The Rise of the Tea Party: Anthony Di Maggio Monthly Review Press New York 2011

This book is a very useful analysis of the rise of the Tea Party in the United States of America. The author outlines how the Tea Party is not an authentic populist movement of opposition to the bureaucracy of the state and is instead an expression of the right-wing shifts within the Republican Party. It has been possible for the Tea Party to acquire popularity because of sympathetic media coverage, but its local organisations have been completely controlled by an elite leadership. Hence the organisation has lacked any semblance of democracy, accountability and expression of initiative by local leaderships. The major tasks of the Tea Party seem to be about influencing the process of electing right-wing Republican members of the House of Representatives and the Senate. In this regard they have been relatively successful and some people have been elected to Congress as Republican supporters of the Tea Party.

In other words the Tea Party is supportive of the hegemony of big business and in this context advocates a free market ideology. However it has been called a type of rancid populism because it is prepared to exploit popular anger with the Washington establishment in the context of economic crisis. But the Tea Party is itself part of this establishment and its major aim is to replace the domination of the Democratic Party in government with the role of the Republicans: “The Tea Party plays an important role in the dissemination of pro-business ideology, but it is merely one of the many forces to do so. Furthermore, the Tea Party is largely a mass mediated force. Contrary to popular depictions, the Tea Party relies upon elite, top-down organizing for its success as the group serves the interests of the Republican Party and business power. The power of the Republican Party to influence the public mind, then, is a product of corporate America and Republican institutional forces.”(p9)

The character of the Tea Party is indicated in the fact that its major support is from affluent and high income groups within society. This means the popular view that it represents a popular rebellion of blue collar workers is largely a myth. *In*deed it would be surprising if the Tea Party did become popular with many working people because its major campaign issue is opposition to the reform of the health service and the end of the importance of private health insurance, and it is also consistently against the interests of the trade unions. However it could be argued that it has been successful because of its ability to blame Obama for the economic crisis and the victory of the Republicans in the midterm 2010 elections was connected to the propaganda of the Tea Party. However this success was based on the Tea Party being able to galvanise the affluent behind the Republican Party and did not mean that it was able to mobilise lower income groups against the Democratic administration.

Consequently in sociological terms DiMaggio has provided a powerful understanding of the Tea Party. But what he does not explain satisfactorily is the ideological character of the ideas of the Tea Party. For example, how are they able to appear credible despite the propagation of the ludicrous idea that Obama is a socialist? These types of questions are not answered because the author is content to consider them as an unserious expression of propaganda that is meant to confuse the general public. Hence DiMaggio does not reply to a book by John O’ Hara that outlines the ideology of the Tea Party. (p84) Instead he contends that O’ Hara is unable to explain why the Tea Party is not a credible mass movement. This omission is serious because the author is effectively ignoring the relation between ideas and the possibility of the development of mass support. Instead of addressing these issues, DiMaggio is content to suggest that the Tea Party is effectively an artificial product of sympathetic media coverage. This viewpoint may not be generally untrue, but the Tea Party could not retain support if its ideas were not considered supportable by some sections of the American population. This point deserves investigation, but it is neglected by the author because of his emphasis on the development of the Tea Party as an expression of the role of the media. But the point is that the role of the media would not be able to sustain the Tea Party if its ideas were unpopular? This is why its ideology should be taken more seriously.

In one of his initial chapters, DiMaggio analyses whether the Tea Party constitutes a genuine mass movement. A genuine mass movement is characterised by its ability for collective action and consistent participation of its members in the decisions of the organisation. This is expressed by the ability to hold public meetings and rallies, and to produce literature. This is contrasted with Astroturf organisations that are extremely centralised and hierarchical, being based on the role of the internet rather than regular internal and external meetings. The Tea Party conforms to the concept of Astroturf organisation. It has an extremely individualist ideology that discourages and opposes collective activity, and this is reflected in its low level of local activity and the fact that the meetings that do take place are poorly attended. However its organisation is highly centralised and based on established Republican politicians like Sara Palin, and the ideology is uniform such as the propagation of the view that Obama is a socialist. The Tea Party also has wealthy patrons like the Koch brothers.

The outcome of the situation is the development of an elite organisation that is compatible with the politics of the Republican Party. It cannot be characterised as an expression of genuine mass protest against the politics of Washington. Instead its most important success was in influencing the Republican Party to oppose the bank bailout and other measures of state intervention to try to overcome the economic crisis. They also had a high profile in opposing health service reform. Hence what could be suggested is that the Tea Party is a distinct part of the right-wing of the Republican Party, and is the most vehement supporters of a market ideology. However they do not form a distinct party within the party and are their voting patterns in Congress are not necessarily dissimilar to other Republicans. The outsider image is a myth created by the media.

Reluctantly the author admits that the Tea Party has a political programme of support for balanced budgets and opposition to deficit financing, the view that taxes are oppressive, and opposition to what they call the socialist transformation of society. They are also opposed to welfare programmes like Medicare and social security. Blame is projected onto Obama for the economic crisis, and the fact that chronic economic problems occurred in the period of the Bush regime is ignored. DiMaggio argues that this standpoint is irrational and the expression of ideological ignorance that is unable to understand and recognise the character of the economic crisis of capitalism. It also represents a big business agenda that is not genuine populism. However what is not explained is why such ideas become credible in this period of crisis despite being expressions of prejudice and irrationality? DiMaggio implies that we cannot take such ideas seriously, but this superficial approach does not establish the superiority of alternative ideas that argue for the alternative of socialism. This is the task that DiMaggio fails to realise.

