



# Placing the Militia Occupation of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in Harney County, Oregon

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## Abstract

This intervention examines the recent militia occupation of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in Oregon. There is no consensus on how to place the group. Some commentators suggest the group was white supremacist. Others argue that it was animated by religious fanaticism. Still others emphasize the group's grievances with the Bureau of Land Management. I argue here that the Malheur occupiers' politics cannot be understood with reference to a single identity position. Rather, we need to focus on the group's anti-government rhetoric because it funnels and shapes multiple interests at once. Here I examine how the group's anti-government rhetoric frames race and class interests. In terms of race, I argue that anti-government rhetoric obscures the white interests behind the occupation. This concealment is based on a selective reading of history that emphasizes the end of settlement, when the government took ownership of land not claimed during the settlement period, instead of the stage leading up to it, when the government seized Indigenous land for white settlement. So construed, the occupiers could claim they were taking the 'people's' land back from the government rather than engaging in a second round of white theft of Indigenous land. In terms of class, I argue that because the occupiers framed their fight as *against* government tyranny instead of as *for* privatization, the occupiers did not have to confront the inequities that come with privatization.



## Introduction

In January 2016 the patriot movement came roaring back. It never really went away, of course, but it did recapture our attention after a self-styled militia occupied the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in Oregon two days into the new year. The occupiers kept themselves in the spotlight for the next three weeks, posting videos on YouTube, providing commentary on Facebook, and giving interviews to reporters. On January 26<sup>th</sup>, 2016 the carnival atmosphere at the refuge came to a halt when the FBI arrested several members of the group during a traffic stop on a highway outside the refuge. Four men and one woman were brought into custody and a sixth man was shot by the FBI during the stop and later died (Zaitz 2016a). In subsequent days, several other occupiers were arrested or surrendered to authorities (Kaplan, Goldman, and Berman 2016). It would take two additional weeks, however, for the last holdouts to surrender and the government to regain full control of the refuge (Wolf, Sullivan, and Berman 2016).

In this intervention I probe a deceptively simple question—how do we understand the Malheur occupation? To be fair, some facts are not in contention. First, the occupiers were all white. Second, the great majority were men. And third, they were well armed. The FBI’s criminal affidavit indicates the group possessed “explosives, night vision goggles, and weapons” (as cited in Duara 2016). Finally, until the 26<sup>th</sup> of January, the government handled the occupiers with kid gloves. They did not turn off the power at the refuge or prevent supplies from being delivered to occupiers. They also allowed occupiers to come and go as they pleased (Morlin 2016).

There is, however, no consensus on how to ‘place’ the Malheur occupiers. Some people believe they are white supremacists (Bell 2016). Others argue that their views are “rooted in Mormon fanaticism” (Beam 2016). Still others (Nantz 2016) emphasize the group’s economic grievances with the Bureau of Land Management (BLM).

I argue here that the occupiers’ politics cannot be understood with reference to a single identity position (i.e. white supremacist, Mormon, or rancher). Indeed, the history of the intermountain west suggests that the settlement of the frontier reflected multiple, often overlapping interests. It was premised on the idea that whites were superior to Indigenous groups, actively supported by the Mormon Church, and committed to the idea that productive land was commodified land (Schlatter 2006). However, it is also not sufficient to state that multiple interests inform the group’s actions. How these interests are expressed is also important. I argue here that to understand the Malheur occupiers, and the wider patriot movement<sup>1</sup> of which they are a part, we have to examine how these more discrete

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<sup>1</sup> According to the Southern Poverty Law Center the patriot movement is comprised of “conspiracy-minded groups that see the federal government as their primary enemy.” The movement includes organized militias as well as so called sovereign citizens who “do not believe they are obliged to

positions/interests are funneled through the movement's actual rhetoric. Indeed, the occupiers' call to arms was not addressed to Mormons, to white people, or even to white ranchers but instead to anyone worried about government tyranny (Zaitz 2016b). None of this is to suggest that race, class, and religion are not important—they are—but instead that anti-government rhetoric has become one of the main vehicles for channeling these identities/interests.

