

7. Berliner Colloquium zur Zeitgeschichte

»Polarized Politics«: The United States in the Age of the Tea Party

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Interview

Berliner Colloquien zur Zeitgeschichte: For quite a while the Tea Party movement and Occupy Wall Street attracted a great deal of attention. To analyze these phenomena from the perspective of contemporary history makes good sense, but is it perhaps too early for a historical assessment? Do we need more time to elapse before we can arrive at any reliable findings?

The choice of perspective is crucial. In this case contemporary, short-term political developments only provided the occasion for addressing an issue that first emerged almost forty years ago and in the meantime threatens to poison American domestic politics: the polarization of politics, and retreat from a political model that relies on negotiation, inclusion and compromise. Taking its place is a radical development in which an entirely different constellation has emerged: friend and foe, exclusion, and the inability to compromise.

BCZ: That sounds like a form of self-blockade, crisis, and collapse.

That is indeed a large part of the story. At the same time both the Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street are starting to show signs of weariness with the stagnation and idling of U.S. politics. The activists on both sides have apparently had enough of being represented by parties that only administer themselves or have become victims of business associations and other lobbyists. Viewed in this manner, a reawakened interest in political participation can be observed, a resuscitation of the grassroots politics that has a long and varied tradition in the United States. Those who ignore this side of things will not be able to understand the new developments.

BCZ: What aspects were central to the discussion?

With respect to the Tea Party, it was initially a matter of a complicated interplay between top-down and bottom-up. In other words, we are dealing with the self-mobilization of the conservative rank and file, and at the same time a success story

which only makes sense if we also bear in mind the role played by powerful financial backers and influential media outlets such as Fox News. Without this money and medial backing, the Tea Party would not be the force that it is. Secondly, there has been much discussion about the movement's social structure as well as its program and ideology. Upon closer examination, for instance, it is not possible to speak of the existence of consistent, radical free-market liberalism. Tea Party activists fully support social welfare entitlements, as long as these entitlements go to whom they judge to be the »right« people. Their anger is directed at all those who allegedly do not (yet) merit those entitlements: young people, illegal immigrants, ethnic or racial minorities. It is relatively easy to describe these resentments. The lack of empathy for fellow citizens who are not members of the middle class and are less affluent and educated is palpable.

However, the question as to where this radical difference between »us« and »them« emanates from is an entirely different matter. As Charles Murray has convincingly shown in his most recent work, the fear of a social and generational transformation has meanwhile and primarily split »white America« – that central element of society which for decades was regarded as the guarantor of social and political stability. The »vital center« is breaking up before our eyes. It is under these conditions that the opportunity has arrived for those who know how to manipulate emotions effectively, who lend their voice to the pent-up rage. The fact that they have renounced the essential business of politics, namely tolerance and a willingness to compromise, is not seen as a weakness but as a strength. However, far too little is yet known about the mechanisms and dynamics of this political emotionalization. It may well be that the Tea Party has already attained its zenith and that its appeal is starting to wane. None the less, the basic problem of the loss of the »vital center« remains. Social scientists and historians are therefore advised to devote greater attention than ever before to studying such fears, emotions and resentments as well as their political influence.

BCZ: And how does a movement like Occupy Wall Street fit in with all of this?

The discussion surrounding the Occupy movement succinctly identified it as the latest chapter in a long history of leftist populism in the United States. It is also a reaction to upheavals that - for good reason - are regarded as threatening. And, above all, like their precursors in the late nineteenth century, it addresses outrageous economic inequality, a development that has become a serious threat to the country's social and political cohesion. Yet the Occupy movement distinguishes itself from earlier protest movements in one essential aspect: it

renounces political participation. It observes the malaise from the outside and refuses to become an actor within the system. It regards demands made of the state as both an imposition and an impertinence, and as a form of collaboration with third parties. Any practice that goes beyond loose networks and which presupposes a high degree of commitment to a political program is both alien to this movement and detested by it. Seen in this way, the Occupy movement should also be on the agenda of any social research wishing to seriously grapple with political transformations occasioned by crises and political emotions. Social and political polarization of this kind threatens to harm not only the United States.