



# Fine Tuning, Standing Firm, 'Fessing Up<sup>1</sup>

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When I completed the final page proofs for *On the Fault Line: Race, Class, and the American Patriot Movement*, I felt a sense of release. The next step was uncertain – critics might applaud my book, tear it to shreds, or worst of all simply ignore it – but the hard work of writing it was behind me. After five years of research I was ready to bid the Patriot Movement farewell. I would no longer have to spend afternoons deciphering complicated conspiracy theories. I could make a valiant effort to rein in my coffee addiction. And best of all, my friends could finally have a conversation with me that did not involve a mention of guns, militias, or right-wing politics. This is not to suggest, of course, that I felt no fear or panic. I felt a great deal of both, but I was ready to move on. My book felt like a baby to me, and I like an expectant mother just past her due date.

Of course, if we follow the metaphor, we know that birth is just the beginning. And so it has been for me. *On the Fault Line* has sparked debate; the critics have responded (Berlet 2004; Durham 2004; Flint 2004; Horton 2004). For me the feedback has been welcome. Commentary (even in disagreement) means someone took the time to consider my arguments and have a serious dialogue about them. I begin this piece, therefore, by extending heartfelt thanks to the participants in this virtual roundtable. And, although she is not a part of this forum, many thanks are also due my editor, Brenda Hadenfeldt, whose patience and support make such a forum possible in the first place.

The comments of my critics are both thorough and wide-ranging. In this essay I will address three criticisms that struck me as particularly salient to the issue of right-wing politics today. In so doing, I hope to fine-tune some of the arguments I made in my book, stand firm on others, and 'fess up to the mistakes of still others.

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## On selecting topics

When I decided to study the Patriot Movement, I had every intention of conducting a highly critical analysis. I chose my topic in 1996, just over a year after the horrific bombing of the Murrah federal building in Oklahoma City. The loss of 168 lives, many of them children, was hard to fathom. Moreover, even though most militia groups decried the bombing, the attention they garnered after the bombing did little to burnish their image. John Trochman of the Militia of Montana peddled conspiracies about UN troops preparing to take over the US government while patriot internet chatter explained that the US had been occupied by a Zionist cabal plotting one world government.

I never abandoned a critical stance during my research, but at some point I realized my analysis would have to be more than ‘just critical.’ To understand the movement I would have to make an effort to stand, however briefly, in the shoes of a group largely reviled and ridiculed and to see things as they saw them. Opening myself up to the nuances of the movement was gradual, but two factors were especially important in prompting a change in my approach. Meeting my subjects was clearly crucial. Reading about “gun-toting rednecks” was one thing, talking to them another. People have a way of being, well human, when you actually converse with them. And, humanity is always more complicated than stereotypes suggest. Reflecting on my experiences with colleagues and friends was also influential. Perhaps, because the subject was so ‘exotic,’ my friends had numerous questions about my informants, and answering them required considered reflection on my part.

Over time, I came to realize that patriots were not one-dimensional, cardboard cut-out figures. Rather, I discovered that they occupy conflicting social positions –working class and particularly vulnerable to neoliberal trade policies, but also white and benefiting from the social privileges that attend it. I began to wonder why so many working class people had opted for a politics that offered baseless conspiracies and hollow solutions to free trade mantras. A simple question came to nag me – did it have to be this way? Perhaps, I thought, the Left could have something to say to the average militia member.

## What about specifics?

While each of my critics applauds the political nature of my project, all note the general lack of concrete suggestions for activists in it. While Niedt applauds my analysis for its “political urgency and self-reflexivity,” for example, he finds my political vision “less satisfying.” Likewise, Miller argues that the question of *how* to funnel working class grievances is not fully addressed in my book, suggesting that a comparative study on a progressive movement in a rural place might help “account for the radically different politics” of rural, white males.

These criticisms are justified. They point to a clear lacuna in my work. *On the Fault Line* has nine chapters, a “Note on Method,” and an “Epilogue,” but none of these is devoted exclusively to the question of *how* the Left might counter-mobilize white workers who stand on a fault line. I discuss the issue in the concluding chapter, but the majority of my comments there are focused on a theoretical argument about connections between Marxism and poststructuralism. When I organized the structure of my book, I had no intention of discussing activism. Given the limited academic work that had been conducted to date on the movement, I felt it needed first and foremost to be thoroughly contextualized vis-à-vis neoliberalism. Katz is on target when she says my book was

primarily designed to “assist if not *goad* leftist political organizers.” Indeed, I felt the academic Left was not so much in need of an organizing handbook as it was a reminder that class continues to be an important site of oppression and that if abdicated by the Left will be mobilized by the Right in particularly regressive, xenophobic ways.

