

INTERVIEW

Trumps Triumph? An Interview with Ingar Solty*

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In December 2024, we sat down with Ingar Solty to talk about the 2024 US election, Trump's victory, Harris' defeat, and the things that we have to expect from the next Trump presidency. In the course of this conversation, we also discussed potential consequences for Europe and the political situation in European states, in particular Germany. As an interplay of various developments on the local, national and international level, Solty describes the 'Zeitenwende' as a shift in the geopolitical sphere that results from the re-rise of Trumpism in the United States.

***JPS:** How can we comprehend Donald Trump's election victory against the background of opinion polls published before the election?*

Solty: Before the election victory, it was said that it would be a neck-to-neck race, that it would be very close and that it would sometimes take days, if not weeks, before we would get an official final result. Of course, this was true with regards to some seats in the House of Representatives. Yet, I bet a lot of people who went to bed on election day were surprised when they got up the next day and realized: "Oh, the election is actually already over." Trump had actually won all seven of the battle ground states that were at stake. And this was already clear early on. Trump also won the election with a solid result and a large lead among the electoral college. Of course, that doesn't necessarily speak in favor of the polls. But we have seen in recent years, actually since 2016, that polling institutes have had problems predicting the election results. This is undoubtedly also due to volatile voter behavior and the difficulty of predicting absentee voting behavior. In fact, the post-election surveys that are now being relied on should be and have been readjusted to reflect absentee voting behavior. And there is a marginal difference, for example, if you compare the CNN post-election survey from election night with the data we have now.

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JPS: *Compared to Germany, France, Denmark or other EU members states, the political system in the United States is extremely personalized. Against this backdrop, we are asking ourselves whether Harris lost because she is a woman or Trump won because he is a man. Or to put it another way: Did the candidates gender play a role? And can you assess whether female candidates have a chance of becoming US President in the future? What does a woman have to bring to the table to beat someone like Trump?*

Solty: I think that's a narrative that has been put forward by the Democrats to explain their defeat. But there is a certain kind of helplessness to this claim. If you remember Hilary Clinton's 2016 election defeat, all she could ultimately say was that it was the left's fault because Bernie Sanders supporters trashed her in front of her voters. And then Putin was to blame because there was Russian election meddling in Trump's favor. I think this narrative that women are not being elected for the sake of being women and that the US is not 'ready for her' doesn't carry very far. For one thing, Clinton won the popular vote in 2016. In other words, she won the majority of votes, but lost in the first-past-the-post electoral system. In 2024, Trump won the popular vote for the Republicans for the first time since George W. Bush Jr. in 2004.

Furthermore, women have won many House of Representatives and Senate elections. A trans-person was also elected. I don't believe that gender decided this election. If you look at the fact that Trump is convicted for felonies such as fraud and hush money payments to a porn actress, that he is suspected of having committed acts of sexual violence against women, and that many other lawsuits are pending, it is surprising that he was still elected by the majority of white women. Moreover, among Latino women his approval rate went from 30 to 37 percent. So, I'm not convinced by the narrative that the US is not ready for female politicians.

In my view, it was not a pro-Trump election but an anti-establishment election. Trump was elected even though he is unpopular with active voters. More than 50 percent have a negative image of him. Even 54 percent of active voters who were mobilized and were more pro-Trump said they thought Trump's views were too extreme. And in spring 2024, for example, 74% of respondents said they thought Trump's election fraud in Georgia was very, very serious, according to the polling institute Ipsos. Yet, in November he was elected. Even 9 percent of those who have a negative image of Trump voted for him. This speaks more for a failed Democratic strategy than for a successful election campaign on Trump's side. I want to remind you that in his first presidency Trump fell below the critical 40 percent approval rating at a record pace and then exited with a historic negative rating because he failed to deliver on his promises. And I'm not talking about the wall against Mexico, but the self-financing of tax breaks for corporations and billionaires. Or the legacy of the coronavirus pandemic. So, it's more a question of why the Democrats have failed strategically.

JPS: *When Biden was still officially in the race, I remember a Pew poll where almost half the voters said, “We’d take any other candidate over those two.”¹ I always had the feeling that the early euphoria about the nomination of Harris came more from this disenchantment with all these old white men and less from the candidate Kamala Harris. Unfortunately, Democrats sought to strategically instrumentalize this dissatisfaction with the other candidates. And they built a campaign around the claim that she was simply someone other than Trump or Biden. But what’s the message in such a campaign?*

Solty: She actually turned the election into an anti-Trump election without sending out a pro-message. With the strategy of focusing heavily on the democracy issue at the end of the election campaign. And with the anticipation that Trump would create a kind of US fascism. And Trump actually made this the theme of the election. So, this was an election all about Trump, for or against Trump and not for a positive economic message from the Democratic Party.

JPS: *When it comes to election victories or defeats, Bill Clinton is often quoted for having said “It’s the economy, stupid!” There has been a lot of discussion around the relationship between identity politics and distributive politics in the 2024 election campaign. How would you summarize this debate and explain the different positions?*

Solty: We are witnessing the rise of right-wing authoritarian, nationalist forces in all capitalist centers of the West. It is connected to the international defeat of left-wing alternatives, as represented in Europe, for example, by the Greek Syriza government and their struggle for a social European Union and against austerity. Since their defeat, the election results of left and right populist forces have been diverging. And it is the right that is benefiting from the anti-establishment sentiment. Trump 1.0 was one example, BREXIT under right-wing auspices another. Against this backdrop, there is the very popular narrative spread by left-wing liberals that it is the rise of racism and sexism in American society that explains Trump’s election result. On the surface, this seems plausible. Namely, the assumption that if the left is too weak to show egalitarian ways out of the crisis, racist and sexist exclusion and demarcations, privileges of the already established, as Wilhelm Heitmeyer calls it, and so on will take a firm hold. Yet, there is no statistical evidence to support the thesis that racism and sexism are responsible for the election result.

Some have argued that the victory was about mass deportations, i.e., that majorities are now in favor of the great remigration project, which became the central campaign hit at the Republican party conference in Milwaukee. And yet, the issue did not play a role for the voters. The statistical data simply refutes the thesis of a social shift to the right. The decisive election issues were the economy with 32 percent and democracy with 34 percent. Democracy was a double-edged sword, as the question

1 <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2024/04/24/feelings-about-the-2024-race-for-president/>

of democracy could be raised from both sides. Democrats warned against the rise of fascism, Trump's authoritarian ambitions and the restructuring of the state. But Trump also warned that the Democrats were trying to smuggle migrants into the country through illegal immigration in order to prevent Trump's legitimate victory and the realization of the American peoples' true will. Accordingly, the fear that democracy was in danger was the most important issue, but voters in favor of saving democracy were split between the two parties.

