenders Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac to lend to poor minorities, or people who shouldn't buy homes. While much of this has been fomented at the margins of American political discourse, the McCain-Palin campaign did much of the early legwork. The early presence of such theories in the presidential campaign demonstrates that the Tea Party populism is not simply a passing fit but rather a sustained political logic¹⁰.

The emergence of the Tea Party in the aftermath of the Republican's electoral failure marks not only the ontological necessity of antagonism but in its populist fetishist inversion demarcates the significance of economy. Their fetishized notion of economy serves as their principle of hegemonic linkage in which the various battles of the culture war coalesce. In preserving the ideal of the yeoman, bourgeois autonomy and the self-sustaining moral order of capital the populists construct a parasitic agent precisely in the terms of the new spirit of capitalism thus marking economy as foundational to their ontology. While it is plainly ludicrous to assume that George Soros^{viii}, who perhaps best embodies Empire as simultaneously a project of finance capital, liberal cosmopolitanism and a politics of heterogeneity, is financing the overthrow of capitalism, the populist dichotomy of the political is able to account for a contradiction that Obama cannot. While Third Way moralism offers an analysis that the proper balance between the market and state was askew, the populists identify rot in the heart of the system. The left-liberal state/market binary is incapable of grasping the ways in which the state was neo-liberalized, effectively creating the legal forms which allowed for the proliferation of derivatives markets and all manner of financial innovation, while Fannie and Freddie were transformed into market movers. What the populists do is take the emancipatory and transcendent claims of the new spirit seriously thereby constructing a parasitic agent in order to preserve the dignity of their fetish. It is this reified notion of socialist government takeover that has allowed the populists to sustain and antagonistic frontier and holistic narrative that encompasses the stimulus, the GM bail-out and healthcare reform, while Obama is left to reconcile the contradictions of his civil society/Wall Street alliance.

Conclusion

The populist challenge to Obama represents the key antagonism of American politics in the post financial crisis epoch and crucially underscores the tensions of the Third Way

conception of the political and the limits of its redemptive discourse. The Tea Party vociferously reject the new consensus of the Third Way and flourishes in the space opened up by the contradictions of Obama. Obama's discourse performs all the ideological contortions necessary to both secure the culmination of neo-liberalism and restore American hegemony of global capitalism. This is principally achieved through a moral discourse emblematic of the new spirit of capitalism in which capitalism itself engenders the imagination of socialist autonomy and offers new commodities that elicit a post-capitalist fantasy. In instilling the necessary redemptive potential in the American political process Obama preformed countless acts of self-effacement in characterizing his campaign as an authentic moment based in a grass-roots civil society movement. This maneuver allowed Obama to stand as the ultimate redeemer of the system in both eclipsing the left critiques of capitalism and in securing the vital interests of finance capital. The 'people' of the Tea Party have emerged specifically to protect their fetish of capitalism as a self-sustaining moral, political and economic system. For them capital needs no moral supplementation and any imperfection is attributable to the parasitic outsider such as government or those moral agents of Empire that might question the virtue of capital. While this fetishized notion of capital surpasses delusion it clearly identifies the constitutive role of economy in the political. What this new intractable post-crisis entanglement highlights is that the Third Way de-politicization of the economy is politically untenable.

The Third Way reaction to populism has been to treat it as "traditionalist" and "fundamentalist" remnants opposed to the march of history (Mouffe 2005). However, what is thought of as a temporary condition has come to dominate American political discourse and created political deadlock, even before the Republican's retook congress in 2010. The ethico-political commitment of the populists should speak to the left and serious liberals of certain political truths and tactical calculations that that have been expunged from the history and consciousness of the left although are beginning to be recovered by the Occupy movement. Despite the innumerable inconsistencies and contradictions of the populist right they speak of an idealized community which is militantly engaged in public, antagonistic struggle with subjects described in productivist if not workerist terms. In contrast, the model of politics embodied by Obama is a privatized civil society movement largely in the virtual public sphere, with communitarianism reduced to modes of conscientious consumption, all within a reconciled nation from Wall St to the heartland. The New Deal, which remains the touchstone ideal for left-liberals, would clearly not have been won without the recognition by workers for the necessity of sectoral struggle against and the owners of capital. What is evident is that the simple antagonistic logic, which offers an explanation of the constitutive role of the state in neo-liberalism, will not be undone by Obama's moralization. Furthermore as the new Third Way consensus fails to even moderately impinge upon the power of the

financial class, creating a banking oligarchy that former IMF chief economist Simon Johnson calls “too big to save” (2011), the next financial crisis threatens to bring radical change from the populist right with untold consequences for the liberal-democratic consensus.

