Le Tea Party Français: the Bonnets Rouges, the Tea Party and mirror movements of grassroots protest

2017

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The emergence of political movements which integrate online activism, collective protest and social action has become a significant feature of contemporary political protest. The economic crisis of 2008 spurred an array of social action, political agitation and street protest in a range of remits, emanating from both right and left. The emergence of social movements which sought collective action through individual associations, suggests an integration of a number of aspects of social engagement which have given force to emergent political movements. These movements, while frequently seeking to achieve action within a nation state or region, appear to have elements that are transferable across national and political boundaries and across ideological divides. Movements appear to mirror each other in organizational logistics while addressing their prevailing political status quo. They seek to alter the position held, commonly by specific socio-economic groups with self-perceived disadvantage, in a broad political framework. The integration of communication, interpersonal and virtual, as a means through which to create and foster social capital and trust comes to the fore, as does an understanding that the acquisition of intelligence and organization comes not only from intra-group observation, but across movements. While recognizing the classic comparative framework of key progenitors of the discipline like Lasswell (1968) and Lijphart (1971), which focused on ideological issues and political systems, this article compares the social and political mobilization of the Tea Party in the United States and the Bonnets Rouge in France. It identifies the immediate underpinning dynamics that led to their mobilization and influenced the activist repertoires that contributed to the coalescence of a mass of activists and members. It does so by positing that the major defining characteristics of both movements are initially a shared a sense of political alienation, a perceived lack of democratic representation and a self-perception of an apolitical position within the respective social frameworks. It assesses to what extent this is true by addressing activist online media activity and physical manifestations such as protests and rallies. Therefore, the article considers the initial emergence of a sense of concentrated grievance in a small or geographically diffuse groups and then maps it onto both virtual and physical spaces in which protest spreads, and which results in the creation of intra-group social capital which in itself fosters trust, political momentum and a collective identity. In a trans-national context this is via causes which were socio-economically reflective of one another. This three-phase method of emergence, coalescence and development therefore becomes a theoretical framework through which to assess the similarities and differences between the two movements. The identification by a French media outlet of the Bonnets Rouge as a Tea Party entity in France is testament to how they might be seen as mirror movements and as logical starting point in empirically asserting their commonality.

**Social Movements**

‘Social movements are one of the principal social forms through which collectivities give voice to their grievances and concerns about the rights, welfare and wellbeing of themselves and others by engaging in various types of collective action, such as protesting in the streets, that dramatize those grievances and concerns and demand that something be done about them.’

(Snow et al. 2008:3)

Social movement theory explains why social mobilization occurs in modern societies and how this has come to encompass an explanation for the collective action that has characterized protest movements in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. It explains why people coalesce around political causes and mobilize movements in pursuit of collectively held goals that are often at odds with the prevailing will of democratically elected governments. It is argued that this occurs when individuals and groups are marginalized from the political process and seek redress this imbalance. Tarrow contests that, ‘at the base of it all social movements, protests and revolutions is *contentious collective action* - collective action can take many forms-brief or sustained, institutionalized or disruptive, humdrum or dramatic.’ (Tarrow 2011: 3) Action can be evidenced in displays of political dissatisfaction via riots and protests, or in the long-term engagement of grassroots activist movements advocating political and social change,

‘rather than seeing social movements as expressions of extremism, violence and deprivation, they are better defined as collective challenges, based on common purposes and social solidarities in sustained interaction with elites, opponents and authorities.’

(Tarrow 2011: 4)

These new movements have largely transcended class structures and social statuses, centering on campaigns which advocate increased rights for youth, gender, sexual orientation or professions. (Johnson et al. 1994)

