

The Party of antihistory

Harvard historian Jill Lepore lays a charge at the Tea Party: abuse of history

The Tea Party is too diverse (and too rowdy) to be easily stereotyped. In fact, the one thing holding the movement together may be its shared commitment to history—and to the idea that America has deviated from its Constitutional course.

This notion that the Tea Party represents a return to our original American values is lodged deep in the movement's DNA. "If you read our Founding Fathers," cable commentator Rick Santelli said during the 2009 CNBC segment that first raised the idea of a tea party protest, "people like Benjamin Franklin and Jefferson—what we're doing in this country now is making them roll in their graves." Since then, Tea Partiers have expressed their devotion to history through tricorne hats, Revolutionary era flags, and historically driven puns ("Give me liberty, not debt!"). On Fox News, Sean Hannity has told viewers the story of Boston's Liberty Tree and offered a stirring graphic of a second Liberty Tree, with "We the People" emblazoned on its trunk and the apples of "Industry" and "Commerce" dangling from its boughs.

Commentators and opponents have poked fun at this—Stephen Colbert wondered if Hannity's apples were going to be "fermented into stimulus cider"—but the Tea Party's historical impulse is something to take seriously. The Tea Partiers certainly do, crafting historical narratives that wrap neatly around their candidates' political goals and drafting the founding fathers into the debates over stimulus funding and President Obama's healthcare plan.

But is that really history? That's the question that has occupied Harvard historian Jill Lepore for the past year. Lepore is an influential specialist in early American history, and her previous book, *New York Burning*, which explored racial tensions in the 1740s, was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize. In her new book, *The Whites of Their Eyes: The Tea Party's Revolution and the Battle over American History*, she takes a careful look at what the Tea Partiers claim about American history—and, more broadly, at how they pursue and value history itself.

Academic historians rarely mix it up with modern political movements. They even more rarely do so by walking into Boston bars, notebook in hand, and interviewing local Tea Partiers. But that's what Lepore did—first for a long story in the *New Yorker*, where she is also a staff writer, and now in *The Whites of Their Eyes*. What she found, and what she dedicates much of her book to arguing, is that the "Tea Party's Revolution . . . wasn't just kooky history; it was *antihistory*."

Lepore spends part of *The Whites of Their Eyes* correcting the Tea Party's historical facts—pointing out, for example, how odd it is to claim "taxation without representation" under a president who carried the electoral vote 365 to 173. But she also corrects the Tea Party's historical methods. The Tea Party belongs to a long tradition of squabbling over the Revolution's meaning, a tradition that began before the Revolution had even ended and continued through the Civil War, the Civil Rights debate, and up to today. But Lepore argues that the Tea Party has

outdone its predecessors on both the left and the right through its fashioning of a nostalgic and inflexible history. The Tea Party takes the Founding Fathers and simplifies them; it turns them into an orderly (angelic) choir when, in fact, they were a confusing and contradictory group. And this isn't just an error of fact, it's an error of method. "The study of history requires investigation, imagination, empathy, and respect," Lepore writes. "Reverence just doesn't enter into it."

In an election cycle where Nevada Senate candidate Sharron Angle defends herself to the *New York Times* by claiming that "those words, 'too conservative,' is fairly relative. I'm sure that they probably said that about Thomas Jefferson and George Washington and Benjamin Franklin"—in an election cycle, in other words, like this one, such issues have stopped being merely academic. But that's just fine by Lepore, who's been pushing historians to re-enter the public conversation for a while now. Patrick Maney, who teaches history at Boston College, admits that, outside of Lepore, "There isn't anybody writing like this—who's both informed by today's historical scholarship and aiming at the general public. Right now, she's in a league of her own."

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"At first, I didn't want to write about the Tea Party," Lepore admits, sitting in her Cambridge office, which has been overrun by stacks of books, piles of paper, and a few Fed Ex boxes half-full of fact-checking materials for her next *New Yorker* essay. "I thought it was being over-reported."

