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The Populism of Enlightenment

Obama and the Transatlantic Left:
Learning to Walk and Fight again

■ During the twentieth century, America's progressives and Europe's social democrats maintained an intensive exchange of socio-political ideas. The best-known results of this transfer of ideas were the American New Deal reform project and the transatlantic Third Way between Clinton, Blair and Schröder. However, the transatlantic exchange of progressive ideas came to a halt after governments changed in the U.S. and in most European countries. This essay attempts to make a new beginning by taking a closer look at the American election campaign.

■ »Left populism with an eye for the feasible« is the methodical basis of Democrat Barack Obama's election campaign. He looks to a broad social alliance for support, with trade unions assuming a central role - their organisers are, in terms of personnel, the backbone of Obama's election campaign. The labour movement, non-profit organisations and the Democratic majority in Congress are supposed to form, under Obama's leadership, the »new coalition for a greener society« – possibly a model for Europe's social democrats, too.

■ What makes American progressives different from the democratic Left in Europe is their strategic mix of utopian demand and practical reason. Their criticism of capitalism is radical. However, in the fight for union rights, good jobs and social justice, tactical flexibility and the will to compromise are just as important. This »visionary pragmatism« relies on step-by-step changes in capitalism.

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Preliminary Remarks

All signs are pointing towards change in the 2008 U.S. election campaign. Change, the motto of the Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama, is the campaign's dominant paradigm. Even John McCain, the Republican candidate, wants to be seen as a candidate of change. The public reaction to the economic and moral bankruptcy of »predatory capitalism« makes clear what had previously emerged from the social rejections in the United States: that the radical market conservatives' ideological claim to leadership and design has come to an end. Finding new answers to the challenges posed by worldwide economic developments has become a strikingly obvious necessity. The global arc of problems – from melting polar ice caps to the core meltdown of Wall Street – is forcing traditional parties and institutions to re-think and re-evaluate their former positions.

What does this mean for the political debate in Europe, marked by social-democratic fears of decline? Will the »battle of ideas« in American society yield new political models? Will this development produce impulses that could breathe new life into Europe's rigidifying democracies in terms of content or method? Does the socio-liberal coalition for change that Barack Obama strives for lend itself as a model for social democracy in Europe? Would it be worth giving a transatlantic exchange of ideas and comparison of practices another try, as successfully done in the first half of the twentieth century? The best-known historical example of this is the New Deal of the 1930s, which offered an answer to the worldwide economic crisis. A more recent example from the late twentieth century is the attempt at building bridges with the Third Way, a programmatic initiative under the ideological leadership of the Anglo-Saxons Bill Clinton and Tony Blair.

This study deals with the preconditions for building new bridges, and the limitations and opportunities of such an undertaking. It is based on extensive talks I conducted with politicians, academics, labour representatives, activists and publicists of the American Left – men and women – in the United States during the summer of 2008. They are all »ideologically« connected by their »visionary pragmatism« – combining the American Dream idea of »rags to riches« with the willingness to accept a »historical compromise« with modern capitalism.

Who and What is Progressive?

When talking to Americans about the »left«, one is not necessarily talking about the same thing. Who or what is considered »left« and what is meant by the ambiguous term »progressive« must often be defined first. There are many »progressives«: radicals, moderates, social liberals (in the European sense), former President Bill Clinton's Wall Street-friendly aides as well as labour activists in Barack Obama's presidential campaign. The leftists in Congress – a group within the Democrats – call themselves the Congressional Progressive Caucus. There currently are 72 members, including Independent Senator Bernie Sanders from Vermont who is a professed »socialist«.

In the preface to his book *In Search of Progressive America*, edited with Dutch social scientists Frans Becker and Menno Hurenkamp, historian George Kazin of Georgetown University remarks, in reference to the terminology of »progressive«, that left-wing Americans today »favor this mildly inclusive term«. To be a professed »progressive« is apparently easier than stating »I'm a leftist« – especially in English. »Progressive« sounds less grim, a bit »bashful« perhaps, as the unionist Ron Blackwell mockingly says, yet it is still a political statement. This terminology also has the advantage of encompassing all movements from social democrats and trade unionists to social liberals, left-leaning Christians and environmental activists who have always wanted to, if not abolish, then at least »control and tame« capitalism, in the mildly ironic words of social scientist Norman Birnbaum.

The progressive tradition in the United States is represented by big names. Both presidents Roosevelt, Theodore (1901-1909) and Franklin (1933-1945) were – despite all differences – progressive charismatic leaders. The latter, of course, Franklin D. Roosevelt – the legendary FDR, the president of the century whom many people think of when they talk about their hopes for and expectations of Barack Obama – was, in addition to that, a man of the Left. The economic times that coincided with his campaign for presidential office – the fundamental crisis of the early 1930s – remind many people of the situation facing the United States in fall 2008. In a comprehensive essay on »The New Deal Legacy in American Politics«, Norman Birnbaum describes FDR as the hero of his political youth and remembers: »Franklin Roosevelt, with his direct and robust imagery, his biting contempt for greed and reaction,

his challenge to fear and passivity, was our charismatic leader«. Under his programme of rebuilding and renewal, the New Deal, FDR, the radical patriot from New York, gathered thousands of socially engaged young activists and intellectuals, employed them in the public sector, and with their help completely turned the country around. The »first hundred days« of his presidency with their abundance of crisis measures and social laws established standards which have served as a benchmark for presidents ever since.

Some say that Franklin D. Roosevelt's presidential campaign was less »leftist« than his subsequent politics. At any rate, the man was enough of a politician, visionary and charismatic leader to inspire a whole generation with his optimism and energy and to show the American people a way out of the worst turbulences of their history to date. European experiences and models played an important role, not least the British economist John Maynard Keynes. There also was, according to Birnbaum, the »secular intellectual legacy of a half century of social criticism« which Roosevelt imported into Washington from the universities. Politically speaking, this time period was a kind of heyday for the North American version of social democracy. Yet it did not last long. The counteroffensive by business elites and conservative-liberal schools of thought began under Roosevelt's presidency and, except for a short interruption in the 1960s, lasted until the year of elections and disasters, 2008.

Lessons and False Doctrines

It pays to learn from one another – but what and how? And who can learn from whom? Since the end of the twentieth century, European progressives in particular have been concerned with studying and comparing, first in good times, now in bad. Based on the business- and management-model, it became customary to scrutinize successful reform undertakings by friendly parties for their transferability: »best practice« on the job market, in health care, retirement plans, education and research policy. The Netherlands' part-time work, Denmark's compromise in job market policy (»flexicurity«), Finland's school policy, Germany's vocational training – anything that worked could serve as a model. In the progressive network of the Third Way, people copied from each other for all what it's worth. The United States, too, was a part of this. At first as a

model and myth: the job machine, the growth machine, and the financial superpower. Only recently it became a deterring example for undesirable trends.