Social movements are rooted in collective action and must involve change oriented goals, extra or non-institutional collective action, some degree of organization, and some degree of temporal continuity. (Snow et al. 2008: 6) In their coalescing around common held beliefs, goals and methods of activism they are an example of epistemic communities (Haas 1992) and communities of practice (Wenger 1998). Social movements and grassroots political activist organisations are ordered around a series of commonly held concerns and aims and to deploy resources in pursuit of these aims. In this, ‘people band together in movements to mount common claims against opponents, authorities or elites. Not all conflicts arise out of class interest, but common or overlapping interests and values are the basis of common actions.’ (Tarrow 2011: 4) Social movements may mobilize utilizing five types of resources: *material*, which entails the financial and human capital; *moral resources* which encompass the internal and external solidarity and support for the group’s aims; *social organizational* which sees the organization around social networks and recruitment; the *human capital* of volunteers, and *leadership* and the important dimension of cultural capital and the prior understanding of activism and activism experience. (Edwards and McCarthy 2004) This mobilization can occur in four areas: identification around collective challenges; a belief in a common purpose; feelings of social solidarity; and these qualities are then manifested in sustained interaction. (Tarrow 2011) This type of mobilization can occur in micro, meso and macro spheres of public life. (Keane 2000) This type of activism is differentiated by cross-national diffusion of themes and action repertoires often triggered by single global events. (Della Porta and Kriesi 2009) For example, on the macro (global) level, the second Gulf War saw the return of global anti-war movements, while the economic crisis of 2008 onwards was the trigger for the development of global economic protest movements like Occupy. Equally the mobilization of activists and grassroots groups can occur in the meso level of the nation state in the manner of the Tea Party in the USA. These entail groupings of politically likeminded activists who seek to engage in the political sphere without necessarily seeking personal representation in the democratic institutions. On the macro level, local and regional political movements and activist organization emerge as a response to either national marginalization or localized episodes of contention. Sub-state regional movements like the Bonnets Rouges in Brittany emerged in a similar fashion to local pressure groups. The meso and macro spheres are therefore, ‘less pre-occupied with the struggles of over the production and distribution of material goods,’ but instead in how post-industrial societies, ‘generate and withhold information and produce and sustain meanings among their members.’ (Keane 2000: 77) These movements embrace a multiplicity of channels, dialogical spaces, and opportunities for debate and idea generation that are presented, for example, by the Internet to help explain the rapid emergence of these movements in the modern era. (Keane 2000)

These movements are only one of the many forms of collective action, many of which are not intrinsically politically in nature. For example, people at sports events and music concerts, or people taking part in riots, are also forms of collective behaviour. (Della Porta and Kriesi 2009) An often-overlapping version of this collective behaviour is also that of interest groups, like the National Rifle Association, which selectively intervenes into the political sphere. Social Movement Theory therefore explains types of collective action which is goal-oriented activity engaged in by two or more people with a common objective in joint collective action in which engagement can be ‘outside of institutional channels.’ (Snow et al. 2008: 7) ‘Social movements are typically outside of the polity, or overlap with it in a precarious fashion, because they seldom have the same standing or degree of access to our recognition among political authorities.’ (Snow et al. 2008: 8) This contributes to the theoretical and comparative framework posited in the introduction to this article. Both movements under discussion, the Tea Party and the Bonnets Rouge, have a self-perception that they exist outside of political convention. By comparing them it is possible to understand firstly, their impulses to protest and how they fostered emerging movements; secondly, how the movements coalesced; and thirdly, how they consequently developed into broader and more powerful coalitions of interests. In addressing the similarities of their ideological and activist repertoire, it is beneficial to the differing specific political contexts of the polities in which they are active to establish the comparative political lessons that their activism elicits in the study of mirror social movements.

**History of social movements**

In the late 20th Century, social movements became the predominant form of organizing and campaigning, politically removed from the conventional institutions of power. (Norris 2002:189) The new social movements which developed in the 1960s voiced the concerns of groups that had been isolated from the democratic institutions of the state, or for whom those institutions had to contested to achieve a specific set of aims. new social movements contested the encroachment of the state and the market into the social sphere and attempted to reclaim the identity of individuals and collectives. (Melucci 1996; Della Porta, Diani 2006) In this sense they represent a positive rather than destructive urge to redress imbalances of power engrained in the institutions of the state, ‘social movements are not a marginal rejection of order, they are the central forces fighting one against the other to control the production of society by itself and the action of classes for the shaping of historicity.’ (Touraine 1981: 29) The new social movements were different from the special interest groups that had evolved with democratic institutions in the 19th and 20th centuries because they tended to be more focused on direct action strategies and were made up of often loose coalitions of activists in less hierarchical organisations. (Norris 2002: 190) Within the context of new social movements the shared ideological positions of geographically diffuse groups like the student movements of the late 1960s and older forms of mobilization like the extreme right in Europe are important, as they are obvious case studies in comparative politics due to shared overlapping timeframes or activity, repertoires of expression, and their existence outside of the polity.

