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Politics After Depoliticization? The USA In Early 2002



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The political strategy of George Bush and the Republicans after 11 September is precisely what it was before: the ruthless depoliticization of the public sphere. Concentrating on „values,“ on „individual responsibility,“ on the „goodness“ of the American nation, that strategy above all seeks to delegitimize and indeed totally eliminate reference to divisions of income, power and wealth. To evoke these, indeed, is to practise class warfare—from which the Republicans think that the citizenry should recoil, since class (in the inimitable formulation of George Bush Sr.) is what the Europeans have and we, happily, do not. The events of the 11 September and national mobilization for a permanent war on „terror“ were of course a welcome excuse for the pursuit of global hegemony by a foreign policy elite which has discarded even the pretext of multilateralism.

The authors of the Declaration of Independence expressed „ respect for the opinions of mankind..“ The Bush government has informed the world that it will be lied to. There is an exact domestic counterpart, the government’s concentration on serving the interests of its financial taskmasters—presented as the liberation of the citizenry from the iron hand of government. I am unable to say whether Bush has read von Hayek, but clearly some in his entourage have done so—and combined his doctrines with close attention to the stratagems of an earlier master, Machiavelli.

In this project, Bush has both witting and unwitting allies. As I write, the nation’s premier discussion of politics, the television program called „Nightline“ has had a temporary reprieve from replacement by a talk show conducted by a grinning clown. Berlusconi had better look to his reputation: in crudity and vulgarity, ignorance and distortion: the American media in their presentation of politics are serious rivals of his TV stations. In this setting, a substantial segment of the Democratic Party has capitulated. The „New Democrats“ advocate deregulation, reduction of the public sector, privatization of our limited but not insubstantial welfare state. Financed by Wall Street, they resemble the Republicans in their aversion to discussions of class. They seek to dispute the Republicans in the white suburbs. They have moved into the vacuum in the Democratic Party created by the attenuation of the trade unions and the disappearance of the urban political machines. Their leader was Bill Clinton with his slogan, „the era of big government is over.“ Clinton was, of course, an entirely ambiguous figure—close to the blacks and to the women’s movement, sympathetic to an enlargement of American democracy, yet convinced that prosperity depended primarily on encouraging the expansive and innovative forces of capitalism. It was he who presided over the Democrats’ loss of the two houses of Congress and control of a majority of governorships and state legislatures. His successor, Gore, lost the election not only because of Republican judicial chicanery—but because (lacking Clinton’s personal appeal) he

presented two faces to the nation. One day he was a reforming and redistributionist Democrat, the next a stern advocate of personal responsibility (a code word in the US for the downsizing of the welfare state) and committed servant of the market.

It has to be remembered that the central fact of American politics is that in presidential elections, only half the citizens vote, in mid-term congressional and senatorial elections, the percentage is barely forty percent. That increases the role of separate segments of the electorate, and the weight of the better educated and more prosperous, who do vote. It makes appeals to a general public interest very difficult: how would the citizens arrive at their own conception of it? In the period of a reformist Democratic Party, from Franklin Roosevelt through Lyndon Johnson, the trade unions had a third of the labor force and acted as surrogates for an entire population otherwise at the mercy of organized capital. With the membership of the unions down to circa thirteen percent of the labor force, the new AFL-CIO leadership under John Sweeney has seized upon the surrogate political function of the unions in its drive to renew both American unionism and reformist politics. Nearly a quarter of the American electorate, despite the decline in union membership, comes from union households. These voters in 2000 in fact nearly won the Presidency for the Democrats and helped the party to reach near parity in the Senate and narrow the Republican majority in the house. Much of this success depended not only on the mobilization of union voters, but on close alliances with environmentalists and feminists, with blacks and Hispanics, with civic action groups of every kind—and with the churches. Much of the leadership of the American churches, in a society in which half the populace goes to church on Sunday, is in favor of maintaining and extending the American welfare state. Now, in presenting its „Agenda For All America,“ the AFL-CIO seeks to enlarge the Democratic majority in the Senate and help take control of the House from the Republicans, in the elections of November, 2002. The Agenda calls for investment in education, the defense and enlargement of retirement security, an increase in the minimum wage, an extension of medical insurance, and holding the private sector to stricter criteria of accountability and legality. Since the private sector contributes about fifteen times to its candidates what the unions can give to theirs, the unions are of course dependent upon mobilization at the base—and broad political and social alliance with those who think of the New Deal and Great Society as milestones in American democracy. That also entails internal conflict in the Democratic party with the „new Democrats.“¹

The economic situation is unclear. The great boom of the nineties was lucrative for the top twenty percent of the income scale, brought much smaller gains for those in the middle, and actually saw a decline in income for those at the bottom. Consumption maintains the economy—but at a price.

The Chairman of the Federal Reserve Board (central bank) theoretically believes in the free market, but in fact his interest cuts were splendid examples of state intervention in the economy.

They had as a consequence a lowering of house mortgage rates, putting more purchasing power in the hands of householders. They used it to buy goods produced by cheap labor abroad. In so doing, they ran up huge amounts of household debt, and so are at risk should they become unemployed. They also contributed, unwittingly, to the destruction of employment within the US.