Learning from America? During the short era of a progressive hegemony on both sides of the Atlantic, from 1997/98 (social democratic election victories in Great Britain, France and Germany) until 2000 (election victory of George W. Bush), politicians on both sides of the Atlantic attempted to build programmatic bridges. The initiative basically originated with the American »European« Clinton and the British »American« Blair. The Third Way as a new option between state socialism and market liberalism was supposed to become the future ideological basis of North Atlantic progress and to secure progressive majorities on both sides of the ocean, if possible in alliance with the business world, if necessary in conflict with the unions. This Anglo-Saxon concept did not have much in common with previous intrinsic disputes in the capitalist system. On the outside, the Third Way was all about image, on the inside, all about reform. However, it was not a political strategy for a new power and distribution struggle. Initially this made the reformists attractive to new groups of voters. Later the concept turned into a political problem due to lack of support in the parties' own ranks. Majorities were lost, and since then Europe's comparative studies have changed: now social democratic party headquarters primarily look at the mistakes and defeats of their international companions. Instead of asking: »What can we do like them?« the question turns into: »What must we do differently?« The United States no longer represents a model of success.

In the better days of the North Atlantic progressive alliance, i.e. before the culturally conservative turn that America took under Bush, there were some new measures that Europe took note of despite the fact that they were controversial within and beyond the progressive parties. They had their good points, after all, and included the policy of deregulation, the distrust of control by a powerful welfare state and the priority of austerity budgets. Party leftists criticised the course adopted by the Clinton administration (1992-2000) that wanted to make it a priority to free the Democratic party, or the liberals as such, from the reputation that they were genuinely inclined to »tax and spend«. Bill Clinton managed to reduce the American budget deficit, in fact, which to this day counts as his

greatest achievement. It is praise that the Left did not embrace. Not only is Clinton the source of the maxim: »It's the economy, stupid« – words that have become well known all over the world and refer to how elections are determined by the economy. He also, no sooner than he had taken office, made the unforgettable proclamation that »The era of big government is over«, meaning the state should keep out of the economy as much as possible and concede tasks to others. Less bureaucracy, relieved public budgets, stronger individual responsibility, subsidiarity: these were legitimate considerations, which were, however, based primarily on the criteria of efficiency and economy. Conceding government responsibility in the social sector became ideology and state reasoning under Bush. The effects were generally felt by the middle class and ethnic minorities, and particularly by the poor. The U.S. has fallen far behind most developed countries in many central areas (life expectation, living standard, access to education). Its child mortality rate is the same as that of Croatia, Estonia and Poland.

Can the phrase »The era of big government is over« thus still hold? One of Clinton's masterminds and economic consultants at the time, William Galston (today working at the Brookings Institution), has come to see it a bit differently. In a June 2008 essay for the Washington magazine *The American Prospect* – a kind of journalistic flagship of the American Left, along with the New Yorker magazine *The Nation* and a few popular online publications (*Salon*, *Huffington Post*, *Daily Kos*) – he wrote about the necessity of a new socio-political concept for future decades. His introductory remark caused a stir in the scene: »In 1996 President Bill Clinton proclaimed that the era of big government was over. It is now clear that the era of the end of big government is over«. Galston's essay was a hot topic in Washington's political circles for several weeks.

The essay is about change as Barack Obama promises it, and about what is needed for this change: new ways of thinking, learning processes and a critical look at everything that only yesterday, under different circumstances, still seemed right and valid. Galston's message, measured in terms of the discourse the Clintonites led in the 1990s, represents a radical turning point: twenty-first century governments can no longer leave the regulation of their citizens' living conditions up to the market and the interplay of social forces. Today's world is no longer comparable to the world of 15 years ago.

After almost eight years of an aggressively ideological right-wing government in Washington, the United States' social reality has indeed changed radically. And with it, the state of the public:

- The American middle class has no part in GNP growth;
- Due to employers' economising and as a result of increased social security costs, the middle class has had to accept a noticeable loss in income;
- Average earners are increasingly in debt;
- Due to the real estate crisis, loss in home values, the flood of foreclosures and the increasing unemployment rate, Americans feel threatened by poverty, homelessness and social decline;
- After the financial system broke down and several banks went bankrupt, the middle class now fears for their retirement savings.

According to Galston, not only the credit markets are to blame but also an »epidemic of corporate misconduct«. Seen from this perspective, the disintegration of social networks in Bush's America is not only the result of market failure and insufficient government controls, but also the result of a decline in social responsibility, sense of decency and morals among the elites. Thus, a strong government is needed all the more. And, according to Galston, a new social contract for the twenty-first century. This is the »key domestic challenge for the next generation«. Public policy, says Galston, must ensure that the fruits of economic growth are distributed, that there are equal opportunities for all and that workers are insured »against wage and income losses against which they cannot protect themselves«. Galston's core thesis is: »The alternative to a new contract is no contract – a society in which the strong take what they can and the weak endure what they must«. This protection can only be provided by strong political leadership – in other words, big government.

It is the announcement of a course correction, similar to the changing European debate in social democracy, which by now even has the »modernisers« thinking beyond the Third Way. The main concern no longer is government downsizing, deregulation, privatisation or the unleashing of financial capital. This phase of the debate, and the re-orientation of the left-wing reformers, is over. The debacle of stock market capitalism quickly changed priorities and agendas. And Democratic reformer Bill Galston demonstrates how to emerge from yesterday's trenches without renouncing one's own phi-

losophies completely. This could be a small best practice model for Europe's social democrats, who are still suffering from the reform debates of recent years and are looking for solutions to their respective programmatic deadlocks.

Free from this baggage of party and ideology history, Barack Obama will let himself in for the new debate. His concept of change stands for the departure away from pre-Bush points of contention. At the same time, he will revert to tried and tested social ideas and models, which under neo-liberalism and government-hostile conservatism had, in part, been buried or put under taboo. This will hold especially true in matters regarding the role of government. As president Obama should be strong enough to talk to the unions about this. Are they for their part sufficiently willing to talk, however? There are signs pointing to yes. One of them is the labour movement's alliance with Obama. In a close race, it could determine the outcome.

Los Angeles, or Paths to Success

New successful ways of collaborating between the labour movement and the political Left – after years of mutual alienation – have obviously been developed in Los Angeles. Today eighteen percent of L.A.'s workers are unionised. The U.S. average is at twelve percent (roughly one third of the rate in the 1930s). Is L.A. the model for a comeback of organised labour? If it is, what makes it special?