Equality causes such as the American Civil Rights movement, feminist activism, and gay liberation stand as the dominant expressions of identity politics pioneered in the social revolutions of the 1960s. Beyond these equality projects, there are concurrent, and in many cases co-terminus, social movements that coalesced in this period but took a longer period to become prominent. For example, the anti-nuclear, anti-war and green movements had similar starting points and had a base in contesting the growing strength of the state and multi-national corporations in the private and public spheres. Unlike the equality movements which are in a continuous struggle for rights and power for socially and legally marginalized groups, some movements, like the anti-war movements, have had quite finite lifespans centred around specific campaigns, such as opposition to the Vietnam or Iraq wars. Significantly, these movements represented a departure from the labour movements that had been one of the most dominant forms of mobilization in the previous 150 years, where people were engaged in a long-term class conflict. The de-industrialization of the USA and Europe has, in part, led to the erosion of strict class boundaries, and the new social movements represented a redrawing of the terrain of political structure away from the precept of class struggle. However, in the modern age with the twin influences of economic globalization and global communication, the development of social movements became more rapid with the potential to share practice transnationally. In the realm of politics and political communication, the Internet created opportunities for the coalescence of powerful grass roots political movements and the space in which they could flourish.

**Grassroots political activism, the Internet and political communication**

The literature of the development of Social Movements in the age of the Internet has addressed new forms of digital media in the mobilization of activist groups. (Atton 2004; Castells 2010; Liewrouw 2011) This literature has identified two distinct influences on the development of political activism, and the radical or alternative media sphere. Firstly, new forms of activism and alternative media have emerged as a result of the shifting discourses of politics and they reflect, ‘society-wide movements of the industrial age – the labour movement, anti/war peace movements, civil rights.’ (Liewrouw 2011: 41) The activism of gay rights groups, the feminists, new age communities and ecologists were, ‘unconventional forms of social activism’, with internationalist perspectives beyond that of the nation state. They focused on identity and equality issues, and their ‘new collective actions could be seen as “new social movements”.’ (Liverouw 2011: 46) Castells noted,

‘Social movements tend to be fragmented, localistic, single issue oriented, and ephemeral, either retrenched in their inner worlds, or flaring up for just an instant around a media symbol. In such a world of uncontrolled confusing change, people tend to regroup around primary identities: religious, ethnic, territorial, national.’

(Castells 2010: 2-3)

The organizational forms of these groups are often highly de-centralized, diffuse and devolved to highly autonomous local sections which cluster around individually suitable modes of technology to develop their positions and profile, including self-published magazines and web based forms of communication. (Lievrouw 2011) In these movements, ‘high value is placed on the particular and the provincial, small social spaces, decentralized forms of interaction and de-specialized activities, simple interaction and non-differentiated public spheres.’ (Habermas 1981: 36) These groups have, ‘unconventional action repertoires, reject traditional methods of organizing and institutional/ political channels in favour of ad hoc, radical, creative, expressive, or disruptive action.’ (Lievrouw 2011: 46) These new social movement groups hold, ‘deep seated mistrust of mainstream channels for social change – including government, political parties, cultural and educational institutions and the mainstream media.’ (Lievrouw 2011: 56) As a result, these movements are, ‘addressing the issues in a pure cultural form, or in purely cultural terms – bringing the issue to the fore, to the public.’ (Melucci, 1996: 36) Atton asserts that the media of social movements are:

‘produced outside the forces of market economics and the state. They can include the media of protest groups, dissidents, “fringe” political organisations, even fans and hobbyists. It is perhaps in addressing radical questions of citizenship in the public sphere that alternative media are most powerful.’

(Atton 2004: 3)

The characteristics of new social movements’ political communication can be conceptualized in two ways: scope and stance. (Lievrouw 2011: 63) In scope they are quite simple to define, they are small scale. They tend to avoid orthodox patterns of organization. Their stance is defined in several niche ways. They are heterotopic, ‘countersites for expression, affiliation and creativity apart from the dominant culture.’ (Lievrouw 2011: 63) Referring back to the work on popular culture by late 20th Century cultural theorists, she suggests, ‘online activists develop a kind of sub cultural literacy.’ (Lievrouw 2011: 65) New social movements exist in the context of agency and action. Their relative lack of influence in the mainstream political and media sphere promotes activist strategies which are interventionist. This form of activism disrupts the mainstream discourse and narrative, and new social movements and alternative media, are ‘a kind of temporary blockage in the system.’ (Lievrouw 2011: 68)

The overall purpose of the media activism of new social and alternative movements is ‘supremely concerned with sustaining a community of citizens engaged in democratic practice, creating a “community without closure”.’ (Couldry 2000: 140) Their work is also about building a new plane within the mainstream political sphere. Alternative media spaces conjoin to create a surrogate public sphere in which is forged new spaces of belonging through activist practice.