Here I demonstrate how the occupiers' anti-government rhetoric channels the race and class based interests of its members.<sup>2</sup> In terms of race, the anti-government frame obscures the white interests behind the occupation. This concealment begins with the group's selective use of history, which emphasizes the end of settlement, when the government took ownership of land not claimed during the settlement period, instead of the stage leading up to it, when the government seized the indigenous land it would use for settlement. With this timeline in place, the occupiers could argue they were reclaiming the people's land from the government rather than engaging in a second round of white theft of Indigenous land. In terms of class, I argue that because the occupiers framed their take-over as a fight *against* government tyranny instead of as a fight *for* privatization, they did not have to address the inequities that often attend privatization or to explain why those inequities would be preferable to government ownership. Indeed, though the occupiers claimed they wanted to give Malheur 'back' to the region's ranchers, privatization is usually governed by neoliberal principles that favor corporate over producer interests.

I now turn to a brief account of the take-over and events that led up to it. As I demonstrate below, the occupiers claimed they were taking over the refuge because of the outcome of a dispute between two ranchers and the BLM.

### **Background Facts**

On January 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2016 an informal militia of a dozen or so men took over the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in Harney County, Oregon. The county is in the state's semi-arid, southeastern corner. The January 2<sup>nd</sup> takeover was precipitated by a land use dispute involving two local ranchers, Dwight and Steven Hammond (Zaitz 2015). The Hammonds were indicted by the U.S. District Court of Oregon

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pay federal taxes, follow most laws, or comply with requirements for driver's licenses and vehicle registrations" (Potok 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Although I focus on race and class here it is worth noting that the anti-government frame is sufficiently large enough to encapsulate other interests/identity positions (e.g. Mormon, veteran, etc.). It is also an ideal outlet for those who are 'lost' or angry but unable to articulate a source for their grievances. Indeed, on-the-ground accounts of patriot groups since the 1980s have consistently noted the mish-mash of interests that bring people into them (on the Malheur occupation see Walker 2016 and Chokshi and Larimer 2016; on the Midwest see Dyer 1998; on groups in Idaho see Aho 1990; on groups in Kentucky see Gallaher 2003).

in May 2012 on nine counts, including two counts of arson for setting fires in 2001 and 2006 on BLM land abutting their property.<sup>3</sup>

Although neither one of the Hammonds was indicted on terrorism charges, they were subject to sentencing guidelines from the federal Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act, which governs procedures for federal crimes. The Act is controversial because it sets mandatory minimum sentences for crimes covered under the statute. The minimum sentence for arson is 5 years (Zaitz 2015).

A jury convicted the Hammonds on the arson counts in October of 2012, but the judge presiding over the case, Michael R. Hogan, rejected the mandatory minimum sentencing guidelines, instead giving a sentence of 1 year and 1 day to Steven Hammond and 3 months to Dwight Hammond. Hogan argued that the mandatory minimum sentences were “grossly disproportionate to the severity of the [Hammonds’] offenses” (as cited in Jackman 2016).

While the Hammonds were in prison, the prosecutors appealed the case—a common occurrence when a judge fails to execute a mandatory minimum sentence. In March 2015, after the Hammonds had completed their original sentences, the appellate court ruled that the men had been improperly sentenced and ordered the U.S. District Court to resentence them using stated guidelines. The Hammonds were resentenced in October of 2015 and ordered to turn themselves into prison by January 2016 (Jackman 2016).

After the Hammonds were resentenced, militia groups in the intermountain West rallied to their defense (Peacher and Sepuvaldo 2016). One of the most vocal was a loose-knit group headed by Ammon and Ryan Bundy. The Bundy brothers are the sons of Cliven Bundy, a Nevada rancher who engaged in an armed standoff with federal agents in 2014 after the BLM moved to seize his cattle in recompense for nearly a million dollars in unpaid grazing fees (Sneed 2014).

On January 2<sup>nd</sup>, the Bundy group, along with several other militia groups, held a rally in Burns, the Harney County seat, to protest the Hammonds’ resentencing. After the rally, the Bundy group drove roughly 30 miles south to the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge and set up camp in the administrative buildings of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which manages the refuge. Because the refuge was closed for the holiday, the group’s occupation proceeded without incident. The group then called the press to announce it had taken over the refuge and would not leave until two demands were met—the Hammonds were released

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<sup>3</sup> The Hammond family claims both fires were set on their property but spread to BLM land. The Hammonds contend they set the first fire to control an invasive species of Juniper and the second to prevent a lightning strike from starting a larger wildfire. Prosecutors allege, however, that the Hammonds set the first fire to hide evidence they had been illegally hunting on BLM land. Prosecutors do not dispute the Hammond’s description of the second fire but argued that it was illegal because there was a “burn ban” in place at the time. See Jackman (2016) and Moyer (2016) for more details.

from prison and the government renounced its ownership of the refuge. Ammon Bundy emphasized his group's resolve—"we're planning on staying here for years, absolutely. This is not a decision we've made at the last minute" (as cited in Zaitz 2016b). He also put his group's demands into wider perspective.