The social scientist Peter Dreier is an expert in these matters. He is the director of the Urban and Environmental Policy Program at Occidental College in L.A. – a rather small, but intellectually exquisite educational institution in one of the more beautiful areas of the metropolitan region. Dreier's work on future environmental policy and social city policy has had a great impact on discussions about the future of the gigantic metropolis. He is a man of journalistic talent, blogs for the left-wing online publication *Huffington Post*, writes for the traditionally left-wing New Yorker magazine *Dissent*, and last but not least is an activist in the labour and city scene who knows every trick in the book.

Peter Dreier has studied the political profile of his fellow Americans intensely. How right-wing is America? Why does the Left not stand a chance? Has the pioneers' belief in progress been broken? Or, in the words of a popular book title: »What's the Matter with Kansas?« This bestseller by Thomas

Frank shows the apparently unstoppable rise of the American Right over the last few decades, describes how the conservatives seem to relate better to the »common people« than the progressives, and discusses the gulf between the down-to-earth, hands-on Americans and the un-American, head-in-the-clouds visionaries. It is a frequently quoted textbook about the many mistakes of the Left.

But is that so? Peter Dreier is not very impressed by Frank's thesis: »It is all wrong«. Americans, he says, are not a cohesive political group. They are right, left and in the middle, and all that at the same time. In surveys, the majority of Americans unreservedly consider themselves »middle-of-the-road« – as the good old middle of America, sensible, cautious, conservative and socially minded at the same time. That same majority, according to Dreier, just as unreservedly agrees to the following statements put forth in the same surveys:

- The U.S. needs a nationwide social security system;
- Government should be responsible for health care;
- Government should take over more responsibilities in terms of environmental protection;
- Employees should have the right and opportunity by law to form unions at their workplace;
- If we had a union at my workplace, I would join;
- Minimum wage should be adjusted to cost increases on a regular basis;
- The state has no right to keep its citizens under surveillance.

In sum: »Especially on social issues they support positions that, upon closer inspection, are of a social democratic nature« (Peter Dreier). Thus, the story of Americans' unchanging conservatism would be a legend. In truth, behind their conservative façade Americans silently share what Columbia professor and »68er« Todd Gitlin calls America's »progressive consensus«. An un-dogmatic »pragmatic Left« (Dreier) must then be able to overcome the culture shock, which shook middle-of-the-road America with fear and tension for a while after the wild late sixties. All one would need to do is form a coalition with this genuine American progressive majority. That is exactly the strategy proposed by Dreier, Gitlin and other representatives of the country's democratic Left. Apparently it also is, more or less, Barack Obama's strategy.

Think radically, act as a populist in the original American sense of the word and be prepared to

compromise at the same time: this is how Saul Alinsky, the mastermind of radical community and grassroots work put it. He is a highly respected authority figure among political activists. In these circles, his 1971 classic, *Rules for Radicals*, is currently attracting new attention. It is basically a guidebook for organisers, the American version of social workers that perform grassroots work in communities, nonprofits and especially labour unions. They advise, organise and occasionally guide their target groups to help them define, express and represent their interests. Organisers basically are agents of the common people. In the eyes of conservatives, and especially corporations and their lawyers specialized in union busting, organisers are agitators and troublemakers disrupting the company peace who must be tackled with private security firms or lawsuits. Being an organiser is not something one does in one's free time – it is a tough job, in a company where a union is fighting for admission, or in the ghetto, where an improved communal life and better quality of life are at stake. Organisers are mediators and peacemakers, lobbyists and fighters at the same time. For them, one of Alinsky's core theses is: »To the organiser, compromise is a key and beautiful word«. Being tough but also being able to give way: an ideal mix for politicians. Barack Obama worked as a community organiser in a disadvantaged part of Chicago for three years to help pay for college. Lessons for life, his supporters say. Training for radicals, his opponents claim.

The L.A. model: a new social alliance is working on making the American Dream come true. It consists of progressive politicians – first and foremost the leaders of the current city administration (Democrats) – officials from various labour unions, activists from non-profit organisations and committed individuals from the fields of law, education and especially churches. In the Greater L.A. area with its ten million residents, this progressive alliance has managed to push through reforms, which up until a few years ago were unthinkable in southern California and even today are still out of the question in other parts of the United States:

- A law for a wage which is markedly higher than minimum wage and is based on the real cost of living (this »living wage« is at \$10.64/hr);
- The right of hotel employees to unionise;
- The foundation of a union for janitors (then inspiring the political movie *Bread and Roses* by the British director Ken Loach with Oscar winner

Adrian Brody in the role of an organiser);

- The city's explicit demand that companies competing for public contracts create »quality jobs« with workers' rights;
- Tying construction rights for city development companies to considerable socio-political requirements that range from offering community benefits to obliging developers to hire only those companies for their project that fulfil certain minimum requirements in terms of fair pay, insurance, leave policy and union rights.

Pragmatism and Vision

In Los Angeles one often encounters the indefatigable liberal, a type that fights the establishment each day anew and is not discouraged by defeats. Here one is reminded of the optimistic concept that Sisyphus – the man who tries, repeatedly and without avail, to roll a giant rock up a hill – should be seen as a happy person, as Willy Brandt said in his memorable farewell speech to the SPD (Social Democratic Party of Germany), referring to *The Myth of Sisyphus* by the famous French author Albert Camus. The L.A. alliance of social radicals is tightly integrated, closely connected and tirelessly active despite setbacks. Thanks to modern means of communication they are also constantly linked to like-minded people. In the progressive blogosphere, this network of the happy »un-frustratables« is everywhere and aggressive as never before, both in the Web and in the real world.

Sisyphus, the symbolic figure for everyone performing important cumbersome and only seemingly futile work: Is that an American illusion, an auto-suggestive self-deception, the result of compulsive positive thinking? Or a possible model for the ever so sceptical European Left that could provide social democracy with a »moral armament« for the confrontation with »predatory capitalism« (Helmut Schmidt), which since defeating communism has, in the course of globalisation, busted former socio-moral bonds and is now threatening the social cohesion of democracies?