In the spring of 2009, however, Lepore was teaching a course on the American Revolution when Santelli inadvertently launched the Tea Party movement with his rant against the stimulus. Lepore says she and her students started bumping into Tea Partiers on field trips and tracking the analogies their leaders drew between colonial America and the current moment. When she taught the course again in the fall, the analogies kept cropping up: during the first 9/12 rallies, where people turned out in their best colonial garb to protest health care; and again during the rise of Tea Party hero Scott Brown. At that point, Lepore decided she had to attend some Tea Party events herself—and to start TiVo-ing Glenn Beck.

Like many Tea Party anthropologists—though unlike many Harvard historians—Lepore sat in on meetings; attended rallies, including Sarah Palin's visit to Boston in April of 2010; observed how local elementary teachers taught the Revolution; and explored the locations of the historical tourism industry, especially the Boston Tea Party Ship, a replica currently sitting in Gloucester and in serious disrepair. Through this reporting, Lepore arrived at a better understanding of the Tea Party's relationship to history. What they were marshaling wasn't patriotic spirit, and it certainly wasn't history. It was, in her term, "antihistory," and this became the core idea of her book.

Two things separate Lepore's antihistory from its prefix-less sibling. First, and most obvious, antihistory gets stuff wrong. Sharon Angle's invocation of Franklin and Jefferson as social conservatives would certainly surprise their contemporaries, who knew Jefferson for his religious skepticism and Franklin for his public abolitionism.

Second—and, for Lepore, more seriously—antihistory hijacks history’s raw materials. It takes dates and events and quotations and twists them into a static picture, a picture that, done right, will match up perfectly with current policy goals. “In antihistory, time is an illusion,” Lepore writes. Antihistory is “more literal than an analogy. It wasn’t ‘our struggle is like theirs.’ It was ‘we are there’ or ‘they are here.’”

These twinned ideas, Lepore writes, add up to a form of “historical fundamentalism, which is to history what astrology is to astronomy, what alchemy is to chemistry.” And that’s what makes the Tea Party’s antihistory so much worse than a simple partisan interpretation of history, which is something we’ve been indulging in for a long time. *The Whites of Their Eyes* also traces the history of refashioning the Revolution for political ends, and Lepore has unearthed some fascinating examples of this. In the 1940s, advocates for universal health care invoked John Adams as a guiding spirit. In the 1960s, both sides in Boston’s busing debate tried claiming the Founding Fathers. In the 1970s, the “Tea” in “Tea Party” stood not for Taxed Enough Already, as it does for some current supporters, but for the progressive group Tax Equity for Americans.

Lepore finds the roots of the Tea Party’s historical agenda not in the Revolution itself, but in the 1970s, when the country’s bicentennial sent Americans scrambling to update and reclaim the Revolution. This was a time of national celebration, especially in Boston. (The new Boston Tea Party ship came over during this period.) But it was also a time of national anxiety. And the competing versions of history that resulted from this split—one from groups like Tax Equity for Americans, the other from their conservative counterparts—reminds Lepore of our current moment. “The Tea Party’s history reminded me of the story I learned as a school child,” says Lepore, who grew up outside Worcester. “I was in the fourth grade, and we came into Boston for the Red Sox and for the Bicentennial.”

The Bicentennial’s Revolution, like the Tea Party’s, seemed closer to folklore than to history. Lepore says this parallel makes sense. “In both the 1970s and right now, the country’s in a bad place. People needed to find something to celebrate in the American past that is somehow unambiguous. I understand that need. But I don’t want to found our politics on it.”

Lepore first introduced this argument in her *New Yorker* article on the Tea Party, which ran in May and contained a number of interviews with Boston-area Tea Partiers. “They’re good, sweet people,” Lepore says. “They really are interested in the Revolution.”

But Lepore’s article did not sit well with its subjects. I called Christen Varley, the president of the Greater Boston Tea Party, and she told me that “as a *former* subscriber”—her emphasis—“I never expected the article to be fair.” Varley says Lepore “tried to define what we were before we had an opportunity to do it ourselves.” She believes Lepore arrived with an agenda, one that revealed itself in her meticulous descriptions of the Tea Party’s meeting place, the historic Green Dragon Tavern near Faneuil Hall. “She placed so much more importance on the location than we ever did,” Varley says. “I never in a million years would have known this place existed—I’m old and married and don’t live in the city.” (The Greater Boston Tea Party can no longer meet at the Green Dragon, Varley told me, because someone who was unaffiliated with the group got into one political argument too many.)

