



**Petr Fischer**

## America: Paradoxical icon of the new

Blaming the American Way of Life for the ills of post-industrial European society is a poor excuse for Europeans' own partiality to consumer pleasures, writes Petr Fischer. On a positive note, American individualism could teach Europe a thing or two about social solidarity.

The future power will belong to people without origin, without authenticity, to people who can leverage this condition. America, Jean Baudrillard, *Amerika*

"Business—Answer—Solution" reads the advertising banner of the subsidiary of a foreign company in the centre of Prague. At first sight, the banner is not particularly interesting, in this case meaning that it is not particularly surprising. Surprising things are those that capture our attention, that shock us in their particular way. This corporate motto repeats the famous, infinitely repeated mantra of aggressive global capitalism, its focus purely pragmatic: give us a problem and we will come up with a solution that profits both you and us. "Win-win capitalism", one could say in today's international newspeak.

What is interesting — in other words disconcerting — is the fact that the banner covers the window of a small shop situated directly behind the National Museum, a building that — as in every other European city — symbolizes a certain perception of historicity cultivated on the old continent at least since the nineteenth century. The National Museum preserves the history of the Czech nation, and the people who work in it analyse and reflect on Czech national existence, its peculiarity, uniqueness, difference or connectedness. This activity is not governed by the pragmatic slogan of performance, of completed things, of *faits accomplis*; rather, it is ruled by a different three words, directed at thinking and its incessant, uncertain movement: Discussion—Question—Searching.

Both slogans represent two sides of the same coin of western civilization, two sides that, so far, have been more or less separate. The first represents the straightforward American way, leveraging everything along the way, everything at hand that can help business; the latter represents the difficult, reflective way of the old continent, left by its American child so that it could later be changed according to America's picture. The fact that the multinational company's motto is located just "behind" the building that, synecdochically, expresses the basic historic orientation of all European nations, is symbolic. "Behind", *meta* in Greek, describes, in the European tradition, something that transcends everything we can arrive at through normal reasoning. In Aristotle's

canon, so the philosophical legend has it, such was the name of the texts found in the library behind the thinker's treatise on physics. However metaphysics has since come to signify a system of thought that transcends the world of tangible facts and things, that represents some invisible internal order of the world. Business—Answer—Solution, the catchword of American pragmatism, is, as its location behind the National Museum suggests, perhaps the only really functioning metaphysics of today's world.

### **New is always better**

Since its discovery, America has been referred to as the New World. But what exactly is new about it for the Europeans? In *De la démocratie en Amérique*, Alexis de Tocqueville — one of the first to systematically analyse American institutions, republican political systems, and above all what today is called the "American way of life" — concluded that the newness of America consist mostly of a kind of neophilia, a love of all that is new.

"The Americans live in a country of wonders, everything around them is in incessant motion, and every motion seems to be progress," says de Tocqueville. "The image of the new is closely connected with the image of the better. They see no limits set by Nature on man's efforts; in American eyes, that which does not exist is what no one has yet tried." In this extension of the purest Enlightenment optimism, the new is associated with a higher, moral quality. The gaze of the man turns toward the future, the past ceases to be important because, in the rush towards the new, the better, it loses its value, becomes inferior. The essential is what will be, or rather, what part of the future can be realized "now".

The image of the neophilic, which can be still be witnessed by every European travelling across America, stands in contrast to a different, let us say pessimist experience of future newness. Walter Benjamin expressed it in reference to Paul Klee's painting *Angelus novus*. The picture depicts an angel driven by the progressive spirit of the time, terrified by the doom he leaves behind: "Klee's picture *Angelus novus* shows an angel whose gaze tells of a desire to get rid of something that possesses his soul. His eyes gaze, his mouth is open, his wings spread. This is the picture of the angel of history. His face is turned towards the past. Where we see a chain of events, the angel sees a catastrophe, a heap of debris deep under his feet. The Angel, waking the dead from their sleep, would like to stop and join in one whole what has fallen apart. But the storm is drawing near, approaching from the Paradise; it has already nestled in his wings with such a force that the angel cannot close them. The storm drives him, unstopably, into the future, to which he turns his back, while the heap of debris under his feet grows towards the sky. The storm is what we call progress."

While Europeans carry the burden of long past and worry either about what they have lost, overlooked or failed to do, the Americans, easily and without hesitation, get rid of even that which a few years ago represented a huge treasure or life trauma. Through Benjamin's eyes, the neophilic Americans would be represented by an altogether different kind of angel: one who does not wander, who has closed his mouth, who flaps his wings joyfully and laughs, because his gaze is directed towards the future, from where he expects beauty and goodness.

It was no coincidence that Benjamin's comparison of progress with Klee's *Angelus novus* appeared in his *Geschichtsphilosophische Thesen* ("Theses on

history and philosophy"). Walter Benjamin was a philosopher who thought about history in a different and innovative way, including its forgotten, mythological level, which we have tried to repress but which, again and again, keeps coming back. Only by viewing history thus, he believed, can we see something like salvation in it, the true Messiah. Most European thinkers who have analysed America and its difference from Europe agree that the Americans do not have history in the strong sense of this word. "America", writes Jean Baudrillard, "exorcises the question of origin, it does not cultivate the mythical originality, it does not have the past or the founding truth. Since it does not have the experience of the originally accumulated time, it lives in an eternal present."