When it comes to the economy as a factor motivating voters' decisions, it's pretty clear that economic issues people respond to are related to the material foundations of the populist situation in the US. The populist situation characterizes the loss of confidence in the country's trajectory and its political institutions. And frequent Gallup polls show that the last time a majority of the population saw the United States on the right track was in January 2004, i.e. at a point of ultra-nationalist and militarist mobilization and a moment in history when it seemed that the US had just won a war, the war in Iraq.² Moreover, polls concerning the problem-solving capacities of state institutions, especially Congress, have shown record-lows for two decades now, accelerated, of course, during and after the 2007 global financial crisis. Here the last time a majority expressed a favorable view of Congress's performance was in June 2003.³

In short, in the United States we have been dealing with a populist situation for an extended period of time which made both Donald Trump as well as Bernie Sanders, right-wing and left-wing populism, possible. And this populist situation, unsurprisingly, has material roots in the political economy of the United States. The material reality of the populist situation puts roughly 60 percent of Americans in working conditions where they live from paycheck to paycheck,⁴ meaning: they have no savings to bridge a pay gap due to inflation, involuntary part-time labor, physical or psychological sickness, no savings to pay for sudden financial burdens like healthcare, which is the number one cause of private household bankruptcies, no savings to afford the birth of a child and the resulting costs for daycare or the costs for elderly care. And this number has shot up from roundabout 40 percent prior to the global financial crisis. In my view, that is the basis for the anger. And Trump 1.0 was possible because Obama praised his post-crisis job miracle while in reality what happened was a recovery based on what the "Wall Street Journal" back then called a "low wage/part-time epidemic" where higher-end union jobs in manufacturing

2 <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1669/general-mood-country.aspx>

3 <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1600/congress-public.aspx>

4 <https://www.forbes.com/sites/joshuabecker/2023/08/18/61-of-americans-live-paycheck-to-paycheck-heres-the-simple-solution-were-overlooking/>

became replaced by lower-end jobs in the service industry,⁵ including a dequalification of labor manifested in the more than 1 million college graduates working full-time in the fast-food industry.⁶ Today, in 2024, those Americans, who were angry, voted for Trump. In fact, 70 percent of those who find the state of the economy is not good or bad voted for Trump. And there are a few other figures that point to this dissatisfaction with the situation: 56 percent voted for Trump. Of those who are angry, it was 72 percent. Moreover, those who say they have experienced severe hardships due to inflation and those who are pessimistic when they look at their own personal economic situation also voted for Trump in the majority.⁷ In other words, the economic situation quite clearly decided the election. Inflation ultimately cost Harris the election.

However, while the 2024 US presidential elections clearly ushered into a significant political right-wing shift, there are no signs of a societal shift to the right. The Republicans now control the Senate, the House of Representatives, the Supreme Court, the majority of governor positions in the states, and, which is terrible for the labor movement, the National Labor Relations Board. And yet, two-thirds of voters still support left-wing economic populist positions like the ones promoted by Bernie Sanders. Things like free university education, public healthcare provisioning (“Medicare for All”), and an inflation-indexed fifteen-dollar-minimum-wage. And they do so not only in theory but in practice. In the 2024 elections, referendums on these issues have turned out accordingly. Even in states where Trump has large majorities behind him and where the Democrats haven’t been able to succeed in decades. Even in Nebraska, an increase of the minimum wage to over 15 dollars and sick pay rights were adopted in a referendum. Now you could say, well maybe Trumpism means trade war abroad and libertarianism at home, but still that could be interpreted as a nationalist socialist position. But even on socio-political issues, there is no sign of a right-wing shift. For one thing, state-level referendums show that majorities defend “my body, my choice”. Even in states like Alaska, where Trump won in a landslide and the Democrats otherwise don’t stand a chance. Moreover, migration was not a decisive factor in the election. It was for only 11 percent, even though Trump and the Democrats made it a key election issue. Trump by promising the mass deportation of the twelve million undocumented workers. And the Democrats by saying, “Look, Trump only talks about deportations. He didn’t even build the wall. And we are the much more efficient deportees.” And yet, this issue was only decisive for 11 percent

5 <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052970203707604578094601253124258>

6 See further Ingar Solty, *Die USA unter Obama: Charismatische Herrschaft, soziale Bewegungen und imperiale Politik in der globalen Krise*, Argument, Hamburg 2013, pp.15-71.

7 <https://edition.cnn.com/election/2024/exit-polls>

of voters. Even among active voters, 3/5 agreed that undocumented workers should not be deported but should be given the prospect of legal residence status. Consider this, this majority basically says: Even though these workers broke the law, they should be rewarded for doing so. Imagine the AfD and CDU/CSU campaign about how this would attract hundreds of millions of migrants from the global South! Given how important rules are for subjects under capitalism and the notion that everybody abides by them, this result is absolutely astonishing. And what this all means is that Trump has no mandate for what he has promised to his MAGA base. If he were to try and push through mass deportations, the illegalization of abortions and mass tax and social spending cuts on behalf of the billionaire class, he would be doing so against the majority of the population.

JPS: *Does this mean that in explaining Trump and his victory we would have to conclude that identity politics played a lesser and distributive politics a greater role?*

Solty: Exactly, or to exaggerate with a pun intended: class position trumps identity.

JPS: *What distributive policies does Trump's program actually envisage? And is it the case that economic hardship was actually decisive? Or has Trump's economic program convinced voters?*

Solty: First of all, the process of proletarianization of the Republican Party, which had already developed considerable momentum in 2016, has undoubtedly intensified. Even in Germany, we have problems identifying voters according to their class position. And this is more difficult in the USA. So, when you talk about the voting behavior of the working class, you're mostly talking about people with an income of less than 50,000 dollars, people without a university degree, union voters. And people who, for example, identify the economic situation as a deciding factor in the election. Or express that their economic situation is bad. But that can also include the petty bourgeoisie. So, it's not entirely clear, but nevertheless it can be stated quite clearly that there is an increasing proletarianization of the Republican Party. And yet I think this can be seen less as a pro-Trump election and more as an anti-Democrat, anti-establishment election. An election motivated by the anger about or disappointment with the status quo rather than the hope that Trump will change or improve the living conditions of the working class. And yet the question is of course legitimate: has Trump only ever formulated his economic policy in the name of the working class, as he did in 2016? Then, he was the only one to use this word and say that this was the day of revenge for the American working class. He promised that wages would return to unknown heights, even without labor disputes and unionization, to the level of the 1950s, where you could support a family and build a house on one income - the male breadwinner model -, even without a university degree. Trump's plan was always to return to this economic level on the basis of classical trickle-down economics. Or as Helmut Schmidt once put it: tax cuts for corporations today are the investments

of tomorrow and the jobs of the day after tomorrow. Needless to say that all this is highly ironic, because in the end the Trumpists seek to return to the 1950s (not least for reasons of patriarchy) but without everything that enabled that decade economically: strong unions, central banks oriented towards full employment instead of currency stability, restrictions on capital mobility, high taxes on the wealthy, a strong welfare state, and a mixed economy with a strong public sector providing services as commons, as public goods. Still, Trump unleashed ultra-libertarian policies in the name of the working class and, as was to be expected, he failed to realize this in his first term of office. The only thing that remained after a flash in the pan was a near doubling of the public deficit from US\$585 billion to 1.1 trillion and an increase of national debt from US\$19.95 to 27.75 trillion. Tax cuts did not refinance anything.