Apart from Peter Dreier, the people in this multi-faceted nationwide network include Todd Gitlin from Columbia University, NY; the African American law professor Emma Coleman Jordan, renowned among experts, from Georgetown University, Washington D.C.; the brilliant editor of *The Nation*, Katrina vanden Heuvel; and the unrelenting colum-

nist Harold Meyerson of *The American Prospect*, whose increased print correlates with the change in public opinion. Furthermore there is the deputy mayor of Los Angeles, Larry Frank, formerly an organiser who worked for the legendary leader of the farm workers' union, Cesar Chavez; the wise spitfire and expert on Europe, Georgetown University emeritus Norman Birnbaum; and the indestructible politician Jim McDermott from Seattle, member of the House of Representatives and veteran in the Congressional Progressive Caucus, the group of Democrats in Congress. There are several lesser-known activists in the network, too, such as the Protestant Terry Flood in Washington D.C. from the *Church of the Savior* and its non-profit job agency *Jubilee Jobs* which finds employment for difficult-to-place job seekers (the homeless, high school drop-outs, former convicts).

A key figure in this network of indefatigable activists is Madeline Janis from California, whom the *Los Angeles Times* – no left-wing paper – respectfully called »L.A.'s Labour Warrior«. In 1993 she founded the non-profit organisation LAANE, which stands for Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy. It has become an influential non-profit organisation in the fields of city development, the fight against poverty and the promotion of democracy, with forty activists – mostly academics – working under Janis' leadership. They have radically changed the scene. Without LAANE and Madeline Janis, L.A. County would look very different. Real estate agents, speculators and project developers would have an easier life. And construction workers, most of them immigrants, cleaning crews in office buildings and the auxiliary workforce in luxury hotels would be paid marginal wages not enough to live on.

Sisyphus and the false feeling of futility: this is something worth asking Madeline Janis about. She and her fellow combatants have been active since the 1990s, in political committees, at rallies, in the media, at union assemblies, in citizens' action groups, at construction sites, in the disadvantaged parts of town with many immigrants, in the offices of project developers and building tycoons. And of course on the Internet: linked to the rest of the world, mainly however to intellectuals at universities, county representatives and influential bureaucrats – Larry Frank for example, the deputy mayor who was an organiser himself in younger years, fighting California labour battles.

Madeline Janis speaks about long-term concepts just as passionately as she does about specific indi-

vidual acts, about research, planning and hunger strikes, blockades, demonstrations. She was able to consolidate her reputation as an unrelenting fighter by winning a vote against the supermarket giant Wal-Mart, which prevented the mega chain notorious for its anti-social working conditions from embarking on a large project, as well as by confronting large hotel chains during the LAX airport expansion. The investors who agreed to talks with the living wage coalition coordinated by Janis at the very least learned to appreciate the advantages of a social consensus. A deal with Janis and her people does not only prove helpful but also saves them expensive work disputes. Peter Dummon, owner and manager of the Radisson Hotel at LAX, thus in an op-ed article for the *L. A. Times* encouraged all his colleagues in the hotel world to no longer resist the living wage law. Adequately paid and happy employees are the best guarantee for happy guests, says Dummon, as important as »money in the bank« and a contribution to development of the whole region. This somehow sounds European, more like stakeholder value than greed for profit.

In the end, only five of thirteen airports at LAX agreed to pay living wages after long fights on site, in the media, in back rooms and during open confrontations on Century Boulevard. The other hotels went to court. Five of thirteen: that looks like a defeat for Madeline Janis's progressive coalition. Doesn't it remind one of the mythological Sisyphus and his giant rock that rolled down the hill again and again? Camus and Brandt regardless – this is frustrating. Is it not?

»L.A.'s Labour Warrior« laughs. Sisyphus? »In five out of thirteen cases we got the management to cooperate by convincing them that they're better off working with us, the community and the unions. I wouldn't call that a defeat.« On the contrary: »It's a miracle! Really!« Twenty-five years ago, she explains, nobody had a clue how to organise workers, which included illegal immigrants. How to lift them from social hopelessness at least to the level of normal poverty. How to create conditions so that their children had enough to eat and go to school. How to find jobs for the parents, allowing them to have a future and employment with rights and health insurance. A place to live that is worth living.

One ought to see the larger picture. Madeline Janis says she understands »that we can't impress you Europeans with that«. But in this process of educating the regional public, the small economic elite of employers and all those who are not elites

but the fundament of society and poor despite holding down a job, the proportion »five out of thirteen« is a success.

In Washington, Professor Michael Kazin calls this perseverance and indefatigability »visionary pragmatism«. For him, the historian of populism in America, this is the new, promising approach for progressive movements in politics, science and civil society. This is how the path of socially reforming the increasingly multicultural and multiethnic American society could lead to success. Hands-on political grassroots work and aggressive participation in the »battle of ideas« with conservatives over national values and ideals – in this combination of practice and theory lies the future, according to Kazin.

To think and plan in utopias, but to live and fight in reality, that is the essence of this approach, the secret of the endurance and success of activists such as the ones in L.A.. Madeline Janis's utopias may be very radical – where else would she get her energy? – but her practice resembles classic reform policy. With a strong, robustly American component nonetheless: a willingness to fight for unions but to mediate for the social democratic cause at the same time. In Los Angeles, both factors contribute to the strategic model of exact planning, political alliances, the organisation of interests, public campaigns and drastic action if necessary. The combination of all this produces the little breakthroughs that, in turn, provide the energy for the next operation.

Comeback of the Unions

As a prerequisite, social radicalism and political reality must be combined as in Madeline Janis's strategy. First of all, she says in describing her concept, it is important that the right people hold the right offices. She thinks in categories of power: it does matter who is in power. If one wants to change the world, one must win elections. In the United States, every important position, on community- and county-level, in the states or the nation, from Congress to White House, is filled through election. Thus it is important to form a majority with the possible partners of a progressive alliance and then mobilise the voters. »Nobody is better at that than union organisers«, Peter Dreier claims. When unions decide to give their professional grassroots workers time off to support a campaign, whether on a local or national level, this could determine the

outcome of the election. In Los Angeles in 2005, for example, the left-wing alliance with labour put the progressive candidate Antonio Villaigarosa in power, four years after his first futile attempt at running for office. Right now, thousands of union organisers are taking time off to campaign for Obama, going from door to door in heavily contested electoral districts.

The importance of the trade unions and their practical experience is, for the progressives, the prerequisite for the change that America and the international community needs. Pollsters from the sphere of the AFL-CIO (American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organization) analysed the last Democratic election defeat on the basis of post-election survey results. They found that while George W. Bush had won the majority of the white male vote in general, his opponent John Kerry had won the majority of the white male vote among union members. Bush won the majority of gun owners in general, Kerry won the segment of unionised gun owners. While Bush won the majority of male churchgoers, Kerry won the majority of male churchgoers belonging to a union. The cultural divide in American society is strikingly obvious. But the »connecting power of unionised workers« (Dreier) is supposed to help bridge this gap.

