

THOMAS GEOGHEGAN:

Were You Born on the Wrong Continent? How the European Model Can Help You Get a Life

New York 2010

The New Press, 336 pp.

This should be a good time for a book that essentially asks Americans to learn from Europe and especially from Germany. Few Western countries have managed the global financial and economic crisis as well as Germany, it seems, and its successful crisis management has a lot to do with those features of the German model which Thomas Geoghegan highlights as »blueprintable.« In the crisis, the institutional strength of the unions led to measures designed to maintain the high-skills backbone of the German economic model based on high-quality exports. For Geoghegan, German industrial relations (and similar systems in other European countries) explain why not only the bottom two-thirds of Americans would be better off in Europe; for him, that is a given, especially with regard to the unemployed and people on welfare. No, »Europe is set up for the bourgeois,« too (p. 11), for the upper middle class, who get the same benefits, such as six weeks of vacation, maternity leave, good pensions, and so on. His thesis is »that even people who are at the top or are in the top 20 percent by income are better off in a European social democracy than in a country like the US« (p. 260). While US per capita GDP is higher than in most European countries, the quality of life is not. Thanks to the strength of the European unions, there is an »invisible GDP« (p. 14) of lower inequality, better public services and goods, and perhaps most importantly from the perspective of an American professional, lower working hours, almost 400 fewer hours worked by the average German than by the average American in 2006. Geoghegan marvels at the fact that, with far fewer hours, Europeans still manage to get close to the per capita GDP of Americans.

Writing well before the 2010 midterm elections but already in the midst of the Tea Party frenzy, Geoghegan must have known his arguments would be a hard sell in the US, even without the Greece crisis. He thus opens his book by repeatedly assuring his readers that he is »no European socialist.« I doubt very much that this will help him in a country where a sizable minority of the population upholds the belief that a harmless middle-of-the-road Democrat like Barack Obama is indeed a socialist without being ridiculed daily in the media. And, of course, American exceptionalism is not an ideology reserved for the Right. So there is definitely the danger that this treatise will be a case of preaching to the choir.

As a European socialist, I do have my reservations. First, like almost any American liberal that I have ever talked to about their European experience, Geoghegan goes somewhat overboard in his description of the achievements of

European unions, the wonders of the welfare states, the quality of life, and so on. But without much reference to scholarly debate, Geoghegan identifies what is at the heart of the German success story, and embraces it wholeheartedly for the US: »In the end, it's socialism that is the reason Germany is competitive. Because German workers are at the table when the big decisions are made, and elect people who still watch and sometimes check the businessmen; they have hung on to a highly skilled tool-making culture« (p. 112). In turn, the industrial base sustains (social) democracy as unions make sure that people have a stake in the big decisions. Unfortunately, Geoghegan omits the costs of the export-driven economy that is the direct consequence of the German emphasis on manufacturing, both internally, where workers have had to accept meager wage rises for decades (only to see Germany's competitiveness diminished time and again by the strong euro) and externally, where foreign governments complain bitterly that Germany is exporting not just goods but unemployment.

In fact, all the achievements he mentions have been under constant attack and all of their foundations are suffering from erosion. Under pressure from global competition, Germany and Europe have deregulated, neoliberalized, and privatized and are bound to do so even more. Recent EU-level court rulings clearly put the freedom of capital above the right to organize, and while unions remain strong in many individual European countries, they remain weak at the EU level. It does not appear that the German model of social democracy, with its emphasis on strong unions and human capital development, is going to be the role model for a unified Europe.

Geoghegan does concede the erosion of European social democracy but is of course right to point out continuing and important differences with regard to the US. But while his research and writing style, focused on personal experiences, makes for a good read and produces many valuable insights, there are a few too many clichés and easily avoidable factual errors. The German left party is called »Die Linke« and not »the Links.« The German word for law is not »Gerecht.« German unions, until very recently, have not had organizers. Düsseldorf is not the heart of German manufacturing. All in all, Geoghegan's story is too much centered on the powerful IG Metall. In the service sector, most of what he writes about the power of unions, centralized bargaining, the division of labor between unions and works councils, and so on is no longer true, if it ever was. There is something to be said for caution and humility when one lacks local language skills. Nevertheless, given Geoghegan's apparent lack of these skills, I marvel at the many profound insights he is able to provide. It is indeed the »very existence of the CDU« (p. 120), the German conservative party with its adherence to Catholic social teachings, that explains the ingrained social dimension of German capitalism, which persists even when the SPD is weak. And yes, the German political conversation is more about collective decisions on »big things« than it is about horse races and celebrities – at least for now.

Geoghegan's enthusiasm for the European way of life and his American optimism help to balance my German gloom and pessimism. I therefore endorse his call to »help European social democracy« by spending dollars in Europe.

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TIM JACKSON:

Prosperity without Growth

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In den vergangenen Jahren kam in der politischen Diskussion der ketzerische Gedanke auf, dass es zukünftig kein Wachstum mehr geben könne und die Frage, ob wir es überhaupt brauchen. Auch in Deutschland gab es eine Reihe von Publikationen, die sich dieser Frage widmeten, zuletzt Meinhold Miegel mit seinem 2010 erschienenen Buch *Exit. Wohlstand ohne Wachstum*.

Das Buch von Tim Jackson mit dem gleichen Titel (auch ohne Fragezeichen!) erschien bereits 2009. Dass es 2010 zweimal neu aufgelegt wurde, zeigt die Aktualität des Themas. Als Commissioner der britischen Sustainable Development Commission und Professor of Sustainable Development an der Universität von Surrey hat sich Jackson mit dem Thema viele Jahre beschäftigt.

Das Buch ist verständlich geschrieben und hat mit 12 aufeinander aufbauenden Kapiteln eine klare Struktur. In den Mittelpunkt stellt der Autor die Frage: Wie kann Wohlstand in einer Welt mit begrenzten Ressourcen und mit einer Bevölkerung, die in einigen Jahrzehnten mehr als 9 Milliarden erreichen wird, aussehen? Seine Hypothese, dass weiteres Wachstum in der gegenwärtigen Form unverantwortlich sei, begründet er detailliert und überzeugend. Wohlstand ohne Wachstum sei jedoch möglich; allerdings wäre ein anderes Verständnis von Wohlstand erforderlich.

Eine Stärke des Buches liegt in der unvoreingenommenen Analyse gängiger Argumente der Wachstumsbefürworter. Dass Wachstum zu einer Verbesserung der Lebensverhältnisse führt, bestreitet Jackson nicht. Anhand mehrerer Grafiken belegt er, dass sich mit einem höheren BIP pro Kopf die Größen Lebenserwartung, Kindersterblichkeit und auch Bildung tendenziell verbessern. Das Einkommen als Maßstab für Lebensqualität werde jedoch dadurch vermindert, dass nicht unser absolutes Einkommen für die subjektive Zufriedenheit maßgeblich sei, sondern der Vergleich mit den Einkommen der Leute um uns herum. Daraus ergibt sich das Phänomen, dass wenn alle reicher werden, das individuell steigende Einkommen seine Bedeutung für den sozialen Status verliert. Das Ganze wird zu einem Null-Summen-Spiel. Damit lasse sich das Paradox (»life