The AFL-CIO has had some success in its struggle against free trade, which is fervently espoused by the market-friendly Democrats----and the struggle to impose environmental and labor standards on trade relations continues. The American steel industry is now, for instance, near collapse. Bush had to impose protectionist measures, at the behest of Republican Congressmen who were convinced that they would lose their seats in steel producing districts if he did not. In the meantime, the new technology investment cycle has ended, but the economists persist in propagating the dogma of „productivity growth.“ Suppose, however, that much American „productivity growth“ can

be attributed to a simple fact. Without union protection, many workers are obliged to work longer hours than they are paid for—so that nine hour days count as eight hour ones in the economic statistics. Meanwhile, the economists' criteria of „productivity“ takes no account of the costs to the society of our inadequate provision of day care, education, health, social services and transport. In any event, at the moment there is argument as to whether we are in recession or leaving one. By American criteria, joblessness has increased from circa four and one half percent to five and one half percent. (Our statistics are not comparable to the ones used in the EU and diminish the actual extent of unemployment.) Capital investment has declined. The Republicans in the Congress have agreed to an extension of unemployment benefits—but extracted as a price further tax cuts for their electoral clients and party paymasters, the prosperous and the corporations. Bush's earlier tax cuts, absurdly skewed in favor of the wealthy, and his gargantuan program of military spending are putting the Federal budget in deficit again. Interest rates are bound to rise, with a restraining effect on investment. The states and cities, meanwhile, are experiencing a considerable decline in their tax revenues. Just when the demand for social services, then, is increasing, the White House has proposed systematic cuts in Federal spending in this area. Once again, those most dependent upon government policies which would stimulate employment, extend social services, and prepare citizens and workers for the future are told that they should look to their own resources (and to the workings of the market).

Is the classic opposition of the two major parties again on the political agenda—with the Democrats speaking for the American equivalent, however limited, of social democracy and the Republicans for the benign omniscience and omnipotence of the market? The difficulty is that a considerable segment of the Democrats have abandoned the traditions of their own party. The nation's attention, for a bit, is on the collapse of the Enron Corporation—an energy firm which was actually a speculative venture in futures trading, in which executives and managers enriched themselves (quite illegally) at the expense of their employees and shareholders. The enterprise had the closest ties to the Republicans, but the long list of politicians receiving contributions from it includes many Democrats. They can hardly claim to be models of civic rigour. The Enron affair has reinforced the effects of the recent decline in the stock market. It has temporarily slowed the drive by Republicans (and the New Democrats, again) to replace the public system of old age pensions, Social Security, by a partly or entirely privatized structure. The Enron employees whose pension contributions were invested in the firm's stocks lost, in many cases, their entire savings.

Meanwhile, the Democrats have made their own the preposterous view that deficit financing by government is always bad, and have added to it the systematic denigration of public enterprise voiced by the advocates of total privatization. The national environmental condition could be improved, and our dependence upon foreign sources of oil reduced, had we a network of high speed passenger trains. Using the orthodox modes of economic calculation, from which the long term consequences of economic transactions are excluded, investment in high speed trains would not pay—otherwise the private sector would long since have provided these. There are some critical economists in the universities, and some critical economic journalists, but their voices are hardly heard. In other periods of American history (the Progressive epoch, the New Deal, the nineteen sixties) there were critical thinkers whose pedagogic efforts were welcomed by large parts of the public. Whether a public exists any longer—as opposed to an atomised aggregate of citizens who did not think that they possess economic and social rights—is an increasingly acute question. At any rate, much of the Democratic Party has abandoned political pedagogy for short term electoral calculation—and manages to lose anyhow. One is reminded of Senator Kennedy's remark: „What America doesn't need is two Republican parties.“

There is considerable local civic activity in the United States, and a plethora of organizations apart from the parties are present in our fragmented public sphere. The media, however, largely ignore these things in favor of gossip—or the purveying of the most vulgar of ideological stereotypes.

Potential recruits to a critical citizenry, then, are often on their own. John Sweeney has seen that the trade unions can hardly survive, much less expand, in the absence of a larger public debate about the class structure, in which citizens would break out of the privatised structures of existence depicted as normal by our mass media. (Our novels and more rarely films are often more honest.) For the moment, there are some 85 members of the Congressional Progressive Caucus (of 435 members of the House of Representatives) and some 20 or so Senators (of 100) who align themselves consistently and systematically with the unions. They are so burdened with defending what we have of a welfare state and workers' rights that a large new project is not imminent. Senator Kennedy spent years in his successful campaign for a rise in the derisorily low minimum wage: at 70, he no doubt feels not unlike Sisyphus.

It is impossible to predict the course of the economy in the next year, although assurances from conventional economists that the worst may be behind us can be read as injunctions to prepare for a deeper decline. It does not follow that economic distress, short time working, unemployment, loss of employment, will induce our citizens to rethink, render them more open to the arguments in favor of common solutions to common problems. They have to be confronted with concrete alternatives. Once the 2002 elections are decided, attention will shift to the choice of a Democratic Presidential candidate, and that choice will be eminently ideological. Should the chosen candidate be a New Democrat (Senator Joseph Lieberman, for instance, who was Gore's Vice Presidential running mate), it is entirely possible that Ralph Nader will contest the election again. The unions have made the Democratic Party their chosen vehicle, but they have been unable to shape it so as to maximize their chances to achieve their legislative ends, much less a breakthrough to a new politics. These are matters for the future. For the moment, it can be said that the nation is slowly awakening from the political numbing that followed the shock of 11 September.