The best possible outcome is that the ranchers that have been kicked out of the area, then they will come back and reclaim their land, and the wildlife refuge will be shut down forever and the federal government will relinquish such control. What we are doing is not rebellious. What we're doing is in accordance with the Constitution, which is the supreme law of the land (as quoted in Zeitz 20016).

As the above statement suggests, the protest in Burns quickly morphed from a protest about the Hammonds' prison sentences into a protest about the validity of federal ownership of land. It is important to note that the shift in focus and tactics was engineered by people from outside the area. Ammon Bundy hailed from Idaho, for example, and his brother lived in Arizona, Nevada, and Utah before the occupation. It was the same with the men and women who joined them on the refuge. Though some were from western states, none of the occupiers resided in Harney County, or even Oregon (Chokshi and Larimer 2016).

Perhaps not surprisingly, the Bundy militia lost the support of locals in Harney County fairly quickly. As Peter Walker (2016), a geographer who followed the occupation on the ground, notes, "for the community, the rally was about supporting neighbors in need and redressing what they considered to be the Hammonds' inappropriate sentences; it was not about any broader political agenda." In fact, most locals see the Malheur Refuge as an economic resource for the area, providing jobs and attracting tourist dollars.

## **Interpretive Guideposts**

### ***Militias and the Discipline of Geography***

Over the years numerous geographers have studied right wing extremism in the U.S. (Bonds and Inwood 2015; Flint 2003; Fluri and Dowler 2002; Gallaher 2003; Hurley and Walker 2004; Jansson 2010; Medlicott 2004). Here I focus on work about militias and two frameworks that have been used to analyze them—neoliberalism and white settler colonialism. I use and extend on both of these frameworks in my analysis of the current Bundy contretemps.

#### *Neoliberalism:*

Several scholars connect the rise/return of rural radicalism in the 1990s to neoliberalism (see Dyer 1998; Gallaher 2003). When I first began studying the patriot movement in Kentucky, for example, I could not help but notice that its rise coincided with the collapse of the state's tobacco industry. The New Deal tobacco

allotment system, which limited the amount of tobacco that farmers could grow, ensured that tobacco farming was a stable and profitable way to make a living for nearly sixty years. The Universal Tobacco Settlement Act of 1997, however, was scheduled to dismantle it.

Patriots I interviewed decried the loss of tobacco in Kentucky, and called for the legalization of hemp to replace it. However, they rejected using subsidies or an allotment system to ensure high/stable prices for it. This led me to question how the movement's rhetoric addressed their concerns and proposed solutions for them. Through interviews I discovered that patriots blamed the "new world order" for government policies like the tobacco settlement. They argued that the federal government had been hijacked by people in the new world order with the help of politicians in both parties.

When I asked 'who' the new world order represented, however, members pointed to "international bankers," the "trilateral commission," and the "UN" instead of groups I considered more likely culprits (e.g. Agribusiness, insurance companies, etc.). Similarly, when I asked people in the movement to explain why the new world order would support the Universal Tobacco Settlement Act, they told me it was because the "third world" wanted to take America's wealth. I concluded that the movement's framing—with the government as the enemy—not only obscured patriots' ability to pinpoint the actors and processes behind the decline of rural America, it also provided an outlet for expressing racial anxieties through politically safe, nationalistic codes.

In order to stay focused on the topic at hand, I will refrain from exploring the degree to which neoliberal policies in the West have contributed to the patriot movement's resurgence. However, I do think we should use neoliberalism as a metric for *placing* the resurgent movement's proposed solutions and assessing the degree to which it addresses their stated goals. As I demonstrate in more detail below, the occupier's stated goal—to seize public land and 'give it back' to ranchers—is inconsistent with neoliberal goals but ultimately dovetails with its solutions.