We can now take another look at the question and clarify what Trump had to offer voters in the 2024 election that could secure active approval at least for a certain period of time. For example, to avoid falling below the negative 40 percent approval mark again so quickly. Frankly, there is not much to suggest that Trump can build an alternative historical bloc. In other words, that he can somehow build and rely on consensus. On the one hand, this has to do with his customs policy. It is paradoxical that he won the election because of inflation, while his economic policy program is likely to perpetuate and increase inflation because it affects a working class that has become totally dependent on imports from China and overseas for its consumption. And the protective tariff policy directed against China and other countries must lead to a considerable increase in the price of basic consumer goods, also because of global supply chains for domestically produced commodities. Also, we can certainly assume that Trump will reduce the corporate tax rate, which he already did in his first term of office (from 37% to 31%). During the election campaign he spoke about 25 percent. It is possible that this will lead to another flash in the pan of investments. And Trump is of course hoping, as he did during his first term in office, that special economic zones will bring the production of industrial goods, including “flying cars”, back to economically depressed regions. Whether this will actually happen remains to be seen. Beyond these flash in the pan effects, including an effect on the stock markets, where funded pensions will certainly rise, at least above their nominal value, there is not much to be expected that can generate lasting approval.

I can only think of one exception: the plan for an American Academy. This is basically Donald Trump’s answer to Bernie Sander’s call for tuition-free higher education. Ultimately, it is a more far-reaching demand, even more far-reaching than the partial reduction in student debt that Joe Biden had proposed in view of the crass indebtedness of university graduates. The American Academy combines Trump’s socio-political culture war with the prospect of social advancement for workers. Because he has proposed, or threatened, to punish all universities, especially private Ivy League universities, that have used affirmative action against whites in favor of people of

color, women and other historically underprivileged social groups. Of course, this affects all universities, except the private and Christian right pseudo-universities founded by Jerry Falwell and others. All universities have affirmative action programs that have also made it easier for people of color, women, and other minorities to get into college, receive grants, and get appointments. So how will Trump punish the universities? He plans to tax the endowments, that is, the capital funds of private universities. There is a joke that Harvard and Princeton and Stanford are actually hedge funds with lecture halls attached to them. And Trump wants to tax them and use the funds to create an American Academy that is purged of left-wing liberals and leftists. In this system, hiring should encompass patriotism tests. Workers should be able to earn a bachelor's degree there, free of charge. And this would actually be something that could have a very positive effect on the proletarian electorate.

JPS: *You just mentioned the punitive tariffs. They are an integral part of his program. At least that's what he has repeatedly said. Talks have already taken place with Mexico and Canada. And the German carmakers are also already warming up to get another negative plus in 2025, so to speak, if the tariffs really do happen. Is it really possible to pursue a worker-friendly politics against neoliberal globalization in this way? Because we would think, as you have already mentioned, that this would burden the less affluent segments of the social structure. So how can he promise such a policy and still win a majority? Or was that not so important?*

Solty: Well, on the one hand, it is indeed remarkable that the criticism of free trade is now being formulated by the right. I mean, this was long a specialty of the left, of the anti- or alter-globalization movement of the late 1990s and early 2000s. And it must also be said that the right-wing free trade criticism contains a promise, namely that the cities, towns and states, where companies invest, should benefit from these investments. Of course, this promise is often overstating the actual benefits for society. We have seen this in Germany, where Tesla is investing in Brandenburg, for example. Of course, a company like that doesn't do this by taking over existing employment contracts, unionization or collective bargaining agreements. Instead, it creates its own structures that are union-free and ultimately follow the capitalist logic of profit maximization. Especially in the rustbelt states (i.e., Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin), which the Democrats had once seen as their blue wall, this criticism and the promise of trickle-down-economics through tariffs has definitely played a role.

Criticism of decarbonization has undoubtedly played a role as well. I mean, on the surface and with regard to party affiliations, the political map is clear. States on the West and East coast vote for the Democrats. Republicans can't gain any ground there. Everything in between, the "flyover states", vote for the Republicans. But if you look deeper into the map, you see an extreme urban-rural divide. Outside of New York City, Los Angeles, San Francisco, San Diego, or Santa Cruz, in the rural

areas of solid Democratic states, people vote for Republicans. Around Albany, Syracuse or Buffalo, NY, majorities are not the same as in New York City. And this is, of course, related to decarbonization and criticism of the green capitalist transformation, because the price of gasoline in the U.S. is a question of the moral economy (in the sense of E.P. Thompson), in the U.S. it is something like the bread price of the 21st century. As it is common for Americans to commute three hours to work and then three hours back, because people can't afford real estate in the cities, the price of gasoline matters and motivates decarbonization sceptics. So, this is really a situation where such issues have played a role.

Nevertheless, I would say that a consensus on tariffs and protectionist politics exists in U.S. politics. Ultimately, China is the last representative and defender of the Washington Consensus. The last defender of the WTO, even though in 2001 it had to submit to these harsh WTO rules. In this regard, everyone – from Habeck to Joe Biden – is, in a certain way, Trumpist. Biden has not only continued the tariffs Trump imposed on Chinese electric cars and solar panels, but increased them from 25 percent to 100 percent. This means there is broad consensus that reindustrialization is happening through protectionist trade policies. This has been the goal aimed for since the Obama administration, and it's more a question of how this industrialization, the crowding in of investment, should take place. Is it through classic neoliberal economic policy, like the trickle-down approach Trump pushed on behalf of traditional manufacturing? Or through a method like Biden's, with strong Keynesian economic and industrial policy, including the Inflation Reduction Act and the Chips and Science Act? These latter policies also focus on new industries and the hope of being able to compete with China on its own turf of the electric revolution, and not already being at a disadvantage in the competition. This is indeed an important difference: Trump relies on the old strategies of the automotive industry, while Biden focuses on engaging in competition with China, especially regarding the electric revolution. But when it comes to reindustrialization and protectionist tariffs, there is agreement.

