"Germany must take the lead in the free world"

US political scientist John Austin believes that the failure to transform old industrial regions is to blame for the electoral success of populists in the US. In Bonn, he is investigating parallels with the strength of the AfD.

By Martin Wein

For many years, John Austin has been campaigning for democratic countries to move closer together economically and politically. He wants them to work together on technological advances in order to create well-paid new jobs and take the wind out of the sails of authoritarian states. Based on his own experiences in his home state of Michigan, the political scientist and 700 other experts have established the transatlantic "Heartlands Transformation Network," which aims to breathe new life into old industrial areas. It is precisely there, in the heartland of left-wing labor movements, that right-wing populists find their main support base.

In the fall of 2025, the scientist and political advisor sits with his hands folded on a sofa at the Academy for Foreign Affairs in Bonn's Rheinallee. The think tank, funded by the state of North Rhine-Westphalia, brought him to the Rhine for six months as a fellow. Austin has traveled extensively throughout Europe in recent months, visiting authoritarian Hungary as well as politically stable, democratic Finland. Shortly before the end of his stay, he draws conclusions from the fact that his home country, of all places, no longer holds the leading role in the free, democratic world. "We must punish the US and the Trump administration economically for their authoritarian course," he says.

As the third-largest economy, Germany must step into the breach and lead its own economic alliances of the democratic world without the US – with the EU, the UK, Canada, and others. Only a massive economic crisis in the US could put an end to Trump's devastating policies for his own people and the rest of the world, Austin believes. It won't be easy. "It's going to be three and a half damn long years," he fears, looking ahead to the next presidential election. Austin is not sure he wants to spend all that time in America.

Born in Pennsylvania in 1962 as a baby boomer, John Austin has lived his entire life in the so-called "rust belt" of the US, first in the coal mines of West Virginia, then in Michigan since 1991. After earning a master's degree in public administration from Harvard, he served for 16 years as an elected representative on the State Board of Education in Michigan, comparable to a German ministry of education and cultural affairs. He launched the Great Lakes Economic Initiative for the Brookings Institution, an important US think tank, and also privately founded the Michigan Economic Center. He is a senior fellow at Gettysburg College. A researcher with a strong focus on practical politics.

Austin considers the transition from dirty heavy industry to smart technologies of the future to be a core task for true democrats. Facilitating migration and welcoming immigrants to build economies, is just as essential for positive growth as enhanced international economic cooperation and open trade. "Half of the goods that Trump is now taxing are intermediate

products," he explains. This makes the production of goods in the US more difficult rather than promoting it. "The idea of an iPhone made in the US is impossible to implement," he believes. Instead, Austin talks about a largely deindustrialized county in Michigan, comparable to a German district, which introduced free university places for all, revitalized its city centers, and attracted start-ups. The population there is now growing again. "When people feel optimistic again because economic opportunities arise, they lose interest in political extremists," he is convinced.

What worked well in the Ruhr region 70 years ago with accompanied structural change—today it has the highest student density in Germany—has been completely overlooked in large parts of the US. A populist like Trump was able to convince voters there with a simple message: "Biden and Harris ruined the economy. I will fix it." "The fact that all his actions, his tariff and immigration policies, his measures against universities or diversity have exactly the opposite effect is of no interest to these disappointed people," he believes. However, Trump's popularity ratings have fallen dramatically because his policies are now having a disastrous financial impact on many voters.

European right-wing populists such as Viktor Orbán in Hungary and the AfD in Germany are also pursuing similar strategies. In an as yet unpublished essay at the Bonn Academy, he, together with Emily Adams and Maria Skora, compared the political development toward extremism in the US and Germany. The parallels are frightening.

However, the US still has the largest and most powerful research landscape, where discoveries and developments are immediately commercialized. This is an approach that Austin finds largely lacking at German universities. He believes that many economic opportunities remain untapped here. "To revive its economy, Germany needs to become more agile and pragmatic in this area," Austin advises.

He does not believe all hope is lost for his home country. "The courts have repeatedly reined in Trump's policies, even if many decisions have not yet taken effect. At the local and state levels, the electoral authorities are working reliably." In November 2028, there will likely be free and fair presidential elections again. Austin says, "Even Trump as president can't change that." He will try to distract attention with smokescreens such as deploying the National Guard in large cities to combat fictitious high crime rates or a possible war against Venezuela. Orbán is attempting something similar in Hungary by withdrawing from EU support for Ukraine. Austin does not expect this tactic to help either autocrat in the long run. But even if Trumpism is voted out of office, international confidence in the US as the leading power of the free world will be permanently destroyed. Austin has no illusions about this. He says, "We will probably not be able to regain that."