

Right-Wing Populism and the Republican Party

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A Conversation with Ingar Solty and Max Bohnel on the Republican National Convention

From August 27 to 30th, the Republican National Convention (RNC) took place in Tampa, Florida, where the party officially nominated Mitt Romney as the Republican presidential candidate and Paul Ryan as his running mate for vice-president. The U.S. foreign-correspondent for German-speaking public radio networks and progressive newspapers, Max Bohnel from New York (previously a Middle East foreign correspondent in Jerusalem), travelled to Tampa and reported on the convention. His conversation with Ingar Solty is a slightly reworked version of a piece published in the print as well as the online edition of the German daily newspaper *Neues Deutschland*.

Ingar Solty is a PhD candidate at York University in Toronto, an editor of *Das Argument*, and co-founding member of the *North-Atlantic Left Dialogue*. He is the author of *The Obama Project: Crisis and Charismatic Rule* (2008) and *The USA Under Obama: Charismatic Rule, Social Movements and Imperial Politics in the Crisis* (forthcoming in Spring 2013) as well as co-author of *The New Imperialism* (2004) and *Imperialism* (2011), all published in German. Since 2004, Solty has been frequently publishing on the political economy of the United States in various scholarly and political journals such as *Prokla*, *Das Argument*, *Z. Zeitschrift Marxistische Erneuerung*, *LuXemburg*, *Sozialismus*, *Capital & Class*, *Socialism and Democracy*, *Wissenschaft & Frieden*, *konkret*, and *Analyse & Kritik*, as well as daily newspapers such as *Neues Deutschland* and *Junge Welt*. The conversation was translated by Sam Putinja from Toronto.

Max Bohnel (MB): What do you see currently as being right-wing and at the same time mainstream in the United States?

Romney and Ryan: "I've got the money, you've got the brains."

Ingar Solty (IS): The most important contemporary American playwright and socialist [Tony Kushner](#) once said about neoliberalism: "What used to be called liberal is now called radical, what used to be called radical is now called insane, what used to be called reactionary is now called moderate, and what used to be called insane is now called solid conservative thinking." This characterization is still accurate. Every political movement, if it wants to be successful, must develop political projects around popular demands. Historically the right has been geared toward justifying existing social inequalities. Ideologies that present inequality as natural, serve this purpose. Hence classism denigrates the lower wage-earning layers as 'dumb,' 'uncultivated,' 'work-shy,' and 'irrational,' and racism persecutes new

immigrants as 'dangerous,' 'backward,' 'unassimilated' or 'deleterious' to the nation. Racism today takes the form of the ethnicization or culturalization of social problems and often manifests itself as Islamophobia even in the classic country of immigration, the United States. Right-wing ideologies of inequality flourish in times of (economic-)crises, since these involve struggles over distribution between classes. So, to answer your question: Many ideas of the right are mainstream today.

MB: Who articulates the ideas of the Right?

IS: The social bases of the right are the insecure middle classes. In the face of social decline they demarcate themselves with racism and classism from those below them. This is entirely normal. Those four out of ten voters, who identified themselves as Tea Party supporters during the mid-term elections in 2010, feel, that someone must be made to pay for the crisis, and these should be those, who, in their eyes, are the less deserving. Hence they are open to arguments against state assistance for the (black and poor white) homeowners with subprime mortgages. In the wake of healthcare reform they feared higher taxes resulting from the insuring of the previously uninsured and they regard the government rescue of the auto industry and banks as unfair since no one, after all, helped them as self-employed or small business owners. Here the naïve theory of the free market, which rewards good decisions and punishes bad ones, is plausible.

MB: What can be done to counter right-wing populism?

IS: Ultimately, the erosion of solidarity and the social Darwinism championed by the right can only lose its attraction through solidaristic movements from below. These movements must shift the limits of the possible by enabling a collective sense of countervailing power for the individuals suffering political and social impotence, and by offering realistic alternatives. Examples include movements in the broader context of the Arab Spring, the Indignados in Spain, the movement against rent increases in Israel, the anti-austerity protests in Greece, the student movements from Quebec to Chile etc. Such movements also arose in the United States in 2011. The trade union movement in Wisconsin and beyond carried out noteworthy resistance to Tea Party governors. The Occupy movement demands that the "one per cent" as the "perpetrators and beneficiaries" of the crisis, should be made to pay for it. Occupy is however stuck in a crisis itself, and in Wisconsin the dynamism is lost for the moment after the failed recall election in June against Tea Party governor Scott Walker.

MB: Where do you see the contradictions between the ruling classes and right-wing populism?

IS: There is cause for concern that the ruling class has very little to counter right-wing populism with. If we understand neoliberal cutbacks and privatization policies, which intensify existing social inequalities and abandon sections of the population most heavily affected by the crisis to themselves, as being 'right-wing,' then in principle the Obama administration is right-wing. In cities and states with legally imposed deficit limits (the so called balanced budget amendments), social cutbacks have been in effect since the beginning of the crisis in 2008. Regressive taxes were increased to maintain municipal and regional public services such as education, police and fire departments, etc. At the federal level hopes for a government initiated equitable and ecological policy response to the crisis were dashed in the summer of 2010. Instead, a policy of cutbacks has been introduced at this level also. The departure of Obama's top economic advisor Christina Romer highlighted

this rupture. Obama does not have any political capital left for a new stimulus program. His policies are thus, in a sense, a stimulus program for the radical right, inasmuch as the social contradictions of his market-orientated crisis management policies further its rise.

