

//Notas de Análisis//

Debt-ceiling showdown and Tea Party extremism

**By Professor Maria L. Fornella*

Most post-modern societies are being challenged by a widening gap that divides their populations by the classic cleavages of age, class, region and religion. Exacerbated by the forces of globalization and the immediacy of technology, they result in constant clashes that cause an exponential increase in social tensions and insecurity. Even if the Norwegian killer was insane and can not be used as example, he was still a member of the dominant culture failing to accommodate to post-modern circumstances. In the United States this gap is vividly evident in the current debt ceiling debate, which is only a symptom of much serious divisions that threaten the country's social unity and political future.

A brief look at recent headlines in the United States can give outsiders and idea of the country's social and political environment.

On Sunday July 24th, a new law approving gay marriage came into effect in New York, making it the sixth and largest state in the nation (plus the District of Columbia) to have legalized same-sex marriage. In Manhattan, people celebrated on Fifth Avenue, singing and dancing to the music and well-suited lyrics of *New York, New York* ("If we can make it here, we'll make it anywhere...").

On July 0th, Republican candidates Michelle Bachman and Rick Santoro a "Marriage Vow" swearing fidelity to their spouses, promising they would "vigorously oppose any redefinition of marriage" and would take steps to amend welfare legislation that did not reinforce conventional marriage.

This is only a sample of the extreme polarization the country is facing both economically and socially. It is a critical moment in United States history, one that may require a deep reflection on the basic principles the nation was founded upon and a renewal of the social compact.

Prodded by the Tea Party leaders, who presently wield an amount of power disproportionate to their numbers, Republican candidates have been signing pledges on an array of different topics in order to prove their conservative credentials. Both Michelle Bachman and Mitt Romney also signed a no-new-taxes pledge, together with a "cut, cap and balance pledge" to amend the Constitution to require a balanced budget and congressional super majorities to raise taxes.

These two pledges, albeit non-enforceable and thus largely symbolic, are now the single most important obstacle to reach a deal in Congress about balancing the budget and avoiding default on the national debt. Tea Party Nation leader Judson Phillips has threatened to recruit candidates to mount primary challenges against any GOP member that votes for a compromise on the debt ceiling that involves any type of revenue increases to balance the budget. The GOP Congressional leadership has been hijacked by intransigent ideologues,

represented in the House by 87 freshmen with disproportionate power over the more established professional politicians who understand that democratic governance requires give and take, and that politics in a pluralistic society is the art of the achievable.

This country was founded on the premise of compromise, negotiation and cooperation, as it is evident from the history of the Constitution and the layers of governmental power devised mainly to counterbalance one another: states versus federal, legislative versus executive, Senate v. House, and an independent judiciary. It was clear even then, that solutions in what promised to be a huge, diverse society with deep regional and religious cleavages would require compromise. But today, in the “worst Congress ever” as Norman Ornstein calls it in his recent article in *Foreign Policy*, compromise is a bad word.

The House is controlled by a GOP freshmen class that owes its seats to Tea Party ideologues and is refusing to raise the debt ceiling even as President Obama has agreed to cuts in spending that include cuts in entitlements, in exchange for ending subsidies on ethanol and other corporate subsidies (he has even given up on the expiration of the Bush era tax cuts he had included in his first proposal). This package that would represent over 3 trillion dollars in cuts from the federal budget, including reductions in Medicare and other social programs, would have allowed the debt ceiling to be raised so that the US could avoid defaulting on its debt by August 2nd. It was on the table last week and close to being signed on by House Speaker John Boehner but he refused it at the last minute because of pressure from his own caucus. The Tea Party is pushing professional legislators toward the abyss, and with them, the whole country.