***JPS:** Were tariffs relevant to voters? Because I read that shortly before the election, right after the election, and during the discussions with Mexico and Canada, many people were googling who actually pays for tariffs? That reminded me of BREXIT, where people were googling the morning after, 'What is the EU?' So, if this played a role for the voters, did they perhaps feel misled? Or is that talking point only relevant in a discourse bubble attempting to explain how the supposedly 'dumb' Trump voters are making choices that ultimately work to their disadvantage?*

Solty: Well, I think this explanation points to a discourse bubble. I found it remarkable when George W. Bush was elected in 2004 in particularly poor districts, like Lincoln County in Nebraska. Left-wing and liberal commentators including Thomas Frank argued exactly in this way: 'You're voting against your own interests,' which quickly led to anti-democratic conclusions. Not that they wanted to overturn the

general right to vote itself, but still – and we saw the same thing with the BREXIT issue, where pro-refugee left-wing newscasters like Anna Reschke said these were such complex decisions that it wasn't the right way for the general public to vote on them in a referendum. During the transition to Obama, George W. Bush faced the accusation that people voted based on identity and didn't pay attention to the actual policy content. This was also true for Obama, in that the left-liberal bubble essentially stopped criticizing Obama, even though Obama implemented significant austerity measures or pushed the drone war in the Middle East. But they didn't want to acknowledge that because this time the 'good' people, the people they could look up to, were in power instead of "dumb Bush." So, I think this is more of a bubble explanation than a real effect. Also, because this election was more of a populist election – a vote against something, rather than a vote in favor of something.

JPS: *Let's move on to another topic and talk about the cabinet. Donald Trump has nominated a number of rather controversial individuals. Kash Patel is supposed to lead the FBI and would, according to Trump, bring loyalty, bravery, and identity to the Bureau. What do these terms mean for Trump? And what are we to expect from the new FBI leadership and what will be the role of the Bureau under Trump?*

Solty: I think Trump simply has a good understanding of Ernst Bloch. Ernst Bloch once said that the right speaks to people, while the left talks about things. So, for example, when Trump responds to criticism of his personnel decisions by saying that they are based on the person being a "Good American," it's simply a very clever and disarming way of speaking. By now, he has even mastered the kind of language that neutralizes left-liberal identity politics. For instance, when he says he is glad that his new chief of staff is the first woman to hold that position in the White House, he is ultimately undermining the Democrats' fixation on "First this" or "First that" as a pseudo-form of emancipation and egalitarianism.

As for Patel, his nomination alone suggests that Trump 2.0 will be very different from Trump 1.0. The Trumpists are simply much better prepared than they were in 2016. In the U.S., there is much fluidity within government and bureaucracy. Unlike in Germany, where permanent bureaucracies exist that state leaders must contend with – such as a theoretical socialist government suddenly dealing with CDU-appointed bureaucrats who obstruct policies – the U.S. allows for greater flexibility. A newly elected president can fill nearly 10,000 positions. In 2016, a large number of these positions remained unfilled. In 2025, things look very different. Trump has been much quicker in nominating candidates than Biden was in 2020. That's the first thing. And from this, we can quickly form a clear picture of who these individuals are and what they represent. Patel, in particular, strongly embodies the explicit goal of an authoritarian transformation of the state.

We already have a fairly clear idea of Trump's plans through his election manifesto 'Agenda 47'. And there has been much discussion about 'Project 2025,' which Trump

referenced for a long time but distanced himself from after facing criticism. This is a 900-page document from the Heritage Foundation, which also drafted a similar program for Trump in 2016 and later boasted that two-thirds of it had been implemented. There is a significant overlap between Agenda 47 and Project 2025, with the main difference being the position on abortion, where Trump would be fighting against majorities. But overall, Trump is planning an authoritarian restructuring of the state, aiming to significantly expand executive power, and governing through executive orders. He also intends to carry out large-scale political purges, especially in the education sector and the Department of Education, since he correctly recognizes that some of his biggest opponents are there – whether in public education or universities.

Patel plays a role in these plans. Especially, if Trump attempts to carry out mass deportations against the majority's will. In 2017, Trump learned that many of his deportation plans were not implemented because of resistance from state and local authorities, with police departments refusing to enforce orders. He has since realized that he can deploy the National Guard – a reserve military force – for domestic operations. The U.S. has a history of using the National Guard for internal conflicts, particularly in labor-capital disputes, where strikes were violently suppressed. Given the overall violent history of American civil society, this is not unprecedented. However, the National Guard is typically under the control of state governors, meaning Trump could face the same issue in Democrat-led states. But there is one scenario in which the National Guard would come under presidential command – just as Trump now seeks to bring the U.S. Department of Justice under his control – and that is the declaration of a state of emergency.

How could such a state of emergency be declared? It is likely that mass deportations would lead to civil unrest, as the U.S. does not have a national ID requirement. Police cannot randomly stop people and demand identification, as they can in Germany. So, in order to round up 12 million undocumented workers, raids would be necessary in their neighborhoods and workplaces. One can imagine Trump being supported in this effort by emboldened paramilitary groups and far Right militias like the Proud Boys, conducting unauthorized raids in communities. Some cities, such as Aurora, Colorado – where Trump claims Venezuelan gangs have taken control – are already on his “target list.” Historically, however, minority communities in the U.S. have always resisted such actions. The Ku Klux Klan faced opposition, and the Black Panthers emerged in response to similar threats. If mass deportations were to take place, violent clashes would be inevitable, likely resulting in casualties. Such events would go viral, producing footage even more shocking than the killing of George Floyd. This, in turn, could create a situation in which Trump declares a state of emergency, allowing him to deploy the National Guard into Democratic states, conduct mass deportations in the name of “fighting terrorism” and push forward with the

authoritarian transformation of the state – his explicit goal. Patel would certainly play a key role in such events.

JPS: *Can we say that Trumpists try to override the system of checks and balances, for which the U.S. is known, by simply exacerbating conflicts within the population?*

Solty: Well, I don't know if it's a deliberate strategy to instrumentalize social tensions – whether there is actually a grand plan to declare a state of emergency. But many of Trump's demands or plans simply cannot be implemented within the system of checks and balances. For example, revoking birthright citizenship for people born in the U.S. would require a constitutional amendment, which is completely unrealistic. In far-right discourse, there is the concept of "Day X." This describes a point at which democracy, existing in a state of openness, must be overcome. Trump has implied that this might be "the last time" he runs for election. That could simply mean that he cannot run again according to the 22nd Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, but it could also be referring to the 2026 midterm elections. This will need to be closely watched to determine whether we are looking at just an authoritarian tendency within the framework of liberal parliamentarism – or something even more extreme, a further shift toward outright authoritarianism which also seems necessary to compete with China.

JPS: *If we try to make sense of the people Trump has appointed, one question I keep asking myself is: Are these actually loyalists or do people like Pam Bondi or Elon Musk, people with professional careers, actually stand for something? I wonder: How many loyalists does he need? And how many experts does he have to appoint to change something? Take someone like Pete Hegseth, for example. He was excluded from Biden's inauguration as a National Guardsman because he was potentially far-right – or at least wore symbols associated with American right-wing extremists. He was under heavy criticism and running around Washington trying not to lose his nomination. But he was eventually appointed. Could such a nomination and appointment also be read as a signal to the Proud Boys and militias?*

Solty: Looking at the first Trump administration, it is striking how much Trump relied on the old Republican establishment, even though they had fought against him. It was remarkable how the party establishment not only lost the primary to him but also continued to reject and attack him even after he had secured the nomination. At one point 50 Republican foreign policy elites even published an open letter declaring Trump a threat to U.S. national security.

