



Clay Banks / Unsplash

Leonardo Curzio*

The United States Exceptionalism and Heterodoxy

As a research topic, the United States has been exceptionally magnetic. Understanding the U.S. is a sweeping intellectual adventure due to its political, social, racial, religious, and historic particularities. Tocqueville is the obligatory reference point since he left us so many keys to understanding this country, and, through it, the evolution of democracies and the role of popular culture and associationism. Other fascinating works exist, such as that of Paul Johnson, which continues to be one of the most beautiful ever written about the history and epic story of a people. Few have managed to capture the essence of the U.S. American nation as he did. Henry Levy wrote an intriguing book—which, by the way, he dedicated to Cullen Murphy, who years later would write that self-reflexive essay about the parallel between

Rome and