If I had it to do over again, however, I would add a chapter on activism. In it I would include a review of key issues around which the Left in Kentucky could mobilize as well as a compilation of resources available to activists. I would also discuss how activists can overcome racial barriers in the mobilization process. In crafting such a discussion I would draw on Zoltán Grossman and Debra McNutt’s work (2003) on Native American and rural white community alliances, which I read after completing my book. Their work demonstrates that multi-racial coalitions can be viable when based around single issues. They also find that coalitions that downplay racial differences are actually less viable than those that acknowledge or even foreground their differences. Indeed, multiracial coalitions appear to function well around anti-corporatist struggles. These findings could also be fruitfully examined, as Miller suggests, in the context of social movements theory, which has developed an important ‘tool kit’ for predicting the viability of movements and coalitions.

### **Citizenship and the Left?**

My argument about citizenship and identity politics was also troubling, especially for Niedt. To recap briefly, I argue that the Left should proffer a progressive notion of citizenship that competes with Patriots’ ethnocentric and antagonistic view of citizenship. A progressive citizenship should be constructed around a discursive chain of equivalences between leftist identity politics and working class concerns. In so doing the Left could reverse its slow neglect of class politics while also connecting it in more fundamental ways to the new identity politics that now predominate within its quarters.

Niedt worries about the categorical viability of a Leftist citizenship. He is apprehensive, for example, that a Leftist citizenship might rely on an antagonistic construction of its others — the guardians of privilege — and thus by virtue of its antagonism be no better an alternative than what the Right currently proffers. He is also concerned that a politic of citizenship focused on celebrating and equating differences does nothing to eliminate the “reproduction of privilege [and] the development of corporatist politics.” Though not stated as such, Niedt’s concern centers on how the Left might develop a notion of citizenship that avoids both antagonism and blind quiescence to unfair structures.

In response I would argue that one need not hate white people to recognize white privilege. Likewise, one can recognize that the accumulation of capital is often at the expense of workers without despising capitalists like George Soros or Bill Gates. Indeed, there are *structures* that maintain white dominance and economic stratification, and the state often protects them. As such, in *On the Fault Line* I argue that it is incumbent on the Left to call on a different role for the state — one that actively intervenes on behalf of workers who cross numerous fault lines of identity. This is vital because the Patriot Movement’s response to the neoliberal state is to hunker down behind essentialist identity categories territorially bounded through invocations to local sovereignty. Not only is such a space/identity configuration antagonistic, it prohibits workers from developing links across geographic and categorical divides. The state has changed under neoliberalism, but

it is not going away. The left should therefore envision a state that is accountable to its citizens and immigrants alike.

It is worth noting here that other movements on the New Right have used anti-statist discourses as an excuse to assault federal entitlement programs designed to assist traditionally othered groups. The so called Republican ‘Revolution’ of 1994, for example, was sold as a remedy to incompetent, corrupt government, but its proposed solutions largely focused on undoing programs like welfare and affirmative action. Indeed, while welfare was attacked for its presumed corruption, tax and regulatory loopholes benefiting corporations were left alone or even strengthened. In such a context, the Left must *actively* posit a role for the state, or risk conceding to right-wing dictates about global competition, efficiency, and privatization.

Niedt is also wary of the efficacy of pluralist citizenship because he feels I underestimate the strength of whites’ attachment to racial privilege. This unease leads Niedt to argue that “the search for opportunities to dismantle material and discursive structures – including those that marginalize patriots – must take precedence over the political inclusion of the right.” He suggests that the strength of attachment to white privilege should lead to a reformation of a key question in my book. Instead of asking “can and should we organize the right?” Niedt suggests that we should query “can and should we organize parts of the right?”

It is important to note, however, that the crux of my argument is not that the Left should mobilize the Right, but that it should have something to say to white workers, and white workers are not by necessity right wing. Niedt’s comments suggest that the two are interchangeable. An alignment between workers and the New Right is true in many places in the US today, but there is no historical rule that says race will always trump class. Such connections are contingent, at least in part, on the efforts of activists on both sides of the political spectrum.

I remain sympathetic, however, to Niedt’s pessimism about the strength of white attachment to racial privileges. And, I acknowledge that the Left will never draw all white workers to a pluralist identity politic. I would suggest, however, that no movement can expect to mobilize all of its target population. Moreover, as I suggest in *On the Fault Line*, the discursive framework of today’s identity politics makes attachment to whiteness attractive for many white males. The white heterosexual male is often posited as the enemy in Leftist identity politics, and in the absence of broad categories such as class or citizenship that bring people together across lines of difference, white workers are likely to fall back on their race to define themselves, and of importance for this book, to frame their anxiety with globalization. Indeed, the Patriot Politic is strong not because it draws on people’s bigotry in the first instance, but because it provides a big tent under which a variety of concerns are acknowledged. It is often only after mobilization that racist and otherwise conspiratorial aspects of the movement are fully revealed (see Aho 1990 for a similar finding). Mobilizing white workers will not be easy, but mobilizing rarely is.