His first victory was a reflection of the populist moment – he won despite the major media outlets being against him. Their criticism only reinforced the political myth around his persona. However, when it came to cabinet formation he largely distanced himself from the forces that had actually secured his victory. Steve Bannon had shaped his campaign around economic nationalism and criticism of free trade, which played a key role in his win, because it won the "Rust Belt" for him. Yet, Trump

struggled to build alternative structures outside the existing system. He did create a separate institution under his trade representative, but the gradual sidelining of Steve Bannon showed how much Trump was ultimately contained by dominant transnational capitalist factions. So this was in his first presidency.

This time, it's striking how much he is relying on people from his immediate inner circle. This, in my view, strongly supports the idea that loyalty is a key criterion. Many of his appointees are people he knows and values from Fox News – this applies to Pam Bondi, for example. As an attorney general, she dropped a legal case against him, which highlights how much loyalty is front and center. That's also an indication of the authoritarian restructuring of the state – Trump seems to believe he needs people he can fully trust.

And you're absolutely right that a lot of this also serves as symbolic politics for the far right. Deporting 12 million undocumented workers is not something the majority of Americans wants. Nor is pushing the abortion issue even further, which means making abortion illegal even in cases of incest or rape, which is something J.D. Vance wants. Many of these positions are less about Trump's personal beliefs and more about signaling to his far-right base.

This is especially evident in his campaign rhetoric, where he has leaned into the "Great Replacement" theory. He has suggested that if the Democrats win, 200 million immigrants will flood the country, bringing about the end of America and the replacement of the white population. As things stand, Trump's network is now even more deeply embedded in far-right and white supremacist circles than it was in 2016, with personal loyalists surrounding him more than ever.

***JPS:** At the beginning of the election campaign, there was a podcast featuring Michael Franzese, a former mafia boss, and Andrew Tate, the masculinist influencer. They spent a long time discussing the idea that "if Harris wins, it will be because they let millions of illegal immigrants into the country, and now they're voting for them. And then even more will come." They had already framed a potential defeat in this way in advance, and the reaction in the YouTube comments was shocking. To what extent has this alliance with right-wing YouTubers and media figures grown organically from civil society? Or is it something that the Republican Party or Trump's inner circle has politically constructed and orchestrated?*

Solty: Well, first of all, it's worth noting that the Democrats themselves have reinforced this theory – but in a positive way. Since Obama's election, and especially in the 2012 presidential and midterm elections, the Democratic strategy has been based on the idea that demographic change will secure them a path to permanent victory.

Their narrative was: "*Republicans will never return to power because the country is becoming less and less white.*" The assumption was that as the proportion of Black, Latino, and Asian American voters grew to over 50% of the population, Democrats would hold a permanent structural majority. This concept was once called the

“demographic schellacking” of Republicans. It was a central election narrative when democrats won in 2008 and 2012.

But that theory has since fallen apart. We now see that Trump made significant gains not only among white voters. It wasn't just a majority of white men or white women who supported him. The biggest inroads he made, despite his ultra-racist and ultra-masculinist rhetoric, were among Latinos, he won a growing share of Black voters and had significant increases among Asian Americans. Even the small but politically relevant population of Native Americans that survived the genocide overwhelmingly leaned toward Trump.

As for whether the connection between Trump and the far-right media scene is organic, Trump's real success has been his ability to communicate outside the mainstream media. There are reasons why Max Weber looked to the U.S. while he was developing his argument about charismatic rule and how acclamation works. This was already evident during Trump's first presidential campaign, when he had 45 million social media followers and could bypass traditional channels. And this certainly creates a dynamic, where his relationship with right-wing media figures isn't just strategic – it's also shaped by his own media consumption habits. It's an acclamatory, almost symbiotic relationship.

JPS: *To follow up on this point: One possible interpretation of this theory is that there's a propaganda apparatus, but it's now structured differently – more decentralized. It's not housed in a Ministry of Propaganda or a campaign headquarters but instead growing more organically from the right-wing civil society. We see similar trends in Germany. If we look at the YouTube faction supporting the AfD or consider the influence of figures like Joe Rogan – it's clear that these platforms are shaping political discourse. But you wouldn't necessarily consider this a coordinated effort? I keep wondering about this.*

I recently watched a documentary about Trump's first term and the January 6 events, where the then-leader of the Proud Boys, Henry „Enrique” Tarrio, said something interesting. He suggested that they weren't just printing all the T-shirts that Alex Jones was selling; they were probably printing most of the pro-Biden T-shirts as well. So maybe this isn't even entirely about political ideology. Perhaps for someone like Alex Jones, Joe Rogan or Andrew Tate, it's just about making money.

Solty: I mean, we already saw this dynamic with the Tea Party. Plenty of entrepreneurs jumped on board simply because it was a lucrative business. The same applies to the evangelical right – many of them are essentially religious entrepreneurs.

As for the broader connections, it would certainly be interesting to analyze how Fox News' guest policies have evolved over time. We now see right-wing figures getting airtime that they wouldn't have gotten eight or ten years ago. I can't say for certain, but I imagine there are some fascinating empirical findings to uncover.

JPS: *Let's turn to international politics. In your opinion, is there any reason to believe that Putin harbors imperialist ambitions beyond Ukraine? Would he continue advancing into Europe?*

Solty: I consider this to be one of the most disastrous liberal narratives we're dealing with. The liberal narrative is ultimately discourse-theoretical or philosophically idealistic – it derives actions from words.

For instance, people take Putin's speeches in which he denies Ukraine's right to exist, promotes an ethno-nationalist vision of Greater Russia, and is said to want to restore either the Soviet Union or Tsarist Russia. From this, they conclude that he will make claims on any country with a significant Russian-speaking population – places like the Baltic states, Georgia, and so on – and that he especially wants to erase Ukraine.

And yes, these speeches do exist. But Russia's military strategy offers no indication that this was ever the real objective behind the illegal invasion of Ukraine. Militarily, it would be sheer madness to attempt to pacify a country spanning more than 4,000 square kilometers with 44 million inhabitants (at the time), using only 190,000 troops.

This idea of ethno-nationalist, Greater Russian expansionism is, in my view, mostly folklore – propaganda for the home front. The actual military strategy suggests only three realistic objectives:

1. The stabilization and annexation of larger parts of Donbas – for which territorial maps have already been redrawn.
2. The land bridge to Crimea and
3. The push toward Kyiv, which seem to indicate an attempt at regime change. The assumption was that Ukrainian forces would collapse, that Zelensky (as the West had advised) would flee the country, creating a power vacuum in which a pro-Russian president could be installed to ensure Ukraine's political neutrality.