Of course unions as a countervailing power are not what they used to be. The AFL-CIO, re-founded in 1955 after a twenty-year split, suffers from a distinct decline in membership. A massive political and legislative anti-union offensive – carried out by employers, supported by conservative governments since Nixon's election victory in 1968 and not thwarted by the two Democratic presidents of the last forty years, Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton – contributed to the decline.

The unions were also weakened by some strategic mistakes, institutional egotism and finally by a new split into two competing organisations in July 2005. Today the umbrella organisation, AFL-CIO, and an alliance of other unions, *Change To Win* (CTW), work side by side.

Barack Obama is their man. CTW supported him early on; AFL-CIO, which had many Hillary fans, remained neutral until the Democrats' decision. Now it has also expressed its support for Obama. In the meantime, organisers from both umbrella organisations and their individual unions have become active. Andy Banks and Timothy Beatty, two leading men from the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, the huge logistics union in the CTW alliance,

have signed up to do grassroots campaigning for Obama: in key states, where the election will be close and all union members have to be mobilised, whether they are white men, churchgoers, gun enthusiasts, war veterans, college drop-outs or any kind of other cohort where a high rate of still undecided voters shows potential for mobilisation.

The two Teamsters are from the Alinsky school, just like the organisers and non-profit activists in all cities and communities in the U.S. that follow Alinsky's *Rules for Radicals*. Obama is good at inspiring people and creating enthusiasm, Banks and Beatty agree. They need someone like him to advance – party and unions jointly – the movement's concerns: jobs, labour rights, security for their families. Expectations will run high with Obama being president. Possibly even too high, but that is not the main issue. Right now, bringing change to the White House and securing the majority in Congress is the most important concern. Then everything will get better, even if it does not turn out to be what they had hoped for – another example of left-wing pragmatism.

Expectations are linked to the candidate's strategic promises. Thus, a president Obama is expected to support the Employee Free Choice Act, a law that Republicans thwarted in the Senate in the past. It is geared towards facilitating the creation of unions in companies and narrowing the gap between the U.S. and most other democracies in terms of labour organisation. Employers and their allies have been fighting it fervently, not least because of its symbolic value. It would mean a victory for the Left. The most important project, however, would be the reform of the health care system. One and a half decades after the Clintons' failure, Obama would attempt anew to create health insurance for employees. In a nation which, despite being the richest one on earth, has for some time seen declining rates in life expectancy, he would contribute to rising life expectancy again thanks to affordable and universally available preventive care.

Finally – in the tradition of Franklin D. Roosevelt, but by no means in the same dimensions – Obama would try to initiate an investment programme to improve the country's catastrophic infrastructure. It won't be a New Deal, at least not a programme that will be called that or anything similar. Most probably it will neither have the scope of its 1933 role model, not least because the bailout costs of the financial crisis will use up many funds, which would have been urgently needed for structural

investments. But there will be a change of direction back to an active state. »The key word here is 'green economy'«, Andy Banks of the Teamsters predicts, as well as »green jobs«. The ecological reorganisation of America that creates new jobs – »That will be Obama's New Deal«.

Then there is free trade, the great point of contention between unions and the Clinton administration in the 1990s. Obama's »change« would also mean a change in trade policy. There is no question about that for the unions or the non-profit groups and activists from civil society. In their opinion, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and other bilateral trade agreements are to blame for the crisis on the American labour market. American jobs are outsourced to countries with fewer workers' rights, less protection in the workplace and no minimum wage, much less a living wage. The discussion is not over yet, but the weight has shifted. One of President Clinton's staunchest supporters in the 1990s, Will Marshall of the *Progressive Policy Institute*, claims that nowadays NAFTA, Clinton's main legacy in trade policy, is blamed for everything that is wrong with the U.S. economy. Bill Galston has a similar point, even if he is willing to re-think a lot after two Bush terms of office. As a matter of fact, there are advantages to free trade for America, despite the real production shifts (structural change). A revival of protectionism under Obama is unlikely, according to experts from progressive think tanks. On the other hand, no Democratic campaign supporters, including Bill Clinton, any longer dare to aggressively promote the idea of free trade. »Re-thinking« is the mild term Obama used in his promise to the unions.

The Anti-Racism Connection

The unionists know that Barack Obama is no »working class hero«. No radical, no Social Democrat, no anti-capitalist. Progressive, however, for sure, one of the leading officials says slightly ironically, »in the sense that he thinks capitalism doesn't have to be as bad as it is right now«. For now, that suffices as a basis for the alliance against the neo-liberal and right-wing orthodoxy. The unionists, both the established traditionalists of AFL-CIO and the cheeky separatists of CTW, have no doubt that Obama needs them to win the election. Not least in order to tear down that fatal wall which apparently still stands between him and the majority of white

voters: the wall of latent racism, the reality of secret – and in some regions not so secret – prejudices against a black president. That includes voters in unions. Their members, activists and officials may be anti-Bush and pro-regime change, but are they ready for a black president?

A prominent member of the AFL-CIO leadership, Secretary-Treasurer Richard Trumka – a former miner and populist of the workers' movement from Pennsylvania, one of the key states in this election – took advantage of an opportunity at the United Steelworkers National Convention in early July to grab the raging bull of racism by its horns. A real historical speech (still documented on *Youtube*). First Trumka praised the solidarity of the steel workers' activist group, saying their unity made them invincible («one of the most powerful forces on earth – and, by God, no one's ever going to turn you around»). Then he described the social situation from the vantage point of the working population in Bush's America, where the gulf between rich and poor is as wide as in the '70s – »the 1870s, that is«. He reminded his listeners of the long list of sins the Bush-Cheney administration had committed, the dreary outlook under a President McCain and described how, as a senator, Obama had fought against the Right. And when the atmosphere was sufficiently charged, he added: The consequence is clear – there is not one reason to vote against Obama.

Or is there? What followed was a lesson in anti-racism: »There's only one really bad reason to vote against him. And that's because he's not white«. He wanted to address this, Trumka said to his deadly silent audience, »because I saw that for myself during the Pennsylvania primary. I went back home to vote in Nemaquin and I ran into a woman I'd known for years. She was active in Democratic politics when I was still in grade school«. She said that naturally she would vote for Hillary, and never for Obama. »'Why not?' I asked her«. Because Obama is a Muslim, she said, and because he had refused to wear a pin with the American flag. Trumka recounted how he had explained that these were rumours being spread on the Internet by right-wing slanderers and how he had refuted both. But the woman had insisted that she did not trust Obama, and then she openly said: because he is black. Trumka countered: »Look around, Nemaquin's a dying town. There're no jobs here. Kids are moving away because there's no future here. And here's a man, Barack Obama, who's going to fight

for people like us, and you won't vote for him because of the color of his skin?« And then the speaker thundered: »Brothers and sisters, we can't tap dance around the fact that there are a lot of folks out there just like that woman. A lot of them are good union people; they just can't get past this idea that there's something wrong with voting for a black man. Well, those of us who know better can't afford to look the other way«. The audience rose and gave the speaker a standing ovation.