The pioneering use of the Internet by the Mexican Chiapas Indians in the 1990s, has been heralded as the first example of the online sphere achieving this effect and is a model replicated by other modern activist movements like the Bonnets Rouges and the Tea Party. Atton asserts that this activity developed ‘a conception of the public sphere as an arena for dialogic praxis… and arena for radical inclusivity.’ (Atton 2004: 30) While Atton’s concentration was on *Indymedia*, the global collective of alternative online activists, this template is one that can be ascribed to the new social movements that construct alternative political spaces which interact with the wider public sphere. These portals provide a barrier free network for groups which aim to counter-balance their alienation from the mainstream media, but also import focal points of mobilization and ideological development. These spaces face inwards to facilitate meaningful internal communications while simultaneously providing an outward looking public identity. They present new forms of online media activism as ‘communicative democracy,’ developing the notion that, ‘it is the right of citizens to communicate what they like however hideous’, and the Internet provides a space to destabilize old modes of top down mainstream media communication and has ‘the capacity to transform the practice of journalism.’ (Atton 2004: 36-37) In this sense, ‘the Internet is fostering new opportunities for civic engagement, and, the new technology provides an environment most conducive to social movements with the organizational flexibility, resources and technical know-how to adapt.’ (Norris 2002: 212)

**The Bonnets Rouges: history, theory and practice**

If social movements require a triggering event to galvanize their coalescence, then the Bonnets Rouges’ lay in the struggle between their resistance to taxation imposed by a detached central government that was remote from their perceived realities. The Bonnets Rouges (the Red Hats) is a political movement that emerged in Brittany in Northern France and which focused initially on opposition to new ecological tax initiatives introduced by the French government in 2012. (Penketh 2014) This mobilization in 2013 brought together an affiliation of entrepreneurs, trade unions, farmers’ unions and students in opposition to a tax levied on lorries travelling on French roads.

These green taxes posed a problem for Brittany which was already one of the most depressed regions in France with a history of high migration to Paris and regional emigration. (Shrijver 2014) More than a million people, had left the region in the 20th Century, with half of those from rural, agricultural areas. (Kedward 2005) However, with the development of the EEC and the Common Market, Brittany was to stage somewhat of an economic recovery, with the remaining rural working class to be the backbone of this. From the 1960s onwards, new mechanized agriculture, particularly dairy farming and livestock production, allowed Brittany to punch above its weight economically. (Kedward 2005) Under the leadership of the charismatic ‘pan-Celtic visionary’ Alexis Gouvernnec, and the development of a regional economy that embraced tourism and developed modern shipping docks, its renaissance was further assured. (Kedward 2005: 408). The Breton economic recovery however would not survive the problems of the global recession, a stalling French economy, and changes in agricultural markets after the expansion of the EU in the late 1990s and 2000s.

A crisis in pork production was part of the economic decline in Brittany and was a catalyst for the mobilization of the Bonnets Rouges. France produces 10% of Europe’s pork and Brittany accounts for 60% of France’s production. Any decline in sales prices and volumes of sales was catastrophic for the regions farmers, slaughterhouses and associated industries. (Jannic-Cherbonnel, 2015) Towns like Carhaix, the central Breton town in which the Bonnets Rouges movement was born, were heavily reliant on these industries and large increases in unemployment appeared to be one of the major triggers for the movement’s emergence. It was noted that the Bonnets Rouge mobilized in a difficult socioeconomic environment, where downsizing, restructuring and attendant job losses had hit the Breton agribusiness sector. (Gardin 2014) An eco-tax on haulage companies using French roads was further catalyst for the emergence of the movement. The struggling Breton agricultural and food processing industries were reliant on hauliers transporting their produce, often from remote areas on the western-most edge of France, like Finistère, the coastal department in which the Bonnets Rouges was born.

The rising tax burden had been a bone of contention across France, instituted by the Socialist government of President Francois Hollande. (Carnegy 2013) Protest groups coalesced via social media in opposition to a wide range of politically controversial issues including the legalization of marriage equality, support of further green legislation, maintenance of the welfare state and opposition to equine taxes. With particular relevance to this article, the rapidity of the offline and online mobilization was enough to lead to Parti Socialiste fears for the growth of a ‘Tea Party à la française.’ (Joseph 2013) Each of the new smaller social movements adopted a ‘bonnet’ of their own to symbolize their struggle: those conservatives campaigning against marriage equality and for family rights adopted purple as their colour, the environmental campaigners championing the eco-tax to encourage greater use of public transport, wore green hats. (Albertini 2013). However, these were superficial adoptions of imagery proving not to be sustainable beyond short-term mobilizations. The campaign against taxation had a much deeper historic symbolic relevance in Brittany that has held, in some quarters, pride in its history of resistance against the French state. (Shrijver 2014) In this instance, the red hats of the current protest movement borrowed from the original Jacobin Bonnets Rouges of 1675, who waged a popular revolt over taxes levied pay for a war against Holland. (Nicolas 2002). The revolt, and the Bonnet Rouge, became symbols of the struggle for Breton autonomy in the 1970s (Cornette 2005) and was used by the small liberationist ‘*groupsucule*’ Frankiz Breizh as the name of its news bulletin. (Cole 2006)

