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# Tax Day Protest in Washington DC

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My first impression approaching the Washington Monument is that this crowd was small, very small. During the hour I stayed, there were dribbles of people coming and going, but no surge of participants. The protesters filled an area between the Monument and Constitution Ave approx. one block long and another block wide, so I'd say there were under 5,000 people – and that might be generous because the lawn wasn't densely packed. (The organizers bragged from onstage of 25, 000 people.) A sea of pre-printed yellow flags: "Don't Tread on Me!" with the rattlesnake, but no pre-printed placards or banners indicating some behind the scenes orchestrated presence. Crowd demographics: about 99% white, disproportionately middle-aged and older. However, the few Blacks I saw were all women and very vocal activists.

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Judging the class composition was a little trickier; I'd say evenly split between middle-class and working class. The younger end of the crowd, those 55 and under, tended to be more working class and Southern, judging by dress, accents, tattoos, etc. Several ZZ Top look-a-alikes. Very few under 30s – and those that were appeared distinctly upper middle class, maybe local Republican apparachniks sniffing around.

Glancing at the mostly home-made placards, the messages were all over the place . . . "Obama, put up the wall!," with a hand-drawn map of the Southwest with a red wall separating Texas from Mexico. Lots of too-much tax themes and cranky Constitutional point making, with quotes from Jefferson, Madison, etc. Another popular theme: Obama turning the country socialist (!!!). One poster said "If You Want Socialism, Move to Europe! I Love the USA!" Lots of anti-big government themes. Little here deviated from the mainstream portrayal of Tea Party (TP) views. One placard read, "Trust the Government? Ask an Indian!" (The holder said he was Native American.) Ann Randists and Ron Paul supporters handing out long boring leaflets. Interestingly, I didn't see any LaRouche people, though they may have been circulating elsewhere in the crowd. I saw more than a few banners and placards with the produce-the-birth certificate line.

Another recurrent theme could be summed up by one poster: "Stop Rewarding Failure." I had the sense this was directed below and not above, i.e. to 'irresponsible' mortgage holders being bailed out and not to the banks. I heard a middle-aged Black woman tell someone she was originally from Mississippi and the Bible said "ye shall earn from the sweat of your brow," so there shouldn't be any welfare. A small army of *Fox News* vans lined up on the periphery broadcasting live.

The first speaker I heard was someone from *Saturday Night Live* who performed this chilling sing-song skit (think of Chuck Berry's call-and-response in "My Ding a Ling"). The punch line, which the audience was prompted into singing along with, went: "There's a Communist in the White House." Obama's mother and father were Marxists, he worked for ACORN, who were Marxists, his professors were Marxists, he appointed a Marxist as his Green Czar and the biggest indictment of all: when Obama's teleprompter went off and he had to ad-lib, he directly quoted the *Communist Manifesto* about "Spreading the wealth around," each indictment paused and punctuated by the crowd chanting the refrain. Here, naked and unadorned, was the worst John Bircher-type paranoia and conspiratorial nuttiness.

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Washington DC Independent Media Center

However illogical, the fear is genuine: the rank- and- file TPerers are rattled about a potential 1984 government dictatorship. The sense of being a persecuted far-sighted minority who sees what is "really" going on hangs heavy in the air and spurs morale and organizing, linking disparate and conflicting agendas that could easily spin apart in

normal circumstances – and in the medium term, the TP may still implode and dissolve into rival groups, all claiming the “true” Tea Party mantle.

One of the organizers warned people to be on the look-out for “Tea Party Crashers,” people planted to discredit the event by making racist statements. If you saw someone like this, surround and escort them out of the rally; clearly, a sign the TP is concerned about its image. Another speaker, running off the list of movement demands, included “Take back America from corporations who want to feast at the public trough.” But that was the only evidence of any vague economic populism I heard from the stage. The next big momentum in Tea Party strategy is a repeat Sept 12th march later this year, an event mentioned several times from speakers, who bragged of bringing a “million” people to DC last fall.

However, the most effective speaker – and I didn’t catch her name – was a fiery youngish Black woman who got the loudest applause of all. She deftly scored points like, “How dare the Democrats play the race card with us when one of their own – Robert Byrd – used to openly wear KKK robes and hoods” and ripped Charles Rangel, who “wants to load us down with taxes yet can’t pay his own.” She said, “They try to divide us by claiming the TP is lily-white. Well look at me, this color doesn’t fade!” Whoever she was, she was a brilliant, forceful speaker, pushing all the right rhetorical buttons.

For me, the most interesting scenes took place on the periphery and involved left-wing people who spontaneously came down trying to strike up a dialogue with marchers. One was a younger anarchist who carried a sign reading, “Stop Socialized Medicine – Shut Down Military Hospitals,” which he used to engage. He was absolutely brilliant, good naturedly provoking and prodding people to look at their contradictions. He consistently attracted a small lively crowd and held his own, bantering well without offending anyone.

Down the street and unconnected to the anarchist was a middle-aged guy who held a sign saying “Tax the Rich.” I eavesdropped on several of his conversations and there was a genuine give and take taking place with some more thoughtful TPer. What would happen if this was duplicated, with more of the left talking face-to-face, like these two plucky individuals?

A good example of what NOT to do. A late-30s couple, well-coiffed in expensive designer track suits, moussed hair, yuppie-looking, held up a sheet spray-painted with this message: “Defend Obama. Outlaw White Supremacy.” Smug, wan smiles, they looked impassively into space like Buckingham Palace Guards, refusing to talk to anyone. I stood by watching how people responded. They exploded incredulously in anger, yelling at the couple, “Where do you see any white supremacists here”? No answer, discussion or explanation forthcoming from these two, just this silent, arrogant posturing of presumed moral superiority. Were they plants of some sort, trying to provoke a violent response from someone in the crowd? Or was it a case, as I overheard one TP say, of “They’re just trying to get on You Tube, ignore them”? Who knows? In the faint whiff of conspiracy and persecution wafting through this event, any scenario was possible.

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There were a lot of contradictions in the recent *New York Times* report. While the report said the Tea Partiers were better off than the average American, the report also said the TPartiers were less educated than the average, with only 1/3 having a college degree. Unless the people without a college degree were classic petit-bourgeois, like small store owners, gas station owners, that sort of job, it’s difficult to see how low education would be associated with high earnings. But from what I saw, many had a classic Southern white working class look. It’s hard for me to see how

many can be reached, because there's such a level of paranoia and victimization that tumbles from one issue to another. Hardly the soaring fascism many on the left, like Chomsky, are foolishly predicting - a prediction which gives these people the excuse to keep supporting Obama.

What is more important is to get an accurate picture of how many young soldiers from the Iraq etc wars are involved. Help for returning veterans is very poor, their unemployment rate is higher than the average and if even a small minority gravitate to these nutty groups, the picture could change, if their bitterness at being abandoned by the government translates into action. I don't think the anti-war movement is going to connect with them; the cultural divide is too great. Most of the anti-war soldiers I've heard speak come from middle-class, well-educated backgrounds.

Washington, April 15, 2010