MB: What must the 'wooden' Mitt Romney do at the GOP convention to unify the party base around his presidential campaign? Are the anti-Obama themes, or respectively, the racist insinuations really enough?

IS: Romney, in fact, has had significant problems with the party rank-and-file. He was from the start the candidate of the party elite. His opponents in the primaries, from the party's right-wing, are indeed able to enthrall the base but are in principle unelectable nationally. Only Romney can give a right-wing platform majority appeal. One reason he appears 'wooden' is that he belongs to another class than the rank-and-file and lacks the corresponding middle class rage. At 28 years old he obtained his doctorate and MBA at Harvard and then became very rich as a more or less unscrupulous hedge fund manager. Hedge fund and money managers are not particularly popular in the United States, especially when, like Romney (at 13.9 per cent), they pay income tax at a rate much below the national average.

Romney's poor primary results in the South and Mid-West - he hardly won any under competitive conditions - reveal he has a poor foothold in the heartland of American populism where the party base resides. Just how nervous the pragmatically neoliberal upper-class party elites were, while the Christian-right underdog Rick Santorum and the Tea Party favorite Newt Gingrich were cleaning up in the primaries right up to Super Tuesday on March 6, was shown by the comment by party strategist Karl Rove regarding Palin's endorsement of Gingrich: It was "not worth snot." The dilemma for the party establishment is the base that has shifted so far to the right that sections of it would out of principle vote for Gingrich - after all, the most disliked politician in the United States - before they would for Romney.

MB: What was the party establishment's response to the grassroots right-wing populism?

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IS: The party elite reacted to this tricky situation with a demonstration of its power. In short succession all party bigwigs endorsed Romney: George H. W. Bush, George W. Bush, John McCain, Jeb Bush, Marco Rubio, Eric Cantor, Kevin McCarthy, Paul Ryan. In addition, at the start of March party strategists Ross Douthat and David Frum appeared to have taken advantage of a sexism scandal on the part of the right-wing populist and secret kingmaker Rush Limbaugh, to discipline the entire right-wing of the party. From that moment onwards Romney had the support of the right-wing. At the party convention Romney will thus find the right words to excite the party's base. He is aware in the United States elections are won in the first instance by money, and in view of the high abstention rate, in the second, by mobilization of the base.

MB: How do you assess Romney's decision to choose Paul Ryan as his running mate in this context?

IS: Romney's decision in favor of the market radical Paul Ryan as his vice-presidential running mate should help to electrify the base close to the Tea Party. At the same time, with this decision Romney has probably done a disservice to his campaign, because Ryan is the extra ammunition Obama needs to be re-elected. The 2012 election boils down to a negative electoral campaign. This has to do with the fact that on the one hand about half the population rejects Romney, but Obama in view of the sluggish economic situation and the remaining unpopularity of his policies including the health care reform cannot undertake a positive campaign. On the other hand, the decision of the Supreme Court regarding campaign financing encourages this very development. The newly legalized campaign funds known as "Super-PACs" though not allowed to directly support candidates, are permitted to provide unlimited money for negative campaigning. Thanks to Ryan, Obama, as a moderate neoliberal politician espousing austerity, can now warn about the specter of the right-wing libertarian Ryan, who with his policy approach antagonized even the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.

MB: How can we conceive of a right-wing intellectual who advises Romney or does the preliminary work for him and the republicans in the media or academically?

IS: Romney's brain trust reflects his origin as an elite republican. Connections to the right-wing fringe exist only with the advisor Jim Talent. It is striking that Romney does not have any political-economic vision. In 2008 Obama early on surrounded himself with many economists with different positions, from the classic neoliberals with Wall-Street connections (Paul Volcker, Lawrence Summers, Timothy Geithner) via the Third-Way neoliberalism of Austan Goolsbee up to moderate Keynesianism (Jared Bernstein, Christina Romer and at the beginning also James K. Galbraith). In contrast, in Romney's team the Hayek ideologue Ryan, who intended to privatize the popular Social Security and Medicare systems for retirees and only backpaddled in his RNC speech now regarding Medicare, corresponds most closely to a high-profile economic expert.