### *White Settler Colonialism:*

Other geographers have looked at how white supremacy and settler colonialism intersect in the patriot movement. For example, Bonds and Inwood (2015) argue that both phenomena underpin contemporary land disputes involving militias in the intermountain West. They point to Cliven Bundy's 2014 standoff with federal agents in Nevada as a case in point. The standoff started after the BLM received court permission to seize Bundy's cattle in recompense for two decades of unpaid grazing fees. In response, Mr. Bundy organized a militia to prevent the government from taking his cattle. Bonds and Inwood (2015) argue that the press depicted the standoff as a regulatory skirmish in which both sides had legitimate complaints. As a result, they failed to interrogate the validity of Mr.

Bundy's claim to the land. However, as Bonds and Inwood (2015) argue, Mr. Bundy's claims deserved scrutiny because his "connection to that land itself is the result of white supremacy and particular settler histories that have become normalized in the US" (p. 11).

I agree with Bonds and Inwood (2015) that Cliven Bundy's standoff demonstrates that the logics of white settler colonialism—notably genocide, slavery, and orientalism—continue to exist today. However, I also want to extend on their understanding of white settler colonialism by examining two other logics intertwined in the process—private property and notions of settler victimization. As Blomley (2003) notes, property was central to the "white mythology" of settlement. White settlers were depicted as bringing "order" to "savage" lands (p. 124). During the process of white settlement, the government argued that it was not stealing Indigenous lands because Indigenous peoples were nomads who did not put the land to productive use. In short, white dominance in the West was established by stealing Indigenous land and then demarcating it as whites' legal property. Recognizing the centrality of property to white settler colonialism is important for my analysis here because the occupiers were not only staking a claim to government land, they were also calling for its privatization.

The second logic is the sense of victimization that infuses settler discourses past and present (Brown 1995). Although settlers received free land, they often felt injured by the process. They feared attacks by Indigenous groups and complained bitterly that the government did little to protect them. The sense of being injured by the state has been a consistent theme in American mythology ever since (Faludi 2007). In the 1970s and 1980s, for example, white workers, who had long dominated the industrial workforce, began to see their cultural dominance challenged by feminists and minorities and their economic power eroded by globalization (Savran 1998). Many responded by blaming the government for failing to defend their place in the social and economic order. This notion of injury by the government was also apparent in the occupation.

### **Anti-Government Rhetoric**

In this section I show *how* the occupiers' class and race based interests are funneled through antigovernment rhetoric.<sup>4</sup> To do so I organize my discussion around a set of related questions—who is the federal government, what does it do, and where does it do it?—and unpack the answers articulated by the Bundy militia during the Malheur occupation. Where appropriate, I buttress my account with views from the larger patriot movement.

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<sup>4</sup> Although some commentators have pointed to the role of the Bundys' Mormon faith in their uprising, I confine my discussion here to race and class because most academics do not define Mormon beliefs as central to settler colonialism.

### ***Who is the Government?***

In patriot circles, the federal government is often depicted as an *occupying force*. In a post on Cliven Bundy's blog<sup>5</sup> shortly after the Hammonds were resentenced, for example, the elder Bundy argued that the BLM was engaged in "illegal predatory actions," and he rebuked the agency for "placing themselves as the sole beneficiaries of land and resources" (Bundy 2015). Although the Bundys' framing is consistent with patriot rhetoric since at least the 1980s (see Dyer 1997), it appears contradictory when considered in a wider temporal frame. After all, the Bundys' ancestors were the beneficiaries of the federal government's 19<sup>th</sup> century frontier policy, so it bears asking why the current generation now sees the government as an oppressor.

Part of the answer is straightforward. The BLM and western ranchers have a landlord/tenant relationship. There is a power differential between the two parties and both sides view the other with some suspicion. In many ways the fraught relationship is not surprising. Forty-seven percent of land in western states is owned by the federal government (Sneed 2014). Many private ranches are not large enough to graze cattle sustainably in the region's semi-arid climate, so their owners must pay to graze their cattle on others' lands. Although the BLM charges grazing fees that are substantially lower than private landowners' fees, ranchers complain that BLM regulations are onerous and change frequently, making it difficult to use the land in predictable ways (Nantz 2016).

