

Reinventing the Self and the American Presidential Race

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Donnerstag/13. November 2008/20 Uhr c.t.
Hörsaal 3042, KG III der Universität



One story persists in informing American culture: individuals have the power to overcome hardship and to reinvent themselves. This has been the immigrant's dream – to come to America, to forget the economic, religious, or political struggles endured in the home country and, through hard work and good fortune, to become a successful American. This has also been the central Puritan narrative: through self-reliance, discipline, and belief, the individual can rise above any difficulty. In America we still want to believe that we can be whatever we wish to be.

The American belief in limitlessly reinventing and perfecting the self has played a determinant role in the 2008 presidential race. Both candidates have repeatedly referred to this belief in their presentations of themselves and their central political messages. A former boxer, and a survivor of several years of torture and solitary confinement in Vietnam, McCain went on to reinvent himself as a straight-talking politician and opponent of political corruption who refused to play by party rules. Obama stresses that he is the product of the American dream come true: his mother came from a small town in Kansas and went on to become an anthropologist; his father was a Kenyan student who won a scholarship to study in the United States. His person and his political success also bespeak the possible advent of a post-racial America. Obama's message of change promises an end to the current divisiveness of bi-partisan US politics and a stop to unilateral foreign policies. The degree to which the candidates have made voters believe that they can help them to become their very best selves and thereby renew the American Dream has played a central role in the election.