

An Illusionary USA

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It is surprising to read the German dailies and weeklies and to find so many singular calls to German “responsibility”---defined as an obligation to follow US leadership. On first impression, nearly all of those writing in these terms seem devoid of knowledge as to the actual condition of US politics. The US is deeply divided itself on what course to take in the acute crises in the Ukraine and the Middle East. The other day, Senator McCain, who expends a great deal of energy in a continuous attack on the President for his alleged “weakness,” called for the dismissal of the very intelligent Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Martin Dempsey, the commanding officer of our armed forces. General Dempsey (rather like his predecessor, Admiral Mullen) invariably cautions against the use of military force to solve political problems. He has been especially forthright in testimony before the Congress, where he has had to confront the profound ignorance, the vicarious combativeness and the exhibitionist displays of politicians who actually think that the US can exercise, at no or little cost, global hegemony. Whatever disappointments (in areas as diverse as economic policy and the extra-judicial and extra-Constitutional police powers of the state) his electorate may have experienced with the President, we have been rewarded in at least one respect. The President’s caution in deploying the armed forces is in stark contrast with the adventurism of his predecessor and his apologists and officials.

The German “friends” of the US suffer from even more striking deficiencies. Their historical knowledge of the development of our very complex nation is shallow. Their direct experience of our conflictual pluralism, of our large cultural and social differences is minimal. It is as if they had gained knowledge of the US from the sorts of films made to reassure and not disturb the public. They are unread in contemporary and classical American literature. Perhaps they are at ease at Harvard or Stanford, in the Washington centers of research, in some Congressional and governmental offices. They are remarkably silent, however, about the implications of the fact that it is not always safe to walk around the Capitol or even the White House at night. As for churches, movie theaters, schools and universities, shopping malls --- one supposes that their American hosts have warned them of the ever present danger of randomized killing.

Let us examine the actual situation. We can begin with political polarization. It is a long term institutional consequence of the slavery prevalent in many of the original thirteen states. The Constitutional provision of two senators for each state was originally intended to give the slaveholding states a permanent veto on the possible legislative abolition of slavery. Now, California with over thirty million citizens has two senators but so does Mississippi with not quite a tenth of that number. In the south and west, ageing white populations, often rather impoverished and dependent upon government welfare expenditures they denounce when extended to Afro-Americans and Latinos, cultivate their resentment. Civil rights for minorities, equality for women, the religious neutrality of the state (a rather better legacy of the writers of the Constitution) are for them so much evidence for their own dispossession. Even the present very small Democratic majority in the Senate is rendered partially ineffective by this stratum of the population. In states in which it does not directly dictate the choice of Senators it compels Senators to extreme caution about extending the powers of the Federal government and using Federal funds for large scale social investment, or for educational and environmental projects. The rejection of limitations on the acquisition of weaponry and opposition to the new legislation requiring citizens to purchase health insurance have the same source, an exaggerated, at times paranoid, fear of government. Combined with the very great ignorance of a considerable segment of the citizenry, this renders very difficult the consolidation of what in the other industrial democracies are standard functions for the state.

What about the House of Representatives, in which seats are apportioned according to population and an urban majority favoring an American welfare state should be possible? Indeed, in voting for the present House in 2012 the Democrats gained a majority of the votes.

The Republicans have the majority, however, on seats --- owing to Republican state governments drawing the boundaries of electoral districts so as to maximize the effects of Republican votes.

That suggests that the terrain on which the Democrats must concentrate involves governorships and state legislatures. Democratic voters are not conspicuously enthusiastic about participating in these elections. In Presidential elections, sixty percent of the electorate votes, in mid-term and state elections the figure is forty percent. It is very uncertain that Obama's winning coalition (Afro-Americans, Latinos, women, trade unionists, the young and the highly educated) will reassemble in the 2014 Congressional and state elections. These are occasions for the white majority (Obama has not achieved a majority amongst whites in two elections) to reassert itself by voting, in general, against the welfare state and governmental regulation of the economy.

Two other factors play a major role in making American democracy imperfect. One is that the Republican state governments, often backed by Republican in the judiciary, make voting more difficult by making registration onerous, reducing voting days and hours --- specifically targeting population groups likely to vote Democratic. The scope of the original Civil Rights legislation ending the flagrant discrimination on Afro-American citizens in the south has been narrowed.

The second factor is the Republican judiciary's successful offensive against limitations on expenditure, open and covert, in politics. We have experienced the monetarization of politics to a degree unmatched even in the most corrupt periods of our history. Immense expenditures by different sectors of capital have the indirect but pervasive consequence of intensifying the prevalent depoliticization of the citizenry by convincing ordinary citizens that their views do not matter. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that capitalist control of the media leaves little social space for critical, much less oppositional thinking. The incessant monitoring of public schools by organized local groups is a parallel phenomenon. Where thought is relatively free, as in colleges and universities, the permanent hostility of the conformist media puts the critical professoriate under permanent siege. In no other nation is, for instance, the denial of climate change an item of so much popular faith.