I see this as one of the most destructive narratives because it fuels fear – the same fear that has led to Europe's internal militarization and the public's active consent to war policies. People buy into the fearmongering, as seen with Boris Pistorius' claim that Putin could soon be standing in our backyard. And that is genuinely dangerous.

JPS: *One could ask a similar security policy question regarding Israel. Benjamin Netanyahu is clinging to power by prolonging a war – one that not everyone in Israel wants to fight, not the elite, not even the military. Maintaining power through war is a possibility.*

Solty: Lenin called this *Jingoism*, Charles Beard a "strategy of diversion." And this strategy plays a role in Russia as well. I used to say that if one really hates Putin and one truly wanted regime change in Russia – if democracy and human rights in Russia were a real concern – then one would need to pursue détente. That would allow internal societal contradictions to play out, leading to change.

It is quite remarkable that after the Yeltsin years and the disasters of shock privatization and national decline, Putin positioned himself – much like the early Soviet leadership – at the helm of a project to elevate the economy using surplus revenues from natural resources. There was an effort to develop a digital economy. And as long as resource prices were rising (until the global financial crisis), this approach worked. But once resource prices collapsed, neoliberal measures became increasingly necessary. The most drastic example was the pension reform of 2018-2019, which raised the retirement age from 50 to 55 for women and from 55 to 60 for men – despite “Russia’s mortality crisis”, as medical sociologists at Lancet have called it.

External conflicts can serve the purpose of maintaining power. The pension reform, for example, was opposed by nearly 80% of the population, led by resistance from the Communist Party. Yet, at the same time, 80% of Russians supported the country’s foreign policy stance.

At the outset, war always consolidates power internally. But the *dialectic of war* is that, over time, it becomes destabilizing – especially as its consequences hit home. Families suffer from casualties, injuries, disabilities, trauma. Economic hardship follows, with inflation, hunger, and the rising costs of war. Unsurprisingly, then, history shows a strong link between war and revolution – whether it was 1871, 1905, 1916-1918, during World War I, or the wave of decolonization after 1945. War often leads to the erosion of power. That’s why Putin has consistently avoided general mobilization – instead opting to send criminals, ethnic minorities from remote regions, and the poorest to fight. He wants to prevent backlash in cities like Moscow and St. Petersburg.

Looking at the world and international relations, I believe that none of today’s conflicts can be understood without considering the U.S.-China rivalry. That is the defining question of the 21st century – the relative decline of U.S. dominance and the question of whether China can rise peacefully. The U.S. is actively trying to block China’s ascent. Therefore, all conflicts have immense potential for proxy wars and escalation. And Trump was never the *peace angel* that many leftists imagined him to be. And the theory that *Democrats start wars, and Republicans end them* does not apply to Trump.

- If it were up to him, Trump would have launched a war against Venezuela.
- He wanted war with North Korea and Iran – and was only stopped by the Pentagon or Tucker Carlson on Fox News.
- He was also responsible for moving the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem, setting the stage for annexations in Israel.

Now, Israel’s far-right is emboldened, hoping for support from neoconservative supporters within the American establishment. They are actively planning a preemptive strike on Iran’s nuclear program, and the recent assassinations of Hezbollah leaders in Lebanon may have been a test run for this. If that happens, we could very

quickly find ourselves in a full-blown proxy war. Iran is allied with Russia, and Israel is backed by the U.S. This is precisely what has already been unfolding in Syria, where tensions are once again rising.

JPS: *How can we explain the fact that the German left – departing from its tradition in the peace movement – has increasingly aligned itself with the interests of Western imperialism, as seen in the conflicts in Gaza and Ukraine? Is this a conscious process?*

Solty: I think this has many aspects. A major overarching factor is that, after the era of bipolarity, many conceptual frameworks from the Cold War disappeared – such as the understanding that even the greatest enemies could establish collective security because neither side wanted to engage in nuclear war. After the end of the Cold War, the West no longer had to exercise restraint in expanding NATO in Europe or in pushing free trade projects and similar initiatives. That's a broad, overarching aspect.

But I believe there's also an internal factor within the left itself, which I call the loss of internationalism. Now, many would argue that their solidarity with Ukraine, including support for arms deliveries, is precisely an expression of international solidarity – that they are not leaving Ukraine to fend for itself. But I mean something more profound.

Last year, I wrote an essay about Rossana Rossanda and was deeply impressed by the way she framed her own political struggle – the fight for revolution in Italy – within the context of international power relations. In 1978, she organized a conference with major figures like Althusser, discussing the post-revolutionary society. She harbored no illusions about the Soviet Union or the People's Republic of China – she called them *post-revolutionary*. Yet her goal was always world revolution, with a focus on revolution in the West.

She asked: *Why did the revolution succeed in Cuba but fail in Chile in 1973?* And she concluded that this depended on how the great powers acted. And she applied this reasoning to Italy: *How do we prevent Italy's attempt at revolutionary transformation from turning into another Chile?* – recognizing that it depends on the behavior of global powers.

This way of thinking about foreign policy not in moral terms but in terms of relationships of forces and windows of opportunity for socialist struggles marks a seismic shift in how the left today approaches these issues. What we have seen for a long time have been romanticizations – especially of Latin American countries – and demonizations. But the left no longer sees its own actions in relation to these states; instead, they become mere projection screens. With regards to the Latin American pink turn, people admired these movements for achieving what seemed unattainable in the West. And when things went wrong, they simply said, *“Well, that was never real socialism anyway.”*

This loss of internationalism, which still existed in the anti-globalization movement, began around the mid-2000s when the neoliberal hegemony started to erode.

The question arose: *Would right-wing populism provide the main response to this erosion, or could the left harness emerging social contradictions to its advantage?*

Ultimately, the left turned inward, focusing on domestic social issues. And for a long time, this approach was successful – it was a condition for the left's political success. Foreign policy was avoided because it was always the bottleneck for participation in government. For this reason, figures like Giorgia Meloni and Marine Le Pen repositioned themselves within the Western order, seeing it as their only viable path to power. And it worked: Bernie Sanders could not be sidelined the way Jeremy Corbyn was. Corbyn remained committed to internationalism and was ultimately neutralized with accusations of antisemitism, preventing his bid for prime minister. With Sanders, this strategy was tried but failed because he had almost exclusively focused on domestic class struggles in the U.S.