Varley and other Tea Partiers dispute Lepore's description not only of their meetings, but also of their ideas. They aren't claiming to be historians, Varley says, and shouldn't be held to that standard: their focus is on political change. When the Tea Party deploys the Founding Fathers, she says, they do so because "it's a tool we can use—personalizing the ideas about the way government should be. I admit it's a little contrived, but it's no different than campaigning for a candidate or marketing a movie star."

But Lepore believes that history should be held to a higher standard. "If Christen says it's window dressing, we don't disagree about that," Lepore says. "But I am not convinced it operates in that way for everyone else."

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One way to read the Tea Party is to say it isn't simply indulging in alternate history, but seeking historical alternatives. They get both in something like Glenn Beck's online (and for profit) Beck University, where you can enroll in Faith 102 and learn that the Founding Fathers had little interest in separating church and state. As Lepore writes in *The Whites of Their Eyes*, the Bill of Rights prohibited the federal government from introducing an official religion—and did so "at a time when all but three states still had an official religion." But Lepore understands and appreciates the desire for history. She also believes, on this count, that her fellow historians share some of the blame for the Tea Party—or at least, for a world in which the Founding Fathers can serve a red carpet function.

Academic history, according to Lepore, has largely pulled away from with the public sphere. She also traces this to the Bicentennial, which contemporary historians dismissed as patriotic schlock and thus forfeited as an opportunity to tell a better, truer story to a public that was newly excited about Revolutionary America.

Things got only worse from there. In the 1980s, Lepore says, the political right began trying to rescue the Founding Fathers from lefty historians, who increasingly emphasized history's social side over its sweeping narratives and individual achievements. At the same time, these historians abdicated any kind of a public role, which created a space for pop historians—call it the David McCullough school—to start churning out heroic, best-selling biographies. "This saturated the culture with a journalistic perspective on the past," Lepore says. "That way of reaching a reader is to say, 'It was just like now. You could sit down and have a beer with George Washington.' . . . I don't hold these people accountable," she says, adding that she admires many of McCullough's books. "But they're all bound up together."

Today, as academic historians content themselves with counting the number of ads selling breast milk in the *Boston Gazette*, Lepore worries that the public face of history has become talking heads on TV specials, breezily ranging between presidencies and across centuries. "The collapsing of distance, the forced analogies—this is what passes for historical analysis in our culture," Lepore says. "And most of it is pretty bad."

But public-minded historians don't need to join the TV gadflies or churn out commentary columns. Lepore respects the breast milk tabulators. (In fact, she's one herself: her *New York*

Burning comes with 40 pages of tiny-type appendices on topics like “Percentage of Certain Name Types Among Male Slaves and Free Blacks.”) Lepore’s next book will be a biography of Franklin and his sister, Jane Mecom, and she hopes that it can combine the history of neglected people and events with the story of a fascinating individual—that it can balance the needs of both audiences. “We can watch him run away, and into history,” she says of Benjamin, “and we can watch what happens to her, left behind.”

That’s one way historians can try to have it both ways. “The contribution historians can make to public conversation is to provide the long view,” Lepore says. And that means marshaling not only a historian’s facts, but a historian’s methods—not to shut down the debate over the Revolution’s meaning, but to keep it going. “I want to ask, ‘Where does this come from?’”, Lepore says, “not ‘What is this like?’”

The question that remains, of course, is who will listen. In what may be the Tea Party’s greatest trick, it has managed simultaneously to invoke history and to dismiss historians. (One of the first things Varley said to me was that Lepore “was disdainful that we didn’t have a list of history degrees behind us.”) Lepore would like to see the media push the Tea Party harder on its historical rhetoric. “I think a lot of journalists were intimidated by the Tea Party,” Lepore says, citing Angle’s example. But she would also like to see historians make themselves and their knowledge more available. They’re doing good work, but that’s not enough. They need to bring that work to journalists, to Tea Partiers, to the public as a whole. “The response of many of them is to refuse to participate,” Lepore says of her professorial colleagues. “But people will still do it—they just won’t be people who know much about history.”