This context is not, however, sufficient to explain why the government is depicted not as an unfair landlord but instead as an illegitimate and predatory actor. As I note above, the patriot movement has long championed the idea that the U.S. federal government has been captured by nefarious forces. During the 1980s farm crisis, for example, militia groups described the federal government as the "Zionist Occupied Government" (Dyer 1997). By the 1990s, militias were using more neutral language—the new world order—to describe the federal government (Gallaher 2003). In both scenarios, however, international organizations such as the UN, the Trilateral Commission, and/or international bankers were depicted as having taken over the federal government. American leaders were also accused of abetting the take-over by signing international treaties, striking multi-lateral trade agreements, and designing monetary policies that subjected American decision-making to outsiders' demands.

So construed, the US federal government has become a symbol of the other. At the geopolitical scale terms like 'the new world order' signal that *foreigners* control the government. In the domestic sphere the federal government functions as a stand in for the country's changing demographics and white males' presumed loss of power vis-à-vis *women and minorities*. Finally, in economic terms, the

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<sup>5</sup> <http://bundyranch.blogspot.com>

government becomes the province of *takers* (environmentalists, the poor, city dwellers) instead of makers (ranchers).

The political implications of this framing are troubling. First and foremost, the occupiers' rhetoric shields the occupiers' from the racial implications of their politics. Although some patriots likely use the rhetoric with a wink and a nod, others, especially new recruits, may take it at face value. Whatever one's starting point, however, the movement's framing reinforces the often unspoken notion that white America is under siege from minority others. Moreover, by crafting the federal government as a nefarious actor, the frame can turn any disagreement with the federal government into an existential battle for the 'real' America and its 'rightful' owners.

### ***What does the Government Do?***

The Malheur occupiers and their supporters believe the federal government routinely engages in *tyranny* against its own citizens. After his militia took over the refuge, for example, Ammon Bundy told the press that government property was a "tool to do all the tyranny that has been placed upon the Hammonds" (Zaitz 2016b). To understand how ranchers could see themselves as victims of a government that gave their ancestors the land many of them still own today, we need to explore the patriot movement's spatial epistemology of power. Since the 1970s the patriot movement has championed the idea that the current hierarchy of power in the US—i.e. federal power trumps state power, which in turn trumps local power—has been improperly flipped on its head (Gallaher 2003). This interpretation is rooted in the ideology of the Posse Comitatus, a social movement founded by Christian Identity adherents in the 1960s (Aho 1990). Christian Identity holds that God purposefully created a racial hierarchy with whites at its top. Scholars think the group's founders promoted the idea that power should reside in the county because it believed the federal government had been taken over by Jews (Levitas 2002).

Since the 1960s Posse Comitatus views on the locus of power have infused patriot ideology (Dyer 1997). However, the white supremacist underpinnings of the theory have often been obscured or downplayed (Gallaher 2003). After the Oklahoma City bombing, for example, many patriot groups wanted to establish their independence from white supremacist groups because it would allow them to recruit from a wider circle of potential members. As a result, a belief in the power of the county was grounded on more popular footing—the U.S. Constitution.

Cliven Bundy (2016) illustrated this belief in a blog post several days after the January 26<sup>th</sup> arrest of his sons by citing the 10<sup>th</sup> amendment<sup>6</sup> to criticize federal

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<sup>6</sup> The 10<sup>th</sup> amendment states: "The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States respectively, or to the people."

use of power. Adopting the government's 'voice,' Bundy first laid out how he believes the government sees its scope of power:

We the great bureaucracies rule and have unlimited power over these lands. We feed our family, we buy our houses, our cars, and our offices are air-conditioned. We have guns, cars with lights, sirens, the best communication equipment, good health care and a lush guaranteed retirement plan! We have unlimited power. We can buy up everything and every man's soul with their own money and with their 18 trillion dollar debt. We are prospering. We own the state government and their land. We buy and control their schools and their sheriff. We control the water in the river and under the earth. We control the airways, even the signals that pass around the world. We, the bureaucrat, are the supreme. We control, or at least we are about to control, the environment. We control all the endangered species of the creatures and plants. We control the elements in the earth and all the markets of the commodities of this earth. Yes, all is well in Zion.

