From the Austrian newspaper Courier, published January 28, 2014. Translation is approximate.

**U.S. has "a real social crisis"**

The State of the Union address, delivered by U.S. President Barack Obama on January 28th, is an opportunity to formulate the political wish list. It is also an opportunity to stake out the terrain for the Congressional election campaign in November. After the last year in which the stalemate between Republicans and Democrats led to a standstill, Obama must show action. The polls predict a debacle for the Democrats in the Senate, and the president could finally become a "lame duck ". If necessary he will bypass Congress, or act outside the political route.

For 2014 Obama needs to bring something more economically - especially reducing the gap between the rich and the poor. After all, the American Dream has long become for many an illusion. This is shown in a new study by two U.S. sociologists - Prof. Thomas Hirschl of the elite Cornell University and Prof. Mark Rank of Washington University in St. Louis. Using 30 years of research on poverty and income inequality in the U.S., they report to the COURIER on their new book "Chasing the American Dream" ("In Search of the American Dream"), which comes out in April.

Mark Rank: Until the early 1970s, the poverty rate has been reduced by half. From then on, everything remained the same - 11 to 15 percent of the population are poor. The U.S. economy creates more jobs with low wages and no benefits. The majority of these jobs do not provide an adequate standard of living. Another problem was that although Johnson declared war on poverty, the war in Vietnam consumed a lot of resources.

Thomas Hirschl: An interesting point of this "war on poverty "is the story of Martin Luther King. Shortly before he was murdered, he went to Marks, a small town in Mississippi. There he attended a school that only had a room with eight students and a teacher. King came time to eat, but no one in the school had something to eat. The teacher had only an apple. This he divided into ten pieces and gave each child a piece. That was one of the experiences that inspired King, to establish his poverty movement. Today the government gives out billions for the poor, but the country is worse off than it was in many respects. In those years there was poverty in Mississippi because of the technological changes in agriculture. Today we see huge cuts in industrial jobs, and the latest example is Detroit. The money that had been provided for the war against poverty is still there, but it is not enough. We still have 46 million poor.

In the book you examine "economic uncertainty ". What does that mean?

Rank: We look at whether an individual slips below 150 percent of the poverty line, if he/she uses a social safety net program, or if the household head loses their job. If any of these three events occurs, we call it "economic uncertainty." What we found is that 79 percent of Americans experience one of these three events between the ages of 25 to 60. That is, almost four out of five Americans will feel a strong economic uncertainty itself.

Is it the "American Dream" yet?

Hirschl: The title of this book is "In Search of the American Dream," that is, we have not yet reached it.

Why is there so often talk in the U.S. today on poverty and income inequality?

Rank: If you have more income inequality in a society, the democratic process is subverted. Those who have significant resources use them in the political process, which is not good for a democracy. The greater the inequality in the society is, the less healthy it is.

Hirschl: The Americans like to think positively about the future, and now they feel no optimism for their children. This is a real social crisis.

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