But with the war in Ukraine, this strategy backfired on the left. Suddenly, they were unable to understand the nature of the conflict and ended up becoming appendages of their own government's moralistic foreign policy. I ask myself: Why are leftists and left-liberals applying double standards to Ukraine? If one argues that Russia's invasion of Ukraine is a violation of international law, then, under the principle of self-defense, Ukraine has the right to receive military aid. But if leftists truly adhered to this principle, then they should have demanded weapons for Syria and Iraq to defend against NATO ally Erdogan, who is conducting military operations in northern Syria and northern Iraq – doing exactly what Putin is doing in Ukraine. They should have called for arming the Yemenis against Saudi Arabia's war. Palestine is recognized as a state by most of the world, so they should have advocated for arms deliveries to Hamas or the PLO to resist Israeli occupation.

Again, I ask myself: *Why are leftists so principled about Ukraine but not about these other cases?* And in my view, there are two possible explanations:

1. The left is racist. They sympathize with Ukrainians because they are European and white. This would explain the double standard. But no leftist wants to be accused of racism.
2. The left has consciously made itself an appendage of its own government and Western imperialism.

I believe the latter is the case. Since the 2021 German federal election, the left has stopped believing in its own narratives – even in positions it previously recognized as true. Even Gregor Gysi, up until 2014, argued that Ukraine was economically divided and that the tug-of-war between Russia and the West was tearing the country apart. He said that NATO's eastward expansion was a mistake, that excluding Russia from the EU's Eastern Partnership was a mistake, and so on. But suddenly, on February 24, 2022, the left no longer wanted to acknowledge any of this. I explain this as a crisis of confidence – a result of the catastrophic 4.9% election result, which left the German left party deeply shaken.

Interestingly, there is a difference between the U.S. and Germany. In the U.S., the Sanders Democrats faced a similar situation: in order to push their domestic agenda, they went along with nearly everything Biden did on Ukraine, and most of what Biden did in the Middle East. This, too, is a consequence of the inward turn that resulted from the loss of internationalism.

JPS: *Let's talk about some other issue related to the wars in Ukraine and Palestine and Israel. Looking at the arrest warrants issued by the International Criminal Court against Netanyahu and Galant, one wonders why aren't there similar warrants against Putin for his attack on Ukraine, or Erdogan and Assad for what they did to the Kurds in Syria? This points to a broader question: Is there no place for a principle-based foreign policy. And is policy solely driven by interests, even in major institutions whose goal should be to prosecute all those involved in violations of international law and war crimes?*

Solty: A thought on this: First, we need to explain why the approval for arms deliveries and solidarity with Ukraine – although one might ask, how “solidary” is it to support forced conscriptions? – was much greater among the left-liberal spectrum than among conservatives. One explanation could be nationalism. Within the AfD sphere, there is an attitude of: Why should I risk a nuclear war for people my grandfather once enslaved? – referring to Ukraine and the Nazi Generalplan Ost. That certainly plays a role. Another factor is that left-liberal governments – Biden, the Democrats, and Germany's Ampel coalition – are the main actors supporting Ukraine. But that alone doesn't fully explain it.

I actually think foreign policy is interest-driven and should be talked about as such. Because interests are negotiable. They can be balanced. When foreign policy becomes morally charged, it turns into a battle of the Shire versus Mordor, the Rebel Alliance versus the Death Star, or Harry Potter versus Voldemort. And this leads to liberal extremism, where the end justifies the means.

In Germany we see this most clearly in the Greens, who are effectively, even though they would never admit it of course, pushing for total war. It was no coincidence that Eva Illouz, on the 80th anniversary of Goebbels' infamous “Total War” speech, gave an interview in *Die Zeit* titled “*I Wish for Total Victory*”. That kind of logic is at play here. In a book chapter, I once described the Ukraine war as left-liberal. I didn't mean that polemically. Rather, I believe the war taps into three fundamental emotions within the left, which explain both their hesitation and their proactive militarism and patriotic fervor:

1. The Anti-War Sentiment

- If you have no understanding of security policy or geopolitics, then the historically left-wing anti-war instinct naturally turns against Putin, because Russia is waging war in Ukraine. This war must be stopped. This feeling is deeply rooted.

2. Antifascism

- Putin embodies everything the left rejects:
 - Russia is an autocracy.
 - It persecutes trade unionists, political opponents and LGBTQIA+ people.
 - It implemented neoliberal reforms.

3. Its economic model, based on fossil fuel and arms exports, is based on climate destruction and war.Solidarity

- Even though the left has abandoned internationalism and no longer understands imperialism, there remains a belief that solidarity means helping the weaker party – which, in this case, is Ukraine.
- Solidarity is now defined as supporting whatever the Ukrainian government demands, overlooking when that government sends its working class against its will into the meat grinder.

To challenge this, we need to cut through this emotional wall with arguments.

The emotional attachment may also explain why so many leftists still refuse to admit their mistake – which, in my view, was becoming accomplices to their own imperialism at the start of this war, which, if you know its pre-history, has had all the elements of a proxy-war for a long time.

***JPS:** If we strip internationalism of its socialist-communist heritage, then identifying with Ukraine or Israel is still a form of internationalism – but one based on projecting one's own desires onto distant regions. I think the analogy between leftist thinking and Lord of the Rings or Harry Potter is quite a good observation. These dynamics follow the patterns Adorno and Horkheimer describe in their chapter on the culture industry, because these narrative structures shape how people think.*

Solty: What I find interesting is that in a neoliberal fragmented society, there is still a desire for a life beyond Homo Oeconomicus. And war might serve as a unifying force for a country. But other ways and strategies exist as well. Take, for example, the mandatory service that German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier wants to reintroduce to strengthen social cohesion. This might lead to interesting new developments: Some people might become communitarians, seeking new forms of collective belonging. Others, shaped in their identity by neoliberalism, might become the deserters of tomorrow – refusing to recognize society or the state altogether.

The German picture gets interesting when consulting polling data on who would actually defend Germany with a weapon. Actually, no other party's supporters are more in favor of arms deliveries than those of the Greens. At the same time, no other party's voters are less willing to personally take up arms to defend the very values

they claim to stand for. In the first *Stern/Forsa* poll of December 2023,⁸ only 9 percent of Green voters said they would fight.⁹

JPS: *That's fascinating from a domestic political perspective. I can't remember the last time I saw such a huge gap between public opinion and the actions of the political elite.*

Solty: That's true, but this issue has always divided elite and masses. There has long been a consensus among international political elites that Germany must rearm and that the country, as an economic giant, cannot afford to be a foreign policy dwarf. This, I think, explains why rearmament has been carried out step by step, in a "salami tactic". The decision to rearm was already made in 2021, but in 2022, it was rebranded as the *Zeitenwende* – because the moment was seen as a great opportunity. However, the elite-mass divide has always existed. In 2014, it became so stark that the German newspaper *Die Zeit* published an article by one of their transatlanticist editorial board members, asking why the masses – especially in East Germany, but not only there – were rejecting the official narrative. The authors even questioned whether the media had been too critical in the past – reporting too much on issues like NSA surveillance, Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo, U.S. torture prisons in Eastern Europe and the war in Iraq in general. I remember this article and the argument because it was a rare moment of transparency, which allowed a glimpse behind the curtain where media and political establishment actually operate.