**Mobilization: the reappearance of Breton cultural nationalism**

Breton nationalism and its less popular strains of separatism had been prevalent since the 1960s, (Rogers 1990), and theUnion Democratique de Bretagnewas the most active since its inception in 1964. (Cole 2006) Breton nationalists had also identified with new Celtic nationalisms that had grown in Ireland, Scotland and Wales in the 20th Century. They also situated themselves among the strain of sub-state European minority nationalisms that developed in the late-20th Century, including those of the Corsicans in France and the Basques and Catalonians in Spain. Information on the Breton movement along with those of the Basques, Catalonians and Corsicans was frequently found in Irish republican literature from the 1970s to the 2000s as a means of internationalizing that particular struggle beyond the British and Irish milieu. (Bean 2007)

The most prominent expressions of the Bonnets Rouges cause were initially in large protests and direct actions against the state’s eco-tax and in support of the reunification of Brittany with the adjoining Loire Atlantique department which had initially been taken out of Brittany by the Vichy Government and re-affirmed in national reorganization in 1955. (Minihan 2002) Subsequent to the initial success of the former campaign, the Bonnets Rouges focus has been in promoting the cause of Breton self-determination and bringing decision making on Breton affairs back to the region by opposing the deep centralization of the French state. (Penketh 2014) In the latter case, Breton reunification has been an important auxiliary goal of the wider cultural and political movements in the region and has united activists beyond the nationalist sphere. The repertoires of activism in this cause have largely been to organize large-scale protests and the Bonnets Rouges have contributed to the promotion of rallies. In recent years more than 40,000 people mobilized on the streets of Nantes, the capital of Loire Atlantique, in support of reunification. (Cormier 2014) The Bonnets Rouges was however only one of the supporting organisations of the reunification campaign, and its central focus was on the eco-tax and the development of a social movement predicated on developing greater autonomy.

In opposition to the eco-tax widespread protests focused on mass rallies, including one in the Finistère capital Quimper, which gained national and international headlines. Direct action involved destroying motorway cameras which were designed to monitor heavy goods traffic on the region’s roads. (Penketh 2014) Destroying the cameras put increased pressure on the Paris government, not least because the ruling Parti Socialiste has historically strong electoral support in Brittany. These votes had become hugely important in a contested political environment in which the Front Nationale competed for working class support. The rally of an estimated 15,000 people in Quimper, which accompanied the direct action, ended with clashes with police and garnered national and international headlines. (Allain 2013; Carnegy 2013) After the rally, and as a result of other strikes, including one by professional footballers over the 75% rate of tax for earnings over €1m, the government abolished the eco-tax at the reported cost of €800m. (Carnegy 2013b) Rallies like the one in Quimper not only provided a public expression of the privately held collective purpose of the Bonnet Rouges as a social movement, but also garnered media attention for a regionally based social movement’s cause and ideals and which perhaps went some way to legitimizing it in the wider body politic. A key dynamic of the movement was that it was a coalition of Bretons fighting for a shared goal beyond the narrow confines of political partisanship that exist in the French state.

**Political affiliation and organization of the Bonnets Rouges**

The political affiliation of the Bonnets Rouges is particularly important within the context of the French state and social movement activism. Many of the movement’s key figures had roots in the traditional French left and the trade union movement: Christian Troadec, has been repeatedly elected mayor of Carhaix on an alternative left ticket, and Nadine Hourmant of the Force Ouvrière union, was prominent in pursuing greater rights for Breton meat and poultry workers. (Equy & Mouillard 2013) However, the Bonnets Rouges also had the input of entrepreneurs and, as a result, self-consciously avoided traditional political allegiances. Both in inspiration and repertoire it portrayed itself as inheriting a more global tradition of resistance that focused on identity and economic independence. Jean-Pierre Le Mat, a prominent Breton nationalist and one of the founders of the Bonnet Rouge, noted that the Bonnets Rouge’s inspiration was not in modern European left movements or their narrow ideological confines,

‘It is not in the far-left movements, Podemos, Siryza or the outraged urban protest movements. They are too formatted. The movement that seems closest to the Bonnets Rouges is EZLN (Zapatistas), in Chiapas in Mexico. It is an agrarian movement, indigenous and which used force. The Zapatistas want cultural, linguistic, and economic freedom for the indigenous people of Chiapas. They have been criticized by the Mexican official left. Now they are in a relationship of both cooperation and rivalry. They did not seek political power, but they are held in respect. Viva Zapata!’