The relative absence of class politics on the Left is an important point to reiterate. Indeed, even progressive scholars often assume that white workers have a full buffet of political choices before them rather than a narrowing political field. In a review of *On the Fault Line* outside this forum, for example, Flint (2004) suggests that workers reject class politics because they are aware of its abuses by regimes such as Stalin’s in Russia. The movement’s anti-statism is thus “an obvious partner” to anticommunism and explains a

good deal of patriots' rejection of class politics. I strongly disagree with Flint's assessment. It ignores both the steady decline in unions during the last twenty years (due in large part to the decline of the manufacturing sector) and the new era of union busting precipitated by Ronald Reagan's brash lock-out of air-traffic controllers in 1981. These structural changes indicate that while class politics may be a choice, the viability of that choice (*vis-à-vis* other choices such as whiteness) is contingent on the state and progressive institutions in civil society.

### **Enduring (v. or adj.) dilemmas in the field**

A final criticism of my book is methodological in nature. Katz' commentary is particularly focused on methodological concerns. She is troubled, for example, by my use of the phrase "poststructural methodology," suggesting that the phrase is unclear, even "opaque." The indicators I define as poststructural, she argues, have been "incorporated into virtually all 'post-positivist' research and has even been recognized by many working in more positivist ways."

When I wrote the "Note on Method" section in my book I used the term poststructural methodology as shorthand to denote the methodology employed by identity scholars in Geography who drew on leading postmodern thinkers, including Foucault, Derrida, and LaClau and Mouffe among others. Katz is correct, however, that there is no "poststructural methodology" in the same way there is a quantitative or qualitative methodology. This is a fair criticism, and I accept it. The terminology is not precise enough to capture the literature I was discussing.

As a person who was doing an identity study of the Patriot Movement, however, I can say that the identity literature provided little in the way of guidance for my particular study. As I note earlier, when I began this study I had every intention of being highly critical of the Patriot Movement. My study was also political from the start. In studying the movement I hoped to expose the strategies and tactics of a movement that blames traditional others (immigrants, Jews, feminists, gay people) for its woes.

Looking to identity studies for guidance for a political project was a natural place to start. Not only was I engaging identity studies in (and out) of Geography, but such studies have a history of being explicitly political. Indeed, the earliest feminist writings in the discipline were designed to uncover and lay bare the oppression of women. The same can be said for works on race, sexual orientation, and disability. Studying the marginalized was often designed to highlight the oppression they suffered and consider how to eliminate it. Given the focus on marginalized groups, however, most methodology in identity work assumes a shared political vision between the researcher and the researched and is tailored appropriately. Indeed, many studies discuss how researchers can assure that their research is useful to their informants and how the researcher's work can be useful to the wider cause in which it is situated.

While my project was political, it was neither aligned with, nor designed to further a patriot politics. In my context, several of the concrete suggestions identity studies offered seemed not only in-congruent but counter-productive. The idea of strategic essentialism, for example, had no bearing for my project. Likewise, while the idea of sharing drafts with my informants was not incongruent, it did raise concerns for me. I

worried, for example, that sharing my findings (which were politically divergent and critical) might lead an informant to cut off my access to others in the movement.

Katz is correct, however, that I could have expounded on a number of methodological issues. In particular, Katz's question – "who was exercising what kinds of power?" – strikes me as especially fruitful to unpack. Identity scholars are accustomed to interrogating the power differentials between privileged researchers and marginalized research subjects. Examining groups like the Patriot Movement, however, present a complex situation. As an academic, I had many of the same advantages over my research subjects as those who study recognizably marginalized groups. However, Patriots also held power over me. Patriots were determined to broadcast their message, and they knew my desire for access could work to their advantage. As I acknowledge in my book, I worried about becoming an unwitting mouthpiece for the movement and fear I crossed the line in one instance.

Studying armed groups can also be potentially dangerous because members often come to interviews with weapons. I was fortunate that none of my subjects ever threatened me. Nor did anyone try to intimidate me by flaunting (or subtly displaying) a weapon. Such scenarios do happen, however. In *Inside Organized Racism: Women in the Hate Movement* (2002) Sociologist Kathleen Blee recounts being intimidated by subjects. At an author meets critic roundtable for her book at the 2003 annual meetings of the American Sociological Association, Blee suggested that researching the Far Right has become too dangerous. She now advises students against doing research on these groups.

While I do not agree with Blee's prescription, I believe it is incumbent on those who study the Right to devise guidelines for how researchers might protect themselves ethically and physically. Space prohibits me from delving into many specifics here, but I believe it is crucial for university institutional review boards to develop protocols for how researcher should protect themselves. As the nature of political violence changes in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (see Kaldor 2001), understanding it becomes vitally important. Just as vital, however, is the establishment of guidelines to protect researchers who do this work.

### **Returning to the Movement?**

Although I was happy to bid the Patriot Movement farewell, I maintain a strong curiosity in it. Indeed, I often find myself wondering how the Movement will reconcile its view of patriotism with the uncritical, flag-waving patriotism advocated by those in other quarters of the Right since September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001. I am equally curious about the movement's response to the heightened security environment since the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks. Will patriots accept the government's expanded powers (and even sanction its use against traditional Others) or will patriots decide to go 'underground' and to adopt a criminal strategy in response? I may yet return to this topic, and should I do so, I will be indebted to the commentary of my critics here. Their insights will sharpen any future research I conduct, and my sincere thanks go to all of them.

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