It was a memorable appearance by a powerful veteran. Obama will need many of those popular, powerfully eloquent old-school labour leaders to break the barrier or jump over it. Without such help, the goal – change in Washington – will be even more difficult to achieve than he and his team had imagined.

The Project of »Change«

Americans have always trusted their community, their local government, their own neighbours and their church the most, while trusting central government and politicians in Washington the least. This is a long-standing tradition in the United States. It has led to the fact that over the years, as the country grew to the size it is today, it neglected to organise a safety net of social benefits that would offer protection to middle class workers in the case of setbacks such as illness, etc. that befell them by no fault of their own. This deplorable state of affairs has reached dimensions that have prompted critics of the system to draw bitter analogies to the poorer countries of the Third World. »It's a disgrace«, says Representative McDermott. He spent part of his political life fighting for a better social system, especially a worthy form of health insurance. Seen from a different perspective, however, thanks to the minimalist welfare state the U.S. also boasts an unparalleled number of private philanthropists and charitable foundations, admired throughout the world.

Charitable church organisations work tirelessly, like the »happy Sisyphus«, to fill the vacuum. They include the Holy Apostles Soup Kitchen in New York, the job placement service »Jubilee Jobs« in Washington, and initiatives by feisty clergymen in cities like L.A., without all of whom the fight for a better coexistence would be even harder than it already is. And, of course, a social welfare state of European dimensions would not have produced the

countless exemplary non-profit organisations, which, locally and nationally, persist in fighting against the many social injustices in the richest industrial nation of the world. These are organisations like the previously described LAANE, networks like the Partnership for Working Families and ACORN (Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now), a politically well-known umbrella organisation representing a huge number of charities.

Given Obama's campaign for change, are we headed for a new phase of American politics today, comparable to the breakthrough from the depths of the Great Depression? Could a President Obama, like Franklin D. Roosevelt once, really offer a general, all-encompassing political solution to the many crises that he would inherit from the Bush/Cheney government and the Republican majorities in Congress of the past decade? Could he have his own New Deal? There is an equal amount of scepticism and hope among the Left. At the Center for American Progress – the think tank founded by former Clinton aides, who would probably provide an Obama administration with the most policy papers, consultants and staff – people are cautious. They are the »realists« among the progressives: Obama will be able to come pretty close to the FDR model thanks to his great communication skills. Just like Roosevelt at that time managed to win over Americans for his New Deal reform project with his intimate radio addresses, Obama would succeed in winning over Americans for his programme of progressive change with today's means of communication and his skills as a charismatic and convincing orator. He who learned to listen, discuss and bring people together during his years as an organiser in Chicago would have to seek the Americans' support as their »first agent of change« – and nobody could do it better than him. Doing a lot of justifying, explaining and campaigning is the basis for every strategy of change. Resistance will be strong and the counter-offensive huge, both during the election campaign and especially then when it comes to putting words into action. Apart from the fact that there will only be little leeway for investments in 2009.

What is Good Populism?

According to progressives at universities, in unions and non-profit organisations, the political solution to overcoming most resistance against a reform and investment programme along the lines of the New Deal will be the social alliance of the top »agent of change« – which is how the 1968-radical Todd Gitlin defines the role of Obama as president – with as many like-minded forces and networks in the country as possible. A strategic »coalition of the willing«. A populist, offensive approach in the American pioneer spirit, which sees politics as beginning at the bottom and at home and from there pushing change – ideally the American Dream – through to the top. In other words: an alliance of government and society, as the progressive »American Dreamers« put it: whether in LAANE, with the Teamsters, in the AFL-CIO, in the editorial offices and departments of sociology or history at universities of this immense country – a political alliance like the country has not seen since Franklin D. Roosevelt. And that has never been needed as urgently as now – left populism with a sense for the strategically necessary and an eye for the politically feasible.

For Georgetown sociology professor emeritus Norman Birnbaum, the core question of the early stages of an Obama presidency is: »Will Barack Obama remain tied to the structures of American politics or will he be able to bring new dynamics and new energy to the White House? Will he tear down walls to gain the freedom of action he needs to realize the change he promised?« Of course the social coalition necessary to implement change would have to be more than just a new team of old, seasoned White House players and a larger Democratic majority of political individualists in the House of Representatives and the Senate. The project of change would have to be the shared basis of this coalition. The president would be in charge of making it happen. It always was like that in the heyday of American politics, Norman Birnbaum reminds us, and lists Lincoln, the Roosevelts and Kennedy. Then the sociologist and author of several books on progressive thought and political philosophy wonders whether the candidate is really up for the task: »Thus far I haven't seen too many indications«. Jim McDermott, a feisty, seasoned member of Congress from Seattle who considers himself an »optimistic

pessimist« (»otherwise I couldn't get up in the morning«), is similarly restrained: »I hope Obama is as progressive as I think he could be – but when I look around I'm not so sure«.

The fear that Obama could end up making too many compromises was reinforced by some of his concessions (gun control, death penalty, Middle East policy). He wants change but again and again takes the beaten path, cautious, perhaps even risk-averse. He may thus avoid deterring potential swing voters but ends up creating a certain unease and impatience among the Democrats. Overall it holds true that since the crash of the credit and financial markets, there is no such thing as a risk-free campaign anymore. Not for the Republican candidate anyway, but neither for Barack Obama.

At least Obama tried in his speech at the Democratic National Convention in Denver to address the expectations of his own supporters, too. He managed successfully – as the responses show – to convey that he is intent on keeping the perspective of the project of change open, in the tradition of classic American populism which considers people's needs as well as politically realistic goals. For some time now, »good populism« has again become a hot topic for American liberals. According to social scientist Ruy Teixeira (Brookings Institution), it is the prerequisite for Democrats to assume a leading role in the American political discourse again. The historian Michael Kazin, author of the benchmark publication on American populism (*The Populist Persuasion*) calls this stance the »populism of enlightenment«. It is the exact opposite of the European-style populism of the Right and Left which promises everything to everybody, but also a stark contrast to American right-wing populism that has become the »language of the disappointed, vengeful and cynical« and whose representatives put greater emphasis on campaign cleverness than personal convictions. Since the days of the New Deal, the traditional, democratic populism has been more than just a campaign instrument. It is a strategy for implementing the political agenda after the election has been won. This permanent populist double strategy, enlightenment and implementation, is indispensable for the project of change to succeed, says Todd Gitlin, not purely party- or government politics – in part it is also »movement« policy. For Gitlin this is exactly the political leadership role the president needs to assume.