Mr. Bundy then added the following parenthetical:

(All of these great powers mentioned above, the US constitution does not give to the US government. In the 10<sup>th</sup> Amendment only a very few enumerated powers are given by the people to the federal government. All other powers and rights are reserved to the states respectively or to the people.)

By invoking the 10<sup>th</sup> amendment to justify the occupation, Cliven Bundy was able to depict the occupiers as victims and justify their claim to the land in patriotic rather than racial terms.

During the occupation, however, a local Indigenous group, the Paiute, called the occupiers' claims into question (Peacher 2016). In a press conference on January 6<sup>th</sup>, Paiute tribal chair Charlotte Rodrique denounced the occupiers' claims by noting that the site of the refuge had belonged to the Paiute Tribe before the government appropriated it. As Rodrique explained, "I'm sitting here trying to write an acceptance letter for when they [the occupiers] return all this land to us" (Peacher 2016).

Perhaps not surprisingly, given the large amount of media coverage of the occupation, Ammon Bundy was asked to respond to Rodrique's comments. Initially, Bundy ignored her argument that the tribe's claim trumped the occupiers' claim and instead tried to equate the two groups by pointing to a common enemy.

That is interesting. They have rights as well. I would like to see them be free from the federal government as well. They're controlled and regulated by the federal government very tightly and

I think they have a right to be free like everybody else (as cited in Peacher 2016).

When Bundy was asked about the Paiute's claims a few days later, however, he specifically rejected the tribe's claim to the land, noting: "We also recognize that the Native Americans had the claim to the land, but they lost that claim. There are things to learn from cultures of the past, but the current culture is the most important" (as cited in Jackson 2016).

Bundy's comments reveal the lingering effects of Christian Identity on the occupiers' views about who should own/control western land. Although government oppression is central to the occupiers' cause, Bundy refused to even acknowledge that the Paiute's land was stolen by the government, instead describing it in passive terms, as something "they lost." Moreover, by calling on the federal government to relinquish its control of the refuge, Bundy also signaled that the occupiers were at ease with severing the Paiute's remaining connection to the land. Indeed, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service currently protects Paiute burial grounds on the refuge and stores Paiute artifacts found there. If the land was privatized, the Paiute would lose all access to the land.

### ***Where Does the Government Engage in Tyranny?***

For the patriot movement, the threat of government tyranny is intimately tied to the importance it places on private property. The movement's concern for private property has played out in a variety of ways. In some cases, the movement has focused on what it sees as unlawful federal incursions on private property. During the 1980s farm crisis, for example, many farmers organized militias to protect their farms from foreclosure (Dyer 1998). Likewise, in the 1990s, dozens of new militias were formed in response to the government's siege of Randy Weaver's home in Ruby Ridge, Idaho in 1992 and its siege a year later at the Branch Davidian Compound in Waco, Texas. Newly formed militias pointed to the women and children killed in both sieges and warned potential recruits that the government's "jack-booted thugs" could invade their homes next (Gallaher 2003).

The movement has also protested the public ownership of land by trying to limit and/or undermine the authority of federal agents on public lands. This approach has been particularly common in the intermountain West where most of the federal government's land holdings are located. In the 1990s, for example, patriot groups in Nevada were frequently accused of harassing BLM and U.S. Forest Service employees. Patriot groups also worked with county level legislators to enact laws challenging federal claims to land. In Catron County, New Mexico, for example, county officials passed a decree that stated that federal grazing permits amounted to private property (Levitas 2002).

Given this history, the Malheur occupation represents a tactical shift for the patriot movement. In this situation, instead of relying on defensive actions or legal maneuvers, the occupiers went on the offense. As Walker (2016) notes, the

occupiers' goals were "ambitious"—"to wrest virtually all power from the federal government through armed action in the name of 'We The People'." Because the occupiers' rhetoric is framed as a form of liberation from a tyrannical government, however, the mechanics of privatization are not discussed. Most militias believe that, at least in the first instance, federal lands should be transferred to the states. However, most states cannot afford to maintain such large tracts of land. Fire prevention alone would add millions to already strapped state budgets. If states were given control of federal land most would be forced to sell it, and ranchers would then have to compete with bigger interests, such as oil and gas companies, to get it. Right wing think tanks, many of whom are sympathetic to militia views of the federal government, have been developing plans for how privatization of federal lands might work for decades. Most of these plans involve sizeable transfers of land to corporate entities. In one such plan drafted in 1999, the Cato Institute argued that land should be privatized with an eye to the "highest-value use" (Anderson, Smith, and Simmons 1999). By depicting the occupation as a harbinger of liberation rather than a forerunner to privatization, the occupiers all but ensure their promise to ranchers will go unfulfilled.