Given the widespread ignorance, primitive religious beliefs, and obsessive hatreds of large segments of the citizenry, it is remarkable that on every summary of recent polling data there are popular majorities for an American welfare state. Government regulation of the economy, especially the banks, the maintenance and even extension of major programs like Social Security (pensions and disability and poverty insurance) and Medicare (government medical insurance for senior citizens) are approved. Despite frenzied Republican opposition drawing on paranoid fantasies of "death panels" deciding whether citizens live or die, Obama's health care reform --- a very complex system joining private insurers and the state --- is winning acceptance. Majorities favor, as well, Federal government support of education, major projects of reconstruction of material and social infrastructure, and environmental controls. Majorities, too, accept governmental action to ensure equality for women and minorities. Even on the very divisive issue of immigration (there are some ten million or more illegal immigrants in the nation) majorities are open to steps toward legalization.

The years of Lyndon Johnson (1963-68) were years in which despite southern (and northern white) resistance to civil rights for Afro-Americans, the economic and social programs of the Great Society had widespread assent. Johnson's large Congressional majorities were made possible by older voters with memories of the New Deal, by systematic support from the trade unions, which then had a third of the labor force as members rather than the diminished nine percent of the private sector they can now claim. The unions were then like their European counterparts engaged in the political education of their members and their families. In every American election, union members and families vote much more consistently for candidates supporting the American welfare state than other voters with the same demographic characteristics.

Quite apart from the unions as sites of political education, there were the churches, Catholic and Protestant. The American churches were (and to some degree still are) proponents of an

ethos of social solidarity. For the past fifty years however, the traditional Protestant Churches have been challenged by Evangelical churches, advocates of Biblical literalism, propagating a message of individualized morality. In the Catholic Church, teachings of social justice were de-emphasized in favor of the advocacy of strict positions on abortion, contraception, homosexuality. (A simultaneous development in synagogues was the supersession of concerns for social justice by a concentration on support for Israel.) These trends were with respect to larger social questions atomizing and individualizing, focusing the attention of average Americans away from larger national questions to familial and local concerns.

Larger economic developments worked in the same direction. The share of national income represented by salaries stopped increasing and began to decline in the nineteen seventies. The displacement of production to Latin America and Asia left entire cities and regions economically stagnant, increasing numbers were thrown into acute economic crisis as deindustrialization struck the American heartland. In that setting, antagonism to the unceasing arrival of Latino immigrants and to Afro-Americans, increased. Moreover, these larger economic processes were accompanied by a consistent, planned attack on the American welfare state by academics, ideologues and journalists financed with the unlimited resources of capital. Between Johnson's departure in 1967 and Obama's Presidency, begun in 2009, there were only two Democratic Presidents. Carter's one term Presidency (1977-81) was inconclusive, ideologically, but Clinton's two terms (1993-2001) were marked by the alliance of a Democratic White House, and much of the Democratic Congress, with the new financial capital. Under the sloganized description "The Third Way", Clinton attempted with considerable success to move the Democratic Party some distance from its welfarist past. It was a rupture which is returning to haunt the Clintons as Hillary Clinton prepares for a Presidential campaign in 2016.

The processes of social disintegration which accompanied first the initial phases of deindustrialization and then the large crisis of 2008 have intensified. Obama's two electoral victories were entirely ambiguous as his coalition could not consolidate itself in the Congress or in state and city politics. The opposition to Obama is a singular combination of racism and xenophobia with the ideological rejection of the welfare state.

The violence of the political language of the President's and the Democrats' antagonists is striking. The Secret Service has been remarkably discreet about plots to kill the President, but there have been some trials and convictions for threats to the President and at least one actual attempts on his life. In large areas of the nation, the authority of the Federal government is distinctly challenged. The government owns about a third of the land west of the Mississippi River, and rents it out to farmers and ranchers at rates far below what they would pay were the land in private hands. That does not encourage the population of these western states, who are also the beneficiaries of many other subsidies, to rethink their enmity to "government". In fact, much of the west is home to armed militias which portray themselves as organizations of civic defense against imminent intrusions of governmental tyranny. (They frequently attack immigrants as well.) Some two months ago, a rancher named Bundy refused to pay the Federal government for grazing his livestock on Federal land in Nevada. When government officials attempted to take possession of some of his cattle, tens of armed groups travelled to the site to threaten the officials. A truce was negotiated by the Governor of the state, but the demonstration of the potential for American civil disturbance is obvious. In future articles, I will try to bring to my readers a perspective on American culture, politics, society which may interest them. In return, I hope that my readers will call my attention from time to time to developments in Germany which I may have missed, despite my scanning the German media daily. For instance, if any German amongst those so vocal in defense of "common values" (USA-Germany) has called for sending the Bundeswehr to Nevada, I should be glad to be told.