

7. Berliner Colloquium zur Zeitgeschichte

**»Polarized Politics«: The United States in the Age of Tea Party
and Occupy Wall Street**

Convenor: Bernd Greiner (Hamburger Institut für Sozialforschung)

Conference language: English

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Questionnaire

Session 1 »Polarized Politics«: What Are We Talking About?

Introduction Bernd Greiner

Chair Charles Postel

- * What exactly do we mean by »polarized politics«?
- * When and why did the polarization of American politics come about?
- * Who provides the momentum for this polarization and by what means?
- * What can be said about the bottom-up and top-down dynamics behind »polarized politics«?
- * Does »polarized politics« imply a »crisis of democracy« in America? Or is »transformation« closer to the mark?
- * Has the institutional setting of American politics become dysfunctional?
- * Do parties still matter?
- * What can be said about the political clout of think tanks, lobby groups and advocacy organizations?
- * Judging from hindsight, what can be said about Richard Rorty's notion about the »emotional turn« in American politics since the late 1960s?
- * Is there a new age of »populist anger« in the United States?
- * Has fear-mongering become a crucial characteristic of American politics?
- * Is the middle class about to lose its political clout and representation?
- * What are the driving forces behind the huge victories for Democratic candidates in 2008 and Republicans in 2010?

Session 2 The Tea Party: Taking Stock of a Movement

Introduction Vanessa Williamson

Chair Bettina Greiner

- * How do we explain the sudden surge of the Tea Party?
- * Would there be a Tea Party movement without President Obama in office?
- * How independent is the Tea Party?
- * Would there be a Tea Party movement without »fat cat funding«?
- * Can the Tea Party hold ground without right-wing media networks featuring its cause and playing the role as event promoters?
- * How popular is the Tea Party? Is it really a mainstream phenomenon?
- * What do we know about how well it is supported by the electorate, and the different levels and types of support?
- * Is it a social movement or rather a political »tempest in a very small teapot« (E.J. Dionne)?
- * What are the traits that make Tea Partiers unique?
- * What exactly is the Tea Party agenda, its concept of state, economy, immigration, party politics and »common good«, in other words: its view on the »lay of the land«?
- * What exactly is the Tea Party's economic vision for America and what are the intellectual traditions behind this economic project?
- * How do Tea Partiers perceive the rules of democracy and democratic decision-making?
- * What is their notion of grassroots democracy (e.g., »watchdog« control of representatives and law-making processes)?
- * Is the Tea Party's citizen engagement good or bad for democracy?

Session 3 Tea Party, the History of Populism, and the Re-Making of Conservatism

Introduction Corey Robin

Chair Michael Hochgeschwender

- * What is old, what is new about the Tea Party?
- * How does the movement fit into the pattern of populist traditions in the US since the 18th century (e.g. »Jacksonianism«)?
- * How does the Tea Party fit into the history of Third Party movements in the U.S.?

- * Are Third Party movements part of the self-correcting potential of American democracy? How did Third Parties contribute to the evolution of American democracy?
- * Compared with conservative grassroots movements of the past (e.g. the Christian Right), what is special about the Tea Party?
- * How does the Tea Party agenda and style relate to other »revolutionaries« on the right (e.g. the John Birch Society)?
- * To what extent does the Tea Party fit into mainstream conservatism; what are the major similarities and differences?
- * What is the Tea Party's impact on the Republican Party?
- * Is it an electoral force and »kingmaker« within the GOP?
- * How does the GOP influence the Tea Party movement?
- * What is the relationship between conservative advocacy groups and right-wing »political action committees«, on the one hand, and Tea Partiers, on the other?
- * Could the Tea Party turn into a third-party movement and provide an alternative to the GOP?

Session 4 »Occupy Wall-Street«: A New Departure for Liberal and Left Politics?

Introduction Todd Gitlin
Chair Susan Neiman

- * Is »Occupy Wall Street« a left-wing version of American populist movements?
- * Is there common ground between the Tea Party's sense of being politically »colonized« and Occupy's »99 percent«-America? Do they both share a deep-seated distrust of representative democracy? What is their notion of the political agency?
- * What exactly is Occupy's concept of the »common good«?
- * Does »Occupy Wall Street« fit into the pattern of »polarized politics«?
- * Compared with Occupy, what can be said about the support and impact of other protest groups of recent years (e.g. supporters of immigration rights)?
- * Which political groups joined Occupy, which kept their distance and why?
- * Is there a generational divide in American politics?
- * A look through the crystal ball: What is the organizational potential of the Obama campaign and its right-wing opponents in November 2012?

Suggested Reading

Elisabeth Drew, Can We Have a Democratic Election? In: The New York Review of Books, 23 February 2012

Jacob S. Hacker, Paul Pierson, Winner-Take-All Politics. How Washington made the Rich Richer—and Turned Its Back on the Middle Class. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010; 116-120, 127-132, 143-155, 158-160, 241-244, 269-271

Susan Jacoby, The Age of American Unreason. New York: Vintage, 2009; 183-209

Mark Lilla, The Tea Party Jacobins. In: The New York Review of Books, 27 May 2010

Paul Pierson, Theda Skocpol, Political Development and Contemporary American Politics. In: Paul Pierson, Theda Skocpol (Eds.): The Transformation of American Politics. Activist Government and the Rise of Conservatism. Princeton UP, 2007; 284-294

Elisabeth Price Foley, The Tea Party. Three Principles. Cambridge UP, 2012; 20-26, 76-81, 167-172, 218-222, 224-226

Jonathan Raban, At the Tea Party. In: The New York Review of Books. 25 March 2010