Until Occupy Wall Street appeared, America was characterized by a strange paradox: a generation of marketizing, privatizing, and deregulating everything within reach both created our current economic crisis and its most powerful response, the Tea Party's demand for more of the same policies that created the Great Recession. The most widely circulated explanations for the Tea Party's spectacular rise tend to stress the familiar and the obvious—funding by the Koch brothers and Dick Armey’s Freedomworks, its Astroturf character, key roles played by leading Republicans and long-term right-wing activists, inspiration and promotion by Fox News, involvement of crackpots, gun-nuts, pseudo-patriots, and racist Obama-haters. Important as all of these elements have been, we cannot understand what this startling movement means without looking beyond its familiar physiognomy, to focus on what is distinctly new about the Tea Party. Accordingly I discuss the fact that the Tea Party originated in, and keeps at its center, a furious outburst against social solidarity. We know that this is a sour middle and upper-middle class movement of individualist resentment made up mostly of college-educated white males over 45, one-fifth of whom are earning more than $100,000. But the remarkable fact that these people have occupied center stage, with their demands and their ideas, reflects a deeper problem which needs exploration: thirty-five years of bitter assaults on the welfare state and on behalf of economic individualism, and long-term structural, demographic, and cultural changes have led to a demented and extreme individualism, and until very recently no Left to oppose it. My presentation seeks to understand this new individualism, and to describe how the Occupy movements have finally begun to combat it.

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