Otherwise Romney's advisors are distinguished as being a crude mix of party cadres close to him from his time as the governor of Massachusetts and Bush administration remnants. Figures such as Cofer Black, Max Boot, Michael Chertoff, Eliot A. Cohen, Norm Coleman, Michael Hayden, Kim Holmes, Robert Kagan, Eric Lehman, Dan Senor, Vin Weber and Dov S. Zakheim originate mainly from the 'neocon' milieu. Most of them have a connection to the "Project for a New American Century" and to the Heritage Foundation, and come from the security apparatuses or the academic departments connected to them. Insofar as large sections of the security apparatuses were privatized during the "War on Terror," with a Romney victory one can expect a return of the revolving-door principle in which high-ranking managers from profit-oriented private security firms such as Chertoff, Black and Hayden will (once again) assume positions in the state. To give just one example, Black is the chairman of Total Intelligence Solutions, a sister company of the Prince Group, the world's largest security and mercenary company which during the Bush administration plundered the state by means of untendered public contracts, and was jointly responsible for the cost explosion of the over \$4-trillion "War on Terror." Next to them, there is only a number of obscure exile-Cuban lobbyists with whom Romney evidently wishes to appeal to Hispanics, in particular in the populous southern swing-states with large electoral colleges such as Florida.

MB: So no great minds in Romney's campaign?

IS: Well, let's say Romney's campaign does not possess a real intellectual superstructure.

His oldest and closest advisor Beth Myers – party member and wife of another very wealthy hedge fund manager – appears to be in line with the policy approach that Romney would follow: politically practical neoliberal policies domestically, and aggressive policies in matters of foreign affairs. The problem is that Obama leaves him little room to breathe on both levels. This is so because since the collapse of the green-capitalist reform agenda Obama has been pursuing a competitive export-oriented strategy based on an intensified exploitation of the American workforce domestically. This is flanked by an aggressive geopolitical strategy in the Middle East, in Central Asia and in the Asia-Pacific region. The aim is to ensure that the rise of China takes place under the global hegemony of the United States and that the U.S. option of a maritime continental blockade of China will dispel any idea of a challenge to the U.S. dollar as the global reserve currency. Romney distinguishes himself only marginally from this aggressive approach to the integration and containment of China.

MB: Are there parallels between American and European right-wing populism?

IS: Right-wing populism as a manifestation of the crisis of political representation in neoliberalism is a multinational phenomenon in the advanced welfare-state capitalist countries. At the same time, it is differentiated in part by its social bases and its worldviews. In countries where right-wing populism has a stronger working-class base, such as in the Netherlands, France or Austria, it takes this fact into account insofar as it combines nationalist with anti-neoliberal demands such as opposing the raising of the retirement age.

Furthermore, as in the French National Front or the Swedish Democrats, its roots are still in part located in anti-Semitic right-wing extremism/classical fascism, while in the United States it presents itself as an authoritarian radicalization of a neoliberalism headed into crisis, and as Islamophobic instead of anti-Semitic. It is this ‘right-wing libertarianism’ flanked with Islamophobic and classist authoritarianism to which the future of the radical right belongs. In Germany, in contrast, state repression, the historic debt mortgage of the right, and the Nazi nostalgia appear to have slowed down the import of ‘right-wing libertarian’ ideology from the United States; with Thilo Sarrazin, Peter Sloterdijk, Henryk M. Broder, Ralph Giordano etc., its ideas enter society rather through the established parties of the so-called center. Right-wing populism in the United States, unlike in Europe, does not have its own political party. This is both a strength and a weakness; a strength because it can take advantage of the established republicans, a weakness because institutionalization (as the Tea Party caucus in the Congress) is usually accompanied by a de-radicalizing co-optation.



MB: What does that entail for the future of right-wing populism in the United States? Doesn't that turn it into a dog that barks but can't bite?

IS: It is generally the case that right-wing populism as a reactionary political project in the United States as well as in Europe, does not have an independent and coherent political project available to it, but ultimately runs on naked resentment. Incidentally, this is also why it is often futile to try and hold a ‘rational’ discussion with the right-wing populist's core base, because the resentment fulfils a basic social-psychological need of people who are subjectively and sometimes even objectively powerless (think of the isolated small-business owner struggling under capitalist competition etc.). This is the need to channel the rage against the system, which has put them into this situation, against those further down

below.

The reactionary nature of right-wing populism and, as a result, the lack of a coherent political project also explains its historical intellectual weakness. The internal contradictions are enormous and they even run through their most important 'intellectuals.' In the U.S., right-wing populists like Michael Savage are simultaneously protectionist nationalists and enthusiastic supporters of the American Empire, while Ron Paul promotes free trade, but as a 'non-interventionist' rejects the military preservation of global capitalism in the context of the American Empire. For this reason U.S. right-wing populists – analogous with historical fascism – have up to now been viewed sceptically by the ruling classes, even if, similarly to Hitler's Nazi Party in Germany, which was financed early on by Fritz Thyssen and other large capitalists, their organizations have been generously financed by some of the richest men and women in the United States.

Right-wing populism nevertheless remains dangerous because the deeper the crisis of representation becomes, the less the political elite of the transnationalized bourgeoisie, to which Romney belongs, can keep the right-wing populists under control. Their precarious situation provides the desire to be more than simply cattle providing voters for the upper-class (party) elites. And the history of far-right movements has shown that the economically and politically dominant classes, when their grasp to power is at risk in the face of strong movements from the organized working-classes, may lose their hesitation to embrace the 'vulgar' people from the far right, whose hatred toward the organizations of the working-classes then comes in handy, quite quickly.

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