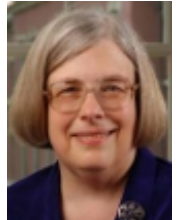


# Five minutes with Theda Skocpol: “Even those on the American centre-left are now viewing Europe in a negative sense because of austerity”

 [blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2013/05/13/interview-theda-skocpol-climate-change-tea-party-state-theory-europe/](https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2013/05/13/interview-theda-skocpol-climate-change-tea-party-state-theory-europe/)

13/05/2013

*Should the organisations of the state be seen as independent actors, or are they simply reflective of groups within society? EUROPP's editors spoke to [Theda Skocpol](#) about her contribution to 'state theory' and the effect of European integration on EU states. She also outlines some of her recent research on climate change legislation, and addresses the parallels between the Tea Party movement in the United States and populist movements in Europe.*



**You've written extensively on the concept of 'state theory' and the role of the state. What are the main components of state theory?**

Well I didn't create an entirely new theory, the work that I did with colleagues that was embodied in the book, [Bringing the State Back In](#), was in many ways drawing on the traditions of Max Weber, and other – especially German – theorists who in dialogue with Marxists argued that we need to take the organisations of the state more seriously in their own right. In particular this refers to the administrative, military and policing organisations, which are at the core of almost all modern states, but also the institutions of representation, where they exist.

So my contribution along with others was to say that there are two ways to think about the impact of the state on politics and policy. One is to say that under certain conditions state elites and bureaucracies can be independent actors, with their own organisational interests which are not simply reflective of class groups – although they may be aligned with them. The second point is that, drawing on the [Tocqueville](#) tradition, the pattern of state organisation – both the administrative and representative institutions, if they exist – creates an opportunity structure for groups that influences which groups will organise and what roles they will follow. Sometimes it can even create a pattern that groups imitate in civil society.

**Could the EU be viewed as a new type of state?**

When I look at the EU I see it as an attempt at creating a federalised governing structure. This structure could be approached in the same way that many emerging federated structures throughout history, including the United States, have been approached. You can come up with all kinds of problems about how you're going to share out the levels of sovereignty: in this case between EU organisations (representative and bureaucratic) and the organisations of the nation states. Then you have to deal with the issue of which levels of authority are going to have to deal with which kinds of problems.

Now the EU might be stalling and reversing. It has this interesting characteristic which is that in theory nations can withdraw from the organisation: that didn't happen in the United States, or it did but it created a civil war. So the EU is much more fragile than some of the other federations throughout history. But rarely are there brand new political structures. The EU is a voluntary federation and there have been voluntary federations before: there were voluntary federations of city states; you could even argue that the United States was formed as a voluntary federation.

Even empires, which have this element of conquest attached, nevertheless had a multi-level structure and constant jostling about what's going to be settled at each level. Of course it's new for Europe, but you could go as far back as [Charlemagne](#) and talk about different attempts that have been made throughout history to paste the pieces together.

**You've conducted substantial research on climate change legislation. Do you think Europe is doing enough to tackle climate change?**

Certainly not. I've recently [written a report](#) about why efforts to create an emissions cap and trade system in the United States in 2009/10 failed. It definitively failed, and the rise of ultra-conservatism in and around the Republican Party is really blocking any effort to create strong national regulatory or tax based solutions that would raise the price of carbon energy and encourage the emergence of green energy sources. That's a transition the United States has to make, and I think the rest of the world has a stake in that.

Now we have seen some real changes in the energy economy happening through the discovery and exploitation of natural gas. If that's handled correctly it can be a cleaner source of energy than oil or coal. But the United States has stalled right now in its ability to deal with a whole series of national problems that have international consequences. Meanwhile, the [European emissions cap and trade system](#) isn't working so well. My own personal preference would be for carbon taxes, and I've been arguing for a carbon tax with dividend payments back to the citizenry so that ordinary middle income, and lower income people, who have seen no income growth over the last four decades, would gain a stake in the contribution to the green economy.

I think environmentalists were looking to Europe for leadership on climate change, but the problems with Europe's emissions cap and trade scheme have undermined that to an extent. And of course in American politics in general it's not a major winning strategy to look abroad for leadership on an issue. Indeed in the era of the [Tea Party](#) and its influence on the Republican Party, Europe becomes almost a negative. This doesn't have anything to do with Europe in reality; it's about debates inside the United States and who points to Europe about what. But it's quite often the case that Europe is brought up in a negative sense. So in terms of American conservatives it's a big negative for Europe to adopt taxation policies to deal with climate change, but even those on the American centre-left are now pointing to Europe in a critical sense because of the austerity policies currently being implemented.

**You've recently co-authored a book on the Tea Party movement in the United States. Do you think the success of the Tea Party has parallels with populist movements in Europe?**

In [our book](#) we argue that the Tea Party is a generational movement incorporating a large amount of resentment against immigrants. It's nativist, and the United States has a long history of nativist movements: they break out from time to time, and they're not always on the right, though this one is. I think that there are parallels in a lot of European nations with native born populations reacting to economic stress through the resentment of foreigners. The US version of this, incidentally, also involves older citizens resenting younger citizens, and I don't know if that's true in the European versions.

But here's what I'd say, as an institutionalist – and this is where the state gets brought back in. The US variant of this depends on two features of our public policy and our political institutions that are different from some countries in Europe. The policy context is that you can have grassroots Tea Party members engaging in right-wing, populist resentment politics, but at the same time they are very willing to celebrate [Social Security](#) and [Medicare](#), which are generous social welfare programmes for the older part of the population. They don't want these programmes to be cut; they only want to cut spending that would go to younger citizens. This is a feature of the United States, where our welfare policies are generationally uneven. They're universal and relatively generous for the old folks, but either non-existent or not very generous for everybody else.

The second thing that's important is that in the US two-party political system, with winner takes all elections, this populist resentment politics is always about leveraging one of the two major parties. The Tea Party is about leveraging the Republican Party: to keep them from compromising, and to enable them to block a whole series of things, including global warming remedies. In Europe, in contrast, a lot of these movements manifest themselves in minority parties. This generally gives them less leverage because they can be overlooked by the parties in government.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPPE – European Politics and Policy, nor*

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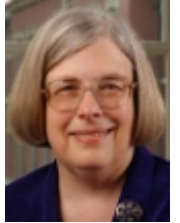
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Theda Skocpol is the Victor S. Thomas Professor of Government and Sociology at Harvard University. She is also the Director of the [Scholars Strategy Network](#). Her publications include, [The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism](#) (Oxford University Press, 2011), [Bringing the State Back In](#) (Cambridge University Press, 1985), and [States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia and China](#) (Cambridge University Press, 1979).



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