Barack Obama, some of his supporters say, is the »optimal transformer« thanks to his training and experience as an organiser, his communication skills and his sense of mission as a representative of the American Dream of freedom, equality and advancement. Gitlin maintains that Obama, in principle, is a man of the Left. Others disagree. In any case, as president Obama would »not govern like a social democrat«. Not in today's America. But there is the memory of the important role model and the hope that Obama could follow suit. Gitlin: »If we're lucky, he's another Franklin Roosevelt, who came into office with no cohesive programme and no left-wing campaign, yet in solving the problems developed progressive policies step by step«.

Roosevelt knew that he would not be able to tame capitalism without the labour unions. Thus he embraced them. Obama also knows this and has communicated it to the unions. But do they on their part know that without the president, without Congress and the social activists they cannot tame capitalism? Does the Left know that more so than being right, they must first win the election? That it matters, as Madeline Janis preaches, who is in office? At first glance one could be doubtful: the fact that the American labour movement split into two umbrella organisations entails friction losses. There is obvious bitterness at AFL-CIO over the walkout of smaller, more radical unions under the leadership of the large service union SEIU (Service Employees International Union), led by Andy Stern. The new alliance *Change To Win* considers itself the motor of change. »They like to think of themselves as younger and cooler«, a young official of the old union says mockingly about Stern, she herself acting at least just as cool. The dissident union-officials do not speak badly of their old comrades, rather a bit condescendingly. They doubt their efficiency. In their opinion, the AFL-CIO is too expensive, too immobile, too bureaucratic. Classical »old guard«.

It is always the same with family conflicts: everything holds some truth and everything is strongly exaggerated. Indeed, *Change To Win* is itself also fraught with internal tensions rooted in considerable organisational egotism, as is manifest in their petty rivalries with other small unions in the public health sector in far-away, progressive California. They even conclude special agreements with Governor Schwarzenegger, which is considered treason by the others. As Peter Dreier, a friend of the unions

who is constantly mediating between them and the grassroots groups, states with the matured cynicism of someone who has witnessed too many disasters: »The Left likes to arrange its marksmen in a circle. And then somebody gives the command: 'Fire!'«.

The Light at the End of the Tunnel

Despite everything, members of the labour movement, non-profit organisations and universities are seeing a light at the end of the tunnel. The organisational self-conception of unionists in the 1930s and the focus on defending the progress they made has weakened. Many unions opened themselves up to general social questions and new alliance strategies. The L.A. experience shows that in a country where the reputed »progressive consensus« does not automatically manifest itself in elections, the progressives will only win the election in a strategic alliance. Thus in this election campaign, activists from labour and charity organisations are out supporting Obama like no other Democrat before him since the 1970s. Many organisers were trained by Marshall Ganz, a guru of grassroots work. Larry Frank, deputy mayor of Los Angeles, sees this as a sign of hope: »Without the know-how that Marshall Ganz taught our people in L.A. there would have been no change here«. Marshall Ganz, a lecturer at Harvard among other things, is everywhere where grassroots work is taught and put into practice: in unions, in non-profit umbrella organisations and with environmental activists. His topic: How one makes total strangers aware of their interests and subsequently brings them to joint action and to making a political decision in the organiser's interest. Voting for Obama, for example.

»In the fall we'll take time off and get out there«, Banks and Beatty say, the two Teamsters who are organiser pros with experience themselves in training canvassers and agitators. »Jubilee Jobs« in Washington, D.C. places workers with social problems and at the same time encourages them to join a union. In addition, they are given advice on how to register to vote. And the umbrella organisation of private charities, ACORN, announced at the Democratic National Convention in Denver that to date they had already enticed 1.1 million Americans to register to vote, predicting that the number would rise to 1.5 million by election day and that among them, McCain voters would certainly be in the minority.

»Today the unions are a social movement«, leading AFL-CIO official Ron Blackwell says. »We want our members to form a countervailing power to Wall Street«. After all, the U.S. has no workers' party in the European sense. Political struggles regarding fair distribution and the future – from climate change to health care and trade policy – are the unions' job. And Peter Dreier, the keen observer of the L.A. scene, has faith in the collaboration between unions and environmental organisations such as the influential Sierra Club. »There's a new coalition for a greener society in the making.«

This would be a rewarding project for a new American Left. The centrist reformer Barack Obama could make the Democrats the political core of a reform movement. Together with trade unions and non-profit organisations, this reform movement could help make the country a model that also fascinates others – just like it used to. America once again would become an experimental project in democratic and social civilization that merits emulation. The Democratic party's base is as colourful as the general American population, with its ethnic and religious diversity, its mix of progressives, leftists and centrists, philanthropists and radicals, social reformers and anti-capitalists, the religious and the secular, immigrants and descendants of immigrants. Thus it is disproportionately more representative of American society than the Republican Party.

If – in times of the globalisation of ideas, problems and conflicts – Obama manages to create a sustainable coalition for change, it would presumably also be a source of political inspiration for Europe's frustrated, fragmented and nowadays less-than-influential progressives. The successful American alliance for social progress and democratic advancement could be a model not only for promising reforms but also a blueprint for offensive democratic methods to implement these reforms. It would be an example of how to win back cultural hegemony and how to strive for solutions with representatives of different interests, how to be sufficiently combative and ready to take on your political and ideological adversary without falling back into empty revolutionary rhetoric and the thinking patterns of »class struggle«. Such a broad alliance cannot be reduced to the role of a mere lobbyist for workers, a petitioner for the weak or a corporate helper for maintaining social peace and a profit-friendly public frugality. It does neither pretend to be the protector of the disenfranchised and downtrodden, the left-wing avenger of »worker

traitors«, and this progressive alliance does not tell the disappointed and frustrated what they want to hear. This alliance would stand for the »populism of enlightenment«. Thus it could be a role model for other democracies, democratic parties and social movements.