(Le Mat 2015)

Troadec noted that there were attempts to place the Bonnets Rouges in traditionally unpopular political spaces by their political opponents and the media in the wake of the first wave of protests,

‘They have accused us of everything – when we started they said we were a bunch of hooligans who smashed things at demos, then extreme right, then extreme left. Whatever. The truth is that we are a popular movement united by the desire to live, work and decide our future in Brittany.’

(BBC Radio 4 2014)

In the two years after the Bonnets Rouges emerged contesting the eco-tax, it evolved to become more than a one issue pressure group. Rather, it has increasingly seen a greater degree of political self-determination as offering the solution to the economic woes of Brittany. Its organization represented the evolution of older civil society and political public sphere organisational links. It encapsulated Breton nationalism, with support from trade unions and agricultural pressure groups as well as the Catholic church which remained strong in a rapidly secularizing France. (Gardin 2014) Le Mat noted:

‘The Bonnets Rouges encapsulates the birth of a new Breton identity. Breton flags are now visible in all demonstrations attended by farmers and business people. This identity is not determined by political policy, but has an economic, cultural and community dimension. Other European organisations like Syriza and Podemos, are part of an old world, bent on ideological quarrels. The Bonnets Rouges live in a new world of communities and networks.’

(Le Mat 2015)

This interpretation of the Bonnets Rouges is pivotal in positioning them on any map of European or global modern social movements. They represented of a new type of politics that emerge out of revitalized old political and offline social networks as opposed to those that emerge from new networks facilitated by globalization and the Internet. With a decentralised approach that emphasises non-hierarchical structures, this style of organization gives a flat horizontal framework which appeals to broad sociopolitical coalitions. This also affords a fluidity of communication which facilitates comparison between the Bonnets Rouges to the Tea Party. Finally, in whatever public figureheads it does have, the Bonnets Rouges has a cultural and political cachet that offers a degree of authenticity that is vital in movements built upon identity. For example, however charismatic Troadec (especially given a professional history in journalism) is, it is his background in local and regional Breton politics, culture and commerce, which affords him a degree of political legitimacy that reflects well upon the movement in general.

However, beyond the initial mobilization of the group in late-2013, it is difficult to make a case for a completed project. To achieve the goals of further devolution of power and decision making for Brittany, the Bonnets Rouges attempted to unite socio-economic and political groups central to Breton life, including representatives of small businesses central to the Breton economy alongside other sub-state nationalist identities in France. Le Mat notes, ‘a popular movement like the Bonnets Rouges is both unpredictable and difficult to control. But we have organized a structure that unites, on the one hand, local committees, which act on their geographical area. On the other hand there are ideologically thematic groups.’ (Le Mat 2015) These groups are represented by Breizh TPE, which gathers all small businesses and is organized in union branches, and the Association of Nations of the Hexagon (named after the so-called shape of France) which undertakes to campaign for the rights of French regional identities proclaimed by the United Nations or the European Union. (Le Mat 2015) These groups develop local and regional forms of financial governance, including forming and sustaining local mutual societies which are ideologically opposed to the spread of modern capitalist policies such as the controversial Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership. In pursuing an economic agenda which returns a modicum of control to the community, the Bonnets Rouge have attempted to use a social movement and its organization attributes to further an anti-establishment cause based on regional identity politics.

**The Tea Party: political identity and social movement**

Prior to the election of Donald Trump as US president, the emergence of the Tea Party as a grassroots movement, with an anti-establishment anti-tax agenda, yet one with no centralized leadership, marked an important juncture in the evolution of a social and political movement in the United States. The movement displays a range of characterizations which are similar to those demonstrated by the Bonnets Rouges and suggests some replication of strategy across movements which share similar economic, social and political identity concerns. That is not to say that the movements are identical images of one another. Rather, the means and techniques of organization, social movement mobilization, and their genesis as anti-tax movements which mushroomed into greater causes, display the trans-state opportunities of organization and momentum that can be garnered from observations of movements in other nations. The core remit of the Tea Party movement within the history of protest in the United States is illustrated by sociologist Charles Tilly’s division of movements,

‘into three types, based on the policies they demand, the constituencies they claim to represent and the identities they are trying to construct. Both the civil rights movement and the Tea Party combined the first and second goals.’ (Tarrow 2011)

The Tea Party accords with the concept of a social movement in that it does not align itself neatly with prevailing political structures, although it was a significant contributor to the establishment and development of local grassroots structures central to Trump’s conservative alliance in 2016. As the Breton movement positioned itself outside of the conventional structures of French politics, the Tea Party also positioned itself as a movement dissatisfied with prevailing norms and attacked the Democratic Party from without, and the Republican party from within. This suggests,