## Conclusion

I began this paper by noting the various ways commentators have categorized the Malheur occupiers—as white supremacists, or Mormon fanatics, or economically oppressed ranchers. Though these explanations may apply to particular individuals, none of them can explain the occupation as a whole. I argue here that the occupiers are best understood as an anti-government group. I am not indifferent, however, to those who want to focus on, or ascribe a central motive to the occupiers. Indeed, Cliven Bundy's statement during his 2014 standoff that African Americans might be better off as slaves, certainly begs the question of whether it is racism that really drives his politics (Blake 2014). However, I also believe we cannot ascribe the sins of the father to the sons; nor can we ignore the fact that the occupiers repeatedly described the government as the enemy and that they chose a federal target for take-over.

None of this is to deny the role of race in anti-government rhetoric. Rather, it is to recognize that anti-government rhetoric has become the dominant form for white protest in the US. As Mark Potok (2015) at the Southern Poverty Law Center explains, "intolerance toward those with openly racist views has made life more difficult for those on the extreme right." In this context, anti-government groups offer a more respectable avenue for expressing white anger than a traditional hate group like the Klu Klux Klan (KKK).<sup>7</sup> Indeed, as Potok (2015) notes, many of the movement's goals were co-opted by mainstream actors in the early 2000s.

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<sup>7</sup> The Southern Poverty Law Center classifies the KKK as a hate group and the Patriot Movement as an extremist anti-government group.

The movement's reach is not confined, however, to those worried about their place in America's racial hierarchy. American mythologies did more than glorify the white race, they also depicted white men as the most productive in the world. As such, when the dominance of white workers and producers was called into question, white men also blamed the government. This is not to suggest, of course, that ranchers do not have legitimate complaints about the way the federal government manages its land. Many do. The BLM's competing mandates—recreation, preservation, ranching, and mining, among others—mean it cannot always prioritize, let alone meet all the needs of ranchers who rely on its lands to make a living. Whatever the legitimacy of ranchers' complaints, however, the occupiers' anti-government framing provides a ready-made venue for expressing class anger/anxiety. It also provides a ready-made frame for interpreting class interests in racial terms, as a zero sum game. Though the occupiers did not do this—i.e. they did not openly blame minorities for their woes—the depiction of the government as the other could certainly permit it.

The occupiers' solutions are, however, ill-suited to address class based concerns. Privatization has been a fundamental part of IMF austerity programs in the developing world as well as in US cities placed under state or federal receivership (e.g. Detroit in 2013 or Washington DC in 1995). In the great majority of these cases, privatization has benefited corporate or politically connected interests over those of workers and producers. As such, privatization of federal land would likely follow a similar trajectory.

None of this means, of course, that the occupiers are self-defined neoliberals. They are better seen as a manifestation of neoliberalism 'from below.' Instead of demanding that the government protect industry, defend the interests of producers, and/or ensure the social safety net, they have simply given up on government, thereby echoing *and* reinforcing neoliberals' ideological view that government is the problem.

To date, we have done a poor job of understanding/addressing anti-government rage. Some people dismiss groups like the occupiers as crackpots. Others assume their anti-government rhetoric is just a cover for intolerant throwbacks. While these depictions may be accurate in some cases, we minimize these groups to our detriment. Many militias are organized and determined, and their plans are societal in scope. As Peter Walker (2016) notes, if the Malheur occupiers had succeeded, "communities and economies across the American West, and the entire country, would have been changed profoundly."

There is no one way to respond to groups like the occupiers, but it is incumbent on those who disagree with their beliefs to offer alternatives to their anti-government rhetoric. We should, of course, continue to criticize government misdeeds, but we should also articulate what government can and should do. We must also think locally. Local communities in the West can and do work together with government officials in productive ways. Indeed, Walker (2016) argues that

the history of collaboration between the BLM and Harney County explains why its residents, who were ostensibly primed for revolt by virtue of their location and recent experience (i.e. the Hammond arrests), instead demanded the occupiers go home.

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