Notes

1. Jefferson wrote that: “Those who labour in the earth are the chosen people of god, if ever he had a chosen people, whose breasts he has made his peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue. It is the focus in which he keeps alive that sacred fire, which might otherwise might escape from the face of the earth” (1975: 217).

2 The frontier has always accorded private property a particular elevated status within the American imagination. Hegel noted that ‘the safety valve of the frontier accounted for the absence of class conflicts’ (in Pocock 1975: 549), as America, already a project born of the flight from city squalor, had its own internal escape in the westward push. Lockean property has been accorded a properly divine status. Consider Thomas Jefferson’s exaltation: ‘America is the world’s garden; there is an all but infinite reservoir of free land, and expansion to fill it is all but the infinite expansion of virtue’ (in *ibid*: 539).

3 I contend here that the New Deal while containing populist elements, as most movements do, should be thought of as instrumentalizing populist discourse. In dramatically re-shaping the site of economy with the labour/capital compromise, populist rhetoric was crucial in disavowing the radical transformation that was taking place. Even the Communist Party USA in its united front policy adopted the slogan that ‘Communism is 20th Century Americanism’ (Kazin 1995: 152), the favoured post-ideological ism of populists. It is in perpetuating this ideal of the middle, in the case of the New Deal labour as a bulwark against communism, that we can understand the various reactionary forms this populist politics of the middle may take.

4 Obama has been blasted by the populist right for seeking a more humble leadership role for the US in global coalitions. One of the most egregious offences of his 2009 ‘global apology tour’ was the relativizing of American exceptionalism: “I believe in American exceptionalism, just as I suspect that the Brits believe in British exceptionalism and the Greeks believe in Greek exceptionalism” (Kirchick 2009).

5 On the night of his election Obama addressed those “huddled around radios in the forgotten corners of our world – our stories are singular, but our destiny is shared” (2008f). During his inauguration speech he spoke of the intent to “work alongside” poor nations “to make your farms flourish and let clean waters flow; to nourish starved bodies and feed hungry minds. And to nations like ours that enjoy relative plenty, we say we can no longer afford indifference to the suffering outside our borders; nor can we consume the world’s resources without regard to effect” (2009).

6 Nobel Laureate Paul Krugman (2009a) was an outspoken critic of the scale of the stimulus and the fact that 40% of the stimulus was in the form of tax cuts, which, while having a dubious effect on spending, fits the neo-liberal rubric of low taxation.

7 Since the end of the campaign the site has been renamed ‘Organizing for America’, while the header reads; “Because it’s About YOU”.

8 The traditional populist language of productivism is evidenced in her description of Real Americans as “those who are running our factories and teaching our kids and growing our food and are fighting our wars for us” (Stein 2008).

9 On of the most striking breaches of political conduct came during Obama's state of the union address in 2009 were Republicans were waving papers in defiance of his health care plan and representative Joe Wilson heckled him with the outburst 'You lie!'.

10 Sarah Palin has since endorsed the Cloward-Piven reading of Obama (Kim 2010) while the vilification of Obama as socialist has become a staple of Republican politics.

11 Glenn Beck's hysterical attacks of George Soros as the puppet master of an anti-capitalist conspiracy, through Soros' funding of Third Way cosmopolitan and human rights groups, proves Žižek's (2006b, 556) claim that the basic model of populism is Nazism with the Jew figuring as the outsider that threatens a good people. Beck's attacks may not be aimed at Soros' because he is Jewish but mirror precisely the structure of anti-Semitism that the cosmopolitan liberal is alien and corrupt.

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