‘Social movements have always had a complex relationship with political parties in the United States, and the Tea Party is no exception. The two main parties in the United States normally serve as the means for aggregating citizens’ preferences. However, when dissatisfaction with the political process or government policies increases, social movements become the vehicles that convey that dissatisfaction to the parties or the government itself.’ (Karpowitz et al. 2011: 303)

At the heart of the Tea Party activism, in keeping with the Bonnets Rouge, was concern over tax. Also similar to the French movement, with this as its primary mandate, it then branched out into a critical observation of a range of policies which it suggested undermined the liberty of the individual and questioned the role of the state. In this, ‘the criticism they [the Tea Party] leveled at both major parties fits their overall aesthetic about money and waste. The Tea Party was unwilling to accept the status quo.’ (Atkinson and Berg 2012: 526) It created a confederation of online activists who employed the web and social media to facilitate both virtual and real engagement, which was then manifested, in the same form as the French activist movement, with rallies, meetings, social associations and the creation of social capital.

The Tea Party represents a multi-layered organization with local activists, chapter groups and a number of hub organizations which attempted to give shape to a national profile. The underlying ideology was against centralization of the movement, or perceptions of a single controlling hand. Any move towards centralization went against the libertarian constructs which gave foundation to the movement. Many individuals who were initially aware of the presence of the Tea Party were not well versed in social media or online communication. Through shared practice and educational seminars on online activism, often coordinated by the conservative interest group FreedomWorks, educating individuals previously unfamiliar with social media and cyberactivism was important. It fostered shared learning, social and political association, facilitated in creating new educators who could pass on their skills, and created trust as individuals were willing to give their time and skills to the political advantage of others. (Hiar 2010) The intellectual dynamic underpinning FreedomWorks and Americans for Prosperity, ‘established ultra-free-market advocacy organizations ardent to gather Tea Party activism under their ideological aegis,’ to, ‘help provide the Tea Party groups with arguments about taxation and deficits.’ (Horowitz 2013: 174) The shared experience of cyber-activism, combined with personal contact and a feeling of broader empowerment suggests that the online and social associations went some way to creating trust between members. In a movement that stressed individualism and libertarian constructs, the virtual and real collective action was important in shaping the collective social movement element of local Tea Party organizations.

On the ideological spectrum, the Tea Party is most commonly associated with a new populist right that is an offshoot of libertarian and conservative movements in the US. However, there are a number of questions about who and what it represents. (Lind 2013) In keeping with the concepts advanced by the Bonnets Rouge, the Tea Party desired to place itself beyond the conventional remit of party politics,

‘…Tea Party leaders and elected officials demonstrate their interest in confirming that the movement is non-partisan in its appeal by downplaying the ideological orientations and policy aspirations of a large percentage of those who identify with the movement and support its aims.’ (Wilson and Burack 2012: 178)

Echoing that the Bonnets Rouge had a broad political spectrum, the Tea Party represented a coalition of political interests. However, unlike the Breton movement which espoused recognizably left wing political aspirations, the Tea Party was much more specifically founded on, and of, the right, and provided an umbrella for a coalition of interests. However, its leadership suggested that it represented a new juncture in politics that was beyond the Republican-Democrat threshold. In keeping with the Bonnets Rouge, there was a root in self-proffered identity politics.

In keeping with the use of historical events as an imagined foundation to the respective movements, the Tea Party and the Bonnets Rouge shared an appreciation of the past as a symbolism for a desired future which, in turn, informed social intra-group identity by offering visible indicators of a fusion of principles and historical causes. While Les Bonnets Rouge rooted a political consciousness in 1675, the Tea Party looked to the anti-tax protests of 1773, with the Boston Tea Party and the action taken to symbolize opposition to imposed tax measures. It too utilized historically persuasive imagery in its public activist repertoire,

‘In the case of the Tea Party then, what appears on the surface as nothing more than middle-aged men and some women dressing up in three-pointed hats and 18th century garb and singing patriotic songs to drum, fife, and banjo in fact carries significant meaning for those who truly understand that the public spectacle is really about expressing patriotism and authentic American identity.’ (Lundskow 2012: 530)

