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Sociologist Sheds Light on Tea Party in New Book

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BLOOMINGTON, Ill.— With their far-right politics and Revolutionary War-era dress, the Tea Party at times has been depicted as an irrational, racist faction.

That depiction is far too simplistic, according to a new book by Illinois Wesleyan University sociologist Meghan Burke. In *Race, Gender, and Class in the Tea Party: What the Movement Reflects about Mainstream Ideologies* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2015), Burke reveals a much deeper and more fascinating analysis of the group by exploring active organizers' understanding of their world and how they act to change it.

An assistant professor of sociology whose expertise is racial discourse, Burke felt compelled to study the Tea Party as the movement gained momentum in the national political spotlight. Over a two-year period, Burke interviewed Tea Party community coordinators throughout Illinois and attended rallies, organizer training sessions and other public events.

Burke is deeply critical of the racism within the movement. But as she argues in the book, that racism is coded and colorblind in ways similar to more liberal Chicago communities she studied previously.

"Very quickly I saw that the Tea Party is far more complex than just a simple 'racist-or-not' dichotomy," Burke said. "I found that, in some ways, the Tea Party is a very mainstream movement. The way they talk and think about race isn't so different from the rest of the country."

Burke believes many Americans share the colorblind ideology that the successes of the civil rights movement have created a level playing field for all people. "It's a common notion that with the passage of equal opportunity laws, the legacy of wealth and inequality by race is nonexistent or can be overcome by individual effort or having the right values.

"That's the way we approach policy, that's the way we are taught in schools, and that's the way we are socialized," she added. "That thinking shows up in the Tea Party, but Democrats don't take a radically different stance. The differences aren't as big as we'd like to imagine when we're in our partisan mindsets."

The book also highlights the gender dynamics of the movement, which have received far less attention from both scholars and the media. She said it was almost immediately revelatory to her to see "so many women involved in the movement who were becoming politically conscious, confident and active in their communities, often for the first time in their lives." In her book, Burke argues that dismissing the movement also dismisses these important transformations.

She said another facet of the movement is the belief that those involved feel they are not represented by their elected officials – a sentiment that cuts across party lines and political ideologies, Burke notes. "Those I spoke with don't feel that our elected officials are really thinking about ordinary Americans and the struggles that we face," Burke said. "They're frustrated that money is so influential in politics." She noted that double-edged sword as she was completing her research. The movement had succeeded in getting Tea Party candidates elected in the 2010 elections, and was struggling to keep those officials accountable as they became Washington insiders themselves, Burke said.

In her conclusion, Burke ponders what is to be made of the Tea Party. She argues that the movement magnifies the challenges that remain for racial and social justice, in spite of progress. She writes: "Most Tea Party members accept racial



Megan Burke



equality at least in principle, and the movement has served as a platform for the empowerment of many women. At the same time, coded racism, a naïve belief that colorblindness equals progress, women's empowerment that depends on sexism as its strategy, and the notion that men and women are fundamentally different – these are all examples of the work that still needs to be done.”

She adds, “My hope for the book is that it inspires critical and more compassionate conversations across political lines that unsettle a lot of assumptions we have about each other and about our own values. I hope that we might be able to push some real dialogue around race and politics and what's going on in our communities as people read the book. Those have to be uncomfortable conversations, so people very well may not like it. As an author, that's a very scary thing, but that's what convinced me to devote a couple of years to this project.”

Burke is also the author of *Racial Ambivalence in Diverse Communities: Whiteness and the Power of Color-Blind Ideologies* (Lexington Books, 2012). She directs the Engaging Diversity program, an innovative pre-orientation program designed for white students to learn about privilege and racism. She was named Student Senate Professor of the Year in 2013. Burke joined the faculty at Illinois Wesleyan in 2009 after earning a Ph.D. from Loyola University Chicago.