Instead the author is more successful in indicating that the local meetings of the Tea Party are poorly attended and reject the importance of audience participation. Instead the major activity of the local Tea Party supporters was sending out emails and participating in the election activities of the Republican Party. This lack of local activity was glossed over by the fact of highly publicised national rallies: “In short, the contrast between bottom-up social networking and activism on the left and top-down partisan electioneering and PR on the right could not have been starker. Tea Party supporters were unwilling to participate in grassroots organizing, let alone engage in direct confrontation, civil disobedience, or nonviolent direct action.”(p91) thus the idea that the Tea party is some type of mass movement is false and contradicts the fact that its central aim seems to be to elect Republicans with far right credentials. Their neoliberal ideology also rejects the collective aspects necessary to the development of a genuine mass movement. But what the Tea Party has been able to succeed in realising despite the connection of the Bush administration with the economic crisis of 2008 is the rebranding of the Republican Party as the party of the people. The development of a popular right-wing movement has enabled the Republican Party to claim outside credentials and opposition to the Establishment. In these terms it hopes to regain office at the next Presidential elections: “During this period of enduring economic crisis and stagnation, the Republican party is only able to retain its hold on government through rebranding itself as an outside force in politics, which relies on unfounded fear-mongering over Democratic ‘tyranny’ and ‘socialism’.” (p101-102)

How does DiMaggio explain the apparent contradiction between the apparent ideological limitations of the Tea party in relation to its ability to develop popular support? His answer is that sympathetic coverage from the media provided the Tea Party with effective free publicity. Fox News became the major supporter of the Tea Party within the media. This meant the Tea party was provided with credibility that enabled it to mobilise voters to support the Republicans in the mid-term 2010 elections. This success was also related to the continuation of the economic problems and the fact that Obama was blamed for this situation. The overall result of the actions of the Tea Party was to convince affluent voters that they should support the Republican Party. People with low incomes and traditional supporters of the Democratic Party were not generally receptive to the propaganda of the Tea Party, except on the issue of health care reform. The propaganda of the Tea Party on the issue of health care reform was successful in convincing people that increased public provision was detrimental to their interests. This stance of the Tea Party was compatible with the attitude of the Republican Party and it has resulted in the dilution of the legislation of the Obama administration and the effective withdrawal of the proposed policy of public option, or universal medical care.

Sarah Palin, a supporter of the Tea Party, argued that the increased influence of the state in the provision of health care would result in death panels, or the introduction of compulsory euthanasia for the elderly. The success of this propaganda in undermining support for the health care reforms led to President Obama making a speech in favour of the proposed changes to the health service. This led to a temporary renewal of support for the health service changes but the overall effect of Tea Party propaganda was to create confusion and anxiety about the future of health care. But it is also important to recognise that the stance of the Democratic Party itself, which represented increasing lack of interest in principled health service reform, contributed to the public anxiety and scepticism about the measures. It was in this context that the propaganda of the Tea party could be successful. This situation does not mean that the Tea party succeeded in gaining the support of poor working class people on an important social issue. Instead the limitations of the Democratic Party seemed to vindicate the propaganda of the Tea Party and led to support for the view that the proposed health service changes might be detrimental for the general public. It is important to understand that the position of the Tea Party was not motivated by the desire to protect the interests of the recipients of health care service, and instead their views were based on protection of the status quo and the privileges of the providers of private insurance.

The elite character of the Tea party was shown by the fact that it was unable to organise its proposed conference in October 2010. This failure indicated that it was based on the leadership of major national figures and yet its local activity was unstable and inconsistent. Furthermore the Tea Party in Congress failed to act as a distinct pressure group, and instead it merged into the activity of the Republican Party. It had achieved its objective of shifting the Republican Party to the right and so the necessity of the continuation of the Tea party was effectively called into question. In contrast the vigorous mass activity of the Unions in Wisconsin against proposed cuts and the undermining of collective bargaining indicated what represented authentic collective action by a genuine mass movement. However in order to obtain support for what are effectively unpopular neoliberal policies, the Republican party has had to market itself in the false populist terms of expressing a revolt against Washington.

The author concludes in the following manner: “Contrary to popular political and media portrayals, the Tea party does not constitute a legitimate social movement on a par with the other movements of the past and present. The comparison of the Tea party to the Wisconsin Labour revolt demonstrated the difference between genuine and “Astroturf” social movements.”(p228)

In general terms the author has outlined the reasons why the Tea party does not represent the development of a genuine mass movement of protest against the establishment. It is not a populist organisation in the radical tradition of American politics. Instead the Tea Party is an elite organisation that represents a distinctive expression of the ideology of the Republican Party. However despite this powerful analysis it lacks a coherent analysis of why the ideology of the Tea Party has been able to obtain popular support. Further work on the ideology of the Tea Party is needed.