America has neither the mythical, circular temporality of repetition and rituals, nor the linear image of history in the European sense, history based on continual appropriation, living memory (*Erinnerung*) of the past. America's only real historical element, known as the "American dream", is the myth of the ever-new beginning. People have always left for America as a space where one can start anew. No matter what one had lived through, no matter what one's nationality or social class, America always provided an opportunity to start a new life. At the start, everything that had been was laid aside. The very gesture of leaving across the sea was expressive of the hope that history (ethnic, national, social, religious) would be erased by distance, by the width and depth of the ocean. Seen from the European shore, America is the dreamed-about Utopia made real; it is the non-place which is nowhere and can consequently be everywhere. "The United States is utopia made real," writes Baudrillard in *America*; but it is no longer the United States as a country, rather it is America as the "icon of the new".

### Utopia made real

Despite all the transformations over time, America's ability to fulfil the personal, strictly individualized desire for utopia, here and now, continues to fascinate. The belief that utopia is possible not only in heaven or after the end of the world, but that it can be made real on earth, no matter where and among whom, is contained in the Declaration of Independence of 4 July 1776: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness...)"

What is important is that the rights spoken about are not collective rights but rights provided to individuals by God. They are not dependent on the organisation of human society but rather on each of us, without help from others. The French Revolution went in the same direction, but its emphasis on collectivity, on the monolithic character of masses — besides freedom also equality and brotherhood — make it more of an ideological tool for use by the state than a universal hope for personal happiness achieved in a single human life. The American Revolution searches for community through individuals; the French Revolution defines or construes theoretically, in a secure, unified and indivisible whole, individuals who would not exist without this whole.

This absolutely individualistic approach fascinates Europeans. It something Europeans can never achieve, perhaps because they are too focused on historical continuity. They cannot start anew, they do not know how to forget. On the other hand, it is precisely its individualism that America is criticised for most vehemently in Europe. The individualistic excesses of Europeans, manifested by the growth of vain and environmentally irresponsible

consumerism, are often blamed for blindly imitating the American way of life. Tendencies to adrenaline-fuelled, monumental use of consumer goods, holidays but also relationships are labelled as instances of American-style individualism. The irresponsible amassing of waste is American, as is junk food. The hyper-inflation of entertainment, psychological manipulation through advertising, the relegation of cinema from art-form into a branch of the culture industry — all this is seen as evidence of Americanization of European culture.

It is as if American individualism was to blame for all the negative phenomena of post-industrial European society. We like to say that we have been forced to accept it, that it does not originate with us. This is, of course, a poor excuse — and not only for the fact that we accept American habits voluntarily because they satisfy the human need for instant pleasure ("the pursuit of happiness"). At the same time, it is an excuse we use to justify our inability to come up with a better, more innovative model. Above all, however, it is an excuse that obscures the fact that the American individualism has also different, more positive aspects, namely in the ways it fosters societal relations, ones which do not link man with the state but, mostly, man to man.

If, for economic reasons and the ever stronger trend towards the satisfaction of individual pleasures, Europe is losing its original conception of the common, if it can no longer think of a way to sustain the common, it is perhaps time for Europe to be inspired by how social cohesion is maintained in America. If the fascination of America is the fascination of utopia made real, then it is not possible to remove, selectively, what suits us or what does not. Alexis de Tocqueville does not speak about utopia made real, but he described, in much detail, what the uniqueness of America consists of: namely the combination of individualism and consensus over the moral principles of (the Christian) religion. Whoever has driven across America from the East to the West knows that a more precise observation about America can hardly be made, and that this statement retains its validity to this day.

### **Europe: A theme park for Americans**

Americanization, or the fascination with America, happens all over the world. However it is strictly focused on the consumption of pleasures and the culture industry, while the ways of sharing the common are neglected. The Chinese substitute them by artificially fostered nationalism, the Russians, born nationalists, by their traditional faith in the strong hand of an enlightened ruler; only Europe, used to a stable welfare state that is increasingly difficult to maintain, is at loss when searching for a new adhesive in the devilishly fast world. The fascination of America is also, at least theoretically, an opportunity to search for this "glue of society".

Georg Simmel, writing after WWI, had already observed that Europeans cannot do without this social adhesive and that they should bear this in mind when passing judgement on the Americanization of the world. Simmel felt that the "idea of Europe" had disappeared and that in the twentieth century it would be replaced by strong current of Americanization. "Europe will become what Greece was during the Roman Empire — an entertaining, curious destination for the Americans, a place full of ruins, memories, still supplying the artists, scientists and gasbags."

Simmel's observation is topical even after a hundred years. What has changed is perhaps that besides the Americans, it is increasingly rich Russians and

Chinese who visit Europe to see its heritage sites and have fun. Europe has retained its role of an entertaining accessory to the dominant powers. The spirit of critical thinking — the pride of the Europeans and the topic of Václav Havel's memorable Rome speech in 2002 — has succumbed to the American culture of the paradox: it is possible to make happen what cannot be made happen, namely utopia.

The European fascination with America is ultimately, then, an expression of wonder that what noble European spirits have only dared think and dream about for centuries, the Americans have simply translated to a quantifiable material level, so that they could touch the dream. They know that what we cannot touch simply does not exist. The Europeans know that the American dream is only a simulation of reality, but this simulation — as we know from our experience with the virtual and media worlds of today — is sometimes more real and more powerful than reality.

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