

Hartigan: Is the tea party racist?

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In the past year, a clearer image of the tea party movement has come into focus.

After waves of vivid yet anecdotal glimpses in the news of these angry conservatives, we gained a more quantified picture via a survey by The New York Times that revealed them to be almost 90 percent white, predominantly male and generally better off economically than the nation at large. The significance of their whiteness has been a fluctuating topic of discussion, now drawn sharply into view by the NAACP's resolution, passed Tuesday at its convention in Kansas City, condemning "bigoted elements within the Tea Party." Not surprisingly, whites associated with the movement have responded animatedly to the resolution. Sarah Palin decried it as a "spurious charge of racism," construing it as "false, appalling, and is a regressive and diversionary tactic to change the subject at hand."

But what is "the subject at hand" when it comes to the tea party? Its supporters maintain that their concerns are economic and linked to the liberal orientation of the Obama administration. Yet it is hard not to recognize a racial texture to these concerns, given that they are so keenly tied to the nation's first African American president. Many commentators have parsed their public statements looking for evidence of racial animus, yet, as whites so often do, members have insisted that it is not about race. So how do we talk about the potential racial dimensions of this movement, and is "racism" the best way to characterize them? Those questions concern more than the tea party; they relate to our public culture as we strive to make sense of how race matters.

That question is challenging because we still tend to think of race and racism as a fairly clear-cut, black-and-white matter. People either are racist or they're not, and as Palin observed, "All decent Americans abhor racism." That does not leave much room, then, for talking about possible roles for race that might not manifest in stark absolutes. The problem is evident even in the NAACP's resolution, which it has not formally released yet, pending passage by its national board of directors in October. Fixating on an incident in March when members of the Congressional Black Caucus were accosted with racial epithets by demonstrators at a tea party demonstration, the resolution asks these people "to repudiate the racist elements and activities of the Tea Party." But what do tea party members hear when confronted by such charges?

The St. Louis Tea Party Coalition responded to the NAACP's resolution by construing it as "condemn[ing] 20 million tea party activists as racists." That is not what the NAACP charged, but it does illustrate the crux of the problem. Whites mobilizing under the auspices of the tea party need to recognize what is so glaringly obvious to people outside the movement: that their whiteness matters to their political stance. Not just their color, but their general age (the majority are over 45 and almost 30 percent are 64 or older) link them to a time in this country when public and political life was much less diverse. Their positions and perspectives reflect a sense of loss of representation and anxiety about the future. Is that racist? Not necessarily, but race certainly does shape their sentiments. The challenge is to find a way to talk about the ways race matter here without assuming that it can only come down to racism.

One of the best ways to proceed is to start talking about whiteness more frequently. Arguably, the greatest privilege that whites retain in this country is the ability to assume that race is not something that matters to them personally. That is why it can be so shocking for whites to encounter charges of racism. And that is where a discussion of the tea party could take a different turn. Instead of taking offense and

launching counter charges of bigotry, participants in the tea party need to take stock of how and why race may shape their perspectives, anxieties and deeply emotional oppositional stances. Whether they are racist or not, race is part of how they see and experience the world. Being cognizant of that is a key step for all whites who find themselves angry about where this country seems to be going.

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