Learning from the U.S. today primarily means studying positions and methods, not content. As far as the latter is concerned, the last eight years' supply of right wing ideas and concepts, it is only of limited attraction for Europe. The democratic parties in the Old World will for instance hardly turn to the religious-fundamental cult of creationism that the Alaskan governor Sarah Palin supports. Moreover, by now it is evident that the »compassionate conservatism« of Bush's campaign in 2000 has nothing to do with real social compassion. European conservatives who have adopted the term – like the Tories in the United Kingdom and the Conservatives in Sweden – emphasise that they have nothing in common with Bush's version of professed »compassionate conservatism«. Rather they use it to signal their actual socio-political shift to the left, a move that has put the Social Democrats in some places in a difficult position. On the other hand the topics of America's progressive movement are no big revelation for Europe's best-practice scouts either. Instead, they point to the great need to catch up in terms of health care, education and vocational training, infrastructure, transportation, economic democracy, employment protection, leave policy, retirement plans, long-term care insurance and labour market regulations. While Europe may also have considerable problems in these areas, their solutions do not lie in the U.S.

Re-Importing the Ability to Campaign

All the more interesting, then, is studying how left activists organise themselves and how the »pragmatic visionaries« (Michael Kazin) are allied, and having a closer look especially at the aforementioned system of union organisers and communities – developed as an instrument of solidarity and self-help in a society where not much assistance can be expected from the government. Slightly adapted, this system could also be useful in a society where the bureaucratisation of governmental support has, on all levels, produced new areas without sufficient solidarity and contributed to the erosion of political confidence throughout The European Union.

This robust kind of integration work in the social hotspots of American society is, at its heart, reminiscent of the political and social groundwork done by the activists of the early European labour movement. When unionists were constrained or persecuted by the authorities, their employers and the police, when they had to fight for union rights, and social living conditions of the working class made solidarity the foremost political virtue, grassroots work by the Left was nothing other than organising. Alienation from the man on the street and an attitude of »arrogance of power« were – other than nowadays – not among social democracy's problems during this part of its history. When social democracy later became part of practical politics, its willingness to compromise has been denounced as »treason« long before today's left populism appeared. Divisions and splits began to be part of the movement. Politically, »pragmatic visionaries« had a tough life. Already then, the Left could not prevent right-wing extremists, fascists and eventually Nazis from availing themselves of their social slogans. The feeling of losing their base and being crushed in a political vice between left-wing and right-wing populists and especially a party of the centre-right with social democratic tendencies (»new conservatives«) is a fairly new phenomenon. The ability to campaign, which used to be one of the strengths of the social democrats with their organisational structures and their rootedness in classic workers' strongholds, has been lost. It is mainly a memory of better times. A modern election campaign office based on the American model – with war room, call centre and Internet – is all they have to offer. In the meantime, left- and right-wing populists are the ones organising the people – the » Hamas model«, as Gitlin puts it.

Perhaps it is not yet too late to learn a few things from the organisational know-how of the feisty American Left. How about a special kind of »re-education«, teaching what used to be commonplace tools of the trade? »Europe's unions forgot a long time ago how to organise themselves properly«, Robert Kuttner, founder and co-editor of *The American Prospect* writes after having done some in-depth research in several European capitals. They would have to re-import this ability, Kuttner says, just like French winegrowers in the nineteenth century had to re-import grapevines from California after a devastating epidemic in their vineyards. Re-learning the skills that declined and were eventually forgotten in the comparatively comfortable world of

the legendary »Rhenanian Capitalism« and in Europe's different, but by comparison still citizen-friendly welfare states: How to keep in touch with the base, strike roots again in one's own communities, run political campaigns from the bottom-up, pursue debates about social issues offensively, draw up large political projects not only in government offices and discuss them inside the party, but also outside with citizens and their city districts or towns. How to justify, defend and enforce political plans if necessary. How to form a political alliance with citizens when uncontrolled, unchecked and unaccountable players obstruct improvements to coexistence and only pursue their own interests.

It is difficult to gauge to what extent the know-how from American election and labour campaigns as well as social and environmental campaigns can be transferred to a European scenario. The traditional parties' established claim to organisation and leadership, even if they currently do not seem to be doing much organising or leading, could conflict with that idea. Teamsters and the service union SEIU, the two strongest members of the dissidents' coalition *Change To Win*, have already begun introducing this know-how into collaborations with European partner alliances. However, in order for the transfer of methods to fully unfold its political power in the dispute over social and ecological progress, it would have to be more than just casual conflict training for German union officials, French *Attac* fighters or various left-wing parties in Europe. Parties of the moderate Left would also need to get interested. After all, in a political best-case-scenario, the social democrats would be the ones discussing a new alliance of progress with a progressive American president; an axis of »visionary pragmatism«, whose tasks would include working together for a more just world order while developing new rules for trade, the financial system and all other questions of our times: energy, poverty, hunger, water.

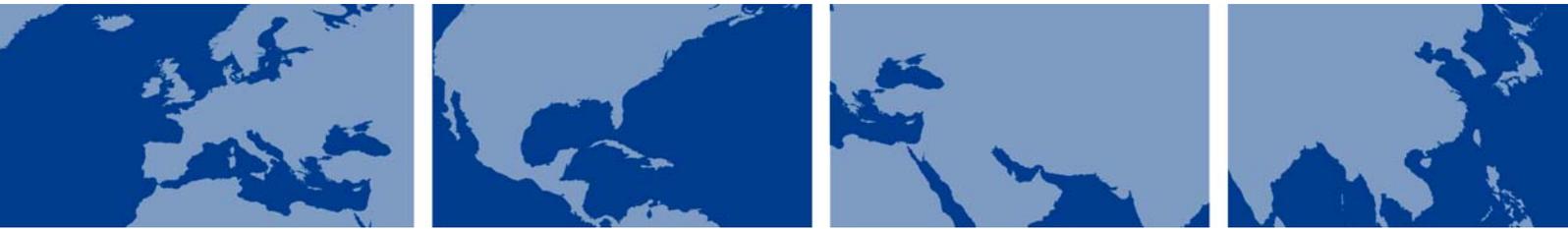
However, this means that in addition to their day-to-day pragmatism, which is focused on the solution of problems, Europe's Social Democrats will also need to embrace political visions again. And improve communication with the »man on the street«. This, too, is part of the mix of mindset and method that they could learn from the American Left, from Madeline Janis to Barack Obama. The opportunity is there.

One of the keenest observers of the transatlantic exchange of ideas, Norman Birnbaum, has discovered an ironic parallel in terms of history. He sees an

Americanisation of European political methods, as reflected in election campaigns and social confrontations, and at the same time an Europeanization of American political content such as Obama has in mind. If this works, it could be very productive. It is also possible that the learning experiment can fail. It is already evident, however, that »if Obama wins and thus overcomes all structural barriers that predicted the contrary, it would be a great political challenge for the structural rigidity of European politics«. For Europeans it would be the signal for a new self-confidence. The heirs of the social market economy are challenged to collaborate with the heirs of the New Deal to lay transatlantic neo-liberalism to rest once and for all.

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