The Tea Party is a social movement that was born out of frustration and disappointment with government spending over the last twelve years. President George W. Bush inherited a budget surplus from the Clinton-Gingrich years. But that surplus quickly vanished as Bush proposed and got passed serious tax cuts on the wealthy and then embarked on two wars that are still going on today. In response, a large coalition of Independents, Republicans and a few former Democrats formed a protest movement that defines itself for what it is against: big government, big media, big banks, unsustainable deficits and intrusive federal regulation. In spite of some evident intrinsic contradictions in their philosophy (for example some the new regulations they so vehemently oppose such as the Dodd-Frank legislation are meant to constrain the actions of “big banks” they so strongly abhor), the Tea Party has been very successful in focusing the public’s attention on the federal budget deficit and on the federal debt that has ballooned in the last two decades. Those are its core concerns, together with a deep-seated contempt for and rejection of, everything the well-educated elites are for the most in favor of: environmental sustainability, a foreign policy based on multilateralism, gay rights and immigration reform legislation that recognizes the realities of the estimated twelve million undocumented workers in the country.

After two months of wrangling, neither side has managed to get what it wanted, the US credit rating is about to be downgraded (with the subsequent increase in interest rates and damaging effects on an already slow economy) and the vitriolic

Washington environment is alienating people on the Right and on the Left. Pressured by the Tea Partiers and their anti-tax obsession, Republicans have refused to compromise to avoid a default, and in so doing they are sabotaging their own chances for 2012. Most Americans are appalled at the GOP's refusal to endorse Obama's proposal that would cut the deficit by \$3.7 trillion through a mix of spending cuts, entitlement reform and ending some corporate subsidies and tax deductions. In so doing, the GOP is alienating independent voters that want to avoid default and are ready for a deal. A new political center of gravity is forming. The number of registered voters that identify themselves as Independent is growing (40% in latest poll), while the numbers of Republicans and Democrats are sinking and there is a new online movement from the grassroots to form a third party.

Paradoxically, out of all this Byzantine intrigue in the hallways of Congress, and given the outcome of no deal announced on Monday night, President Obama may come out as the winner. To the dismay of his most progressive base, Obama, intent on finding some common ground with the opposition has shifted to the center-right of the political spectrum on his proposals, daring to sacrifice some cuts on entitlements in exchange for revenue increases, only to see them rejected by the Republicans. He is close to winning a stand-alone debt ceiling increase while having proven to be the only reasonable adult in this struggle. This would gain him the support of many independents and help him avoid a confrontation within his own party. It would also allow him to focus on unemployment, the real immediate crisis that most directly impacts people's lives. However, Democrats in the House and Senate are afraid that concessions on reducing some Medicare benefits, for example, or postponing the eligibility age, would ruin the clarity of their message to seniors during the election. Conversely, Tea Partiers see a compromise involving any sort of revenue increases by the government, even non-tax measures such as ending corporate subsidies, as a betrayal of their principles.

The Tea Partiers have brought into focus the spending crisis that has been growing unchecked for a long time, and one the country cannot obviously tax its way out of. Some facts cannot be denied: debt is the result of spending not backed by revenue. Total government spending at all levels has risen to 37% of the GDP today from 27% in 1960. It could reach 50% by 2038. The debt-to-GDP ratio has reached 100% today, from 42% in 1980. The big moral struggle is still ahead. There is no question that the government is spending too much, but the real debate is about priorities and the philosophies that underlie those priorities. The President has recognized that the budget deficit is important to voters, most of which have come to the conclusion that since the stimulus spending did not solve the problem of unemployment, deficit reduction appears to be a better way to improve the economy than investing in education, infrastructure and new energy technologies. Obama must acknowledge this, and make it part of his discourse.

But the President must also continue to make a case for the common good ("there are things we can still do together", he said in his last speech), the social safety net and America's future. He can do this by personalizing the budget battles the way Clinton did. Are budget battles about choices or necessities? Why

give more tax cuts to the wealthy if their wealth has grown through the recession while the rest saw their wealth diminish? Why subsidize corporate agriculture and ethanol production? Social programs like Medicare serve all Americans, why focus on cutting it while giving a pass to the upper income- and- wealth echelon? General elections are won from the center. Strong strident advocates make for weak candidates. Undoubtedly, the 2012 election will be about money, about fiscal discipline, but it will also be about a more equal distribution, and it will require strong leadership from the two respective philosophical corners to come to a consensus. That is why the Republican establishment is so worried about the lack of gravitas in their field of candidates. That is why some yearn for budget whiz Paul Ryan, or Governor Chris Christie or Rick Perry....or anybody really, that looks and sounds as if he can take on Obama in the intricacies of the budget, the debt ceiling, and social programs reform. That may also be why Jeb Bush was asked on Fox News about his intentions to run for President again two days ago. This time his response was more nuanced: he said that while he doesn't anticipate it, he hasn't ruled it out ("but, he added, "I haven't ruled out being in Dancing with the Stars, either").