The relationship between social media, the Tea Party and social protest is a strong one, and these have come to characterize the means through which the movement asserted itself. There are three mediating mechanisms which forged the relationship between protest movement and social associations created by social media. These are the use of social media for access to news, its use as a forum for political expression and its use for promoting the cause and enhancing mobilization strategies. (Valenzuela 2013) Added to this is the concept of what social media actually does, as opposed to the volume of it, or its prominence as a contemporary communications strategy. Did the use of social media and the internet actually create a sense of social space and trust among the members of the group? In turn there are four sources of importance in the mobilization of support based on a platform of electronic communication: knowledge, credibility, interpersonal interaction, and identity support. (Hara and Estrada 2005) The congruence of internet activity and the creation of social associations and social capital appear pronounced. In this sense,

‘the Internet can also increase organizational involvement by facilitating the flow of information between face-to-face meeting and arranging these meetings themselves…Thus, if the Internet increases social capital, then high Internet use should be accompanied by more offline interpersonal contact, organizational participation, and commitment to community.’ (Wellman et al. 2001: 438)

This is evidenced in the Tea Party through the use of social media to facilitate meetings, rallies and periodic conventions which gave the movement a group identity above and beyond the individual social media associations online. Tea Party 911 highlight on their website the importance of communication to the movement and in maintaining connection among members as a means of sustaining political momentum,

‘Networking and blogging are changing how people in the tea parties organize and what they were able to accomplish. Networking allows groups consisting of like minded people, widely separated across the country, to form groups and address important specific issues. They then blog on their activities to influence and inform others.’ (TeaParty911 2012)

There are however limitations in placing the Tea Party as a template model for other groups. Although the organizational remits and social movement concepts might be transferable, there are issues of size and identity which play a role. While the Bonnets Rouge had a core central identity of regional assertions of power and influence, the sheer size and breadth of the Tea Party as a political entity gives added complexity in creating a tight identity to the plethora of different chapters and some of the different emphases they have beyond the original anti-tax ideology that launched the movement. While the Breton movement could ultimately gravitate towards a distinctive regional and geographic identity to complement its opposition to an eco-tax, increasingly, as a social movement, the Tea Party had an ever expanding list of grievances to hold against the prevailing political establishment. As a consequence it could be unpredictable in its focus given the range of chapters it is composed of. Jacobson observed,

‘Part of the inconsistency in the Tea Party’s impact nationally stems from the movement’s structure, or lack thereof…In fact, Senator Jim Banks, an Indiana Republican, notes that “several of us were supported by Tea Party factions in our campaigns, but I found that while in one county Tea Party members might support me, in other counties they might not.’ (Jacobson 2011: 12)

**Conclusion: Connections and Parallels**

At first sight consideration of two movements faced with different regional and national challenges presents some challenges in making comparisons. However, recognition in France that the Breton movement may represent the emergence of French Tea Party is testament to a deeper understanding that movements can copy one another, operate as social forces in a decentralized way and provide an impetus for grassroots organization in a trans-national capacity. Core features come to the fore in the replication of movement dynamics. The Tea Party, while entertaining controversy regarding the views of some of its members, represents a successful and dynamic social movement. Controversy rages as to whether it is genuinely grassroots or a creation of monied interests to give popular legitimacy to corporate interests, however in its organization, activities and core ideology it appears to share many of the characteristics of the Breton movement. (DeMelle 2013)

Organizational logistics, in conjunction with communications strategies, evidently create strong social bonds within the movements, and this in turn creates elements of trust which forge intra-group identity and cohesion. This transcends ideological disposition and creates internal senses of momentum that the groups, for all their position as minority status entities, can maintain momentum when direct drives for representative office have been dismissed and there are limits in seeking universal political support. The core of what is created is a social movement which takes its cue for the creation of bonding capital and the maintenance of this through the use of education and social media.

In part the movements are rooted in identity politics, that the members of the social movements perceive themselves as being removed from the orthodox establishment identity. In the case of the Tea Party the economic fallout of the 2008 crash suggested a role of the federal government that was overly controlling, and in the case of the Les Bonnets Rouge the imposition of a tax which adversely affected the region suggested as government that was out of touch with the geographical and economic interests of the region. The two movements suggest that social movements share similar attributes, foundations of cause and mobilization strategies across borders. They also suggest concepts of grassroots empowerment. While this has been present in movements such as the Indy cause, that it now transcends the politics of left and right, and those movements which do not see themselves associated with the conventional patterns of partisanship is significant. Moreover, the movements discussed in this paper do not seek direct political representation. Rather they act as social influences on the political establishment and work as protests again how the system acts as a medium of representation. The use of both old and new forms of political communication, from street based activism to social media and the internet testifies to a readiness to mix a range of conversation mediums to foster group mobilization, identity and cohesion. That this was achieved beyond the traditional organizational strategies of political parties is further testament to how the new social movements have brought together a complex mix of identity politics and have created their own group dynamics, often with little prior experience of mounting a case or political cause.

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