JPS: *How would you relate these observations to Donald Trump's election victory?*

Solty: It is a fact that the left-wing political spectrum – once encompassing Greens, Leftists, and Socialists – has fragmented over the decades. Looking ahead, in my view, left-wing liberalism will have to justify itself in light of the horseshoe theory. Obviously, there is a widespread fear of the rise of the right, leading to a willingness to support authoritarian policies, including military measures, in the name of defending democracy. All this is framed as the battle of democracy vs. autocracy.

This is the absurd part of the new war ideology: It claims that democracy must be militant against autocracy. Thus, internal dissent is usually framed as coming from external autocratic forces – e.g., Putin manipulating elections, China spreading narratives. Ultimately, this perspective labels all opposition as a "fifth column." This logic feeds into the horseshoe theory, justifying a militant democracy internally with measures like the "loyalty to the constitution" tests for public servants in Brandenburg. Or look at the dual citizenship debate. In this regard, SPD politicians, who compared a meeting between German and Austrian rightwing populists and identitarians in January 2024 to the Wannsee Conference, are now proposing to revoke dual citizenship retroactively for up to ten years in cases of antisemitism.

8 <https://www.stern.de/politik/deutschland/umfrage--nur-17-prozent-der-deutschen-bereit-zur-landesverteidigung-mit-der-waffe-34301080.html>

9 Edit: In the most recent poll of March 2025, that number rose to 10 percent. <https://www.stern.de/news/umfrage--17-prozent-der-deutschen-bei-angriff-zu-verteidigung-mit-waffen-bereit-35527170.html>

Now, in relation to Trump, I think the following observations are crucial. With regard to Israel and Palestine, Trump is obviously pro-Netanyahu, which is causing political shifts within the right. We've already seen Le Pen and Meloni align with the Western alliance – a move facilitated by the Gaza conflict. Why is this so, one may ask? Because Israel's enemies are also the far right's enemies. Israel frames the conflict as civilization vs. barbarism – and from this perspective, "the barbarians" are the Muslim populations of the Arab world. This aligns with Björn Höcke's "remigration" project, where he calls for pushing Islam back to the Bosphorus.

For now, within the AfD, the Krah-Höcke faction is still influential. And they cling to the New World Order theory, while promoting at the same time a classic anti-American stance, likely for electoral reasons – since Eastern Germany remains skeptical of the West and the USA, shaped by post-1990 experiences. However, pressure is growing on the far right in Germany to align with the Western alliance – not just because of the "Melonization" of the AfD as a power strategy, but also because Le Pen, Meloni, and Trump are setting a precedent – figures they admire and want to ally with. And because the Gaza conflict provides an opportunity to position themselves within the Western bloc and overcome the Holocaust guilt they loathe. If the AfD now claims to defend Europe's Judeo-Christian heritage against "Afrikanism" and "Orientalism", it becomes harder to hold them accountable for Holocaust denial and their extremist positions. So, there are strong forces keeping the Krah-Höcke faction in check – and Trump's pro-Israel stance could play a key role in this shift.

JPS: *If Trump integrates into these networks, we can ask the question that is always somewhat implicitly on the table: Does Trump qualify as a fascist under mainstream fascism theories?*

Solty: The recent surge in fascism discourse is linked to the rise of a discourse-analytic approach – which focuses on: Manichean thinking (good vs. evil), friend-enemy dichotomies, and in-group vs. out-group dynamics. However, this overextends the definition of fascism, and it leads to absurdities, when even critical psychologists like Klaus Weber label Sahra Wagenknecht as fascist. Why is this so, one may ask? Because they define fascism purely through discourse, arguing that it: breaks with universal human rights and represents a radicalization of conservatism. But this doesn't explain fascism's societal function.

Historically, we've seen two flawed hypotheses: First, there is Lenin's view that democracy is capitalism's best disguise, while authoritarianism is not a capitalist form. But this hypothesis fails to explain why liberal democracy collapsed in the 1930s (except in the US and UK). Secondly, there is the 1930s critical Theory's hypothesis that fascism is capitalism's "ideal" form. Now this hypothesis fails to explain why democracy flourished after 1945. Clearly, capitalism shifts between periods where it favors authoritarian states and periods where liberal democracy is the best model. This raises the question: How functional or dysfunctional is today's far right?

Historically, the NSDAP was functional for nationally organized capitalism (e.g., Thyssen, Krupp). But neoliberalism globalized capitalism, shifting dominance to transnational capital factions. Capital export today isn't just short-term investments, but foreign direct investment (FDI) – this has become the dominant force, in particular in strong states. Against this backdrop, the AfD has remained dysfunctional for capital. As long as the AfD rejects the Euro, which serves as a springboard for German industry (Bosch, Siemens, Daimler, BMW, etc.), and as long as the party rejects NATO, which secures global trade routes and foreign investments, it cannot become a partner for Bosch, Siemens, Daimler, and BMW. Globally, the far right was never really a partner for global capitalist endeavors. This explains, for instance, why Trump was largely opposed by Fortune 500 companies in 2016, despite the tax cuts promised for corporations.

If we use the fascism concept, we should adopt Griffin's differentiation between fascism as a movement and fascism as a state form. Certainly, fascist movements can emerge from capitalism's contradictions. Referring to Poulantzas, we can argue that fascist movements gain strength when circumstances worsen and become unbearable. The conditions are moving in this direction, as capitalism faces a prolonged crisis, and the left is too weak to offer an egalitarian way out of this crisis.

Overall, we are experiencing a renationalization of capitalism, a deglobalization so to speak, at least in parts. And this could possibly also entail a new functionality for people like Trump. That is where it becomes interesting. Perhaps, we do not need to call the new state form fascist. This state will certainly still rely on elections, but also on centralization of executive power. And there are reasons for this centralization. Because liberal parliamentarism is increasingly less capable of competing with China. China has proven to be hyper-competitive after the global financial crisis. The austerity policies in the West were completely inferior to Chinese state interventionism. China's industrial policy was vastly superior to that of the West, which explains China's competitiveness. The West then tried to beat China at its own game, by implementing new industrial policy. Examples are the EU Climate and Transformation Fund, the EU Chips and Science Act, or the Inflation Reduction Act in the US. But it is becoming evident that neoliberal debt brakes and similar instruments make it difficult to beat China at its own game. There is no best practice and liberal parliamentarism acts in some instances as a brake when it comes to taking on the competition with China. Certainly, we observe growing disillusionment with democracy from above and below. We already saw this during the global financial crisis, when neoliberals spoke of the ungovernability of democracy, and a discourse on the dysfunctionality of liberal parliamentarism took roots. And I believe this is intensifying under the conditions of competition with China. That means a situation could arise in which people like Trump actually become functional when it comes to the new bloc confrontation.