In the meantime, the Wall Street Journal today announced that, based on the Pew Research Center tabulations of SIPP and Census data, the wealth gap between America's whites and its two largest minorities, Blacks and Hispanics, has widened to unprecedented levels due to the housing crisis and the Great Recession. Alan Greenspan, former President of the Federal Reserve has said repeatedly that the wealth gap that has grown consistently for the last decade is a threat not only to our country but to capitalism itself. Poverty and unemployment are a combustible mix: if fiscal responsibility ends up being based on the back of the poor, social conflict will erupt. It is unconscionable, for example, to think that hedge fund managers pay significantly less taxes than their secretaries.

Some Republicans want to abolish every piece of social legislation and re-litigate every progressive judicial decision since the New Deal. As part of a pledge game, Michelle Bachman and four other candidates also signed the "Susan B. Anthony pledge" promising to appoint abortion opponents to their cabinets and to deny all funding for Planned Parenthood when they become presidents. The bizarre "Marriage Vow" pledge signed by Bachmann and Santoro not only opposes same-sex marriage and includes a personal promise to be faithful to their spouses, but (most peculiarly yet redundantly) it also rejects Sharia Law (which, by the way, like Bachman, also opposes gay marriage and female adultery, which it punishes by death!)

The only candidate that has refused to sign any pledge is Jon Huntsman, who understands the perils of siding too closely with the rebellious Tea Party. Even if some of its main points have successfully brought into focus the deficit issue, the Tea Party is still supported by a minority and resented by most Republicans. Its anti-technocratic, anti-Washington message has resonance, but it may have pushed the GOP too far into a corner. Its message is also becoming blurred when it steps into the social arena: its racist and homophobic overtones do not reflect the spirit of the times and are offensive to the "millennials", the youngest generation of voters born in the 80s and 90s, which Republicans still hope to attract in 2012.

Social movements are major vehicles of participation and can re-energize a worn out party. They reflect the spirit of the times, often in an extremist way that is what gives them prominence: their passion for the cause, their original approach, are all important, but their message has to resonate with the public if they are to succeed. They emerge, coalesce, grow and achieve some successes. However, once their main point is made, three things can happen: they can become a party, their main ideas can be incorporated into mainstream politics, or they dissipate and be quickly forgotten. The Tea Party brought into focus the issue of fiscal responsibility, it infused conservatism with new energy and found a natural home in the Republican Party, which had become profligate, and will have to prove from now on that it is sincere about austerity. Its impact is undeniable: it has also attracted Independents and in so doing, has per force moved the Democratic Party to the center-right. Mimicking the “big tent” approach of Republicans, the Tea Party has lately been focusing strategically on fiscal responsibility, limited government and free markets and its main groups have avoided divisive social issues when speaking to the general public. But their demands of ideological purity from their candidates, their emphasis on returning to the strict meaning of the Constitution and the values of the Founding Father, their defense of states rights and gun rights, belie their claims of inclusiveness for all Americans; in its coded language, its contempt for immigrants and its not-so- veiled racism, one senses a strongly reactionary sentiment bordering on uncontrollable fanaticism which is completely out of step with most Americans and which will make it very difficult to widen its appeal beyond what it has already achieved.

To paraphrase deceased Republican leader Barry Goldwater, the Tea Party’s aim is *not* to streamline government or make it more efficient, but to get rid of every piece of social legislation and economic regulation passed since the New Deal. Their purpose is not to share the burden of the weakest members of society, nor to educate their children so they can have equality of opportunity, but to defend the individual freedoms of those who can stand on their own. In sum, they are extremists for whom tolerance and moderation are vices, not virtues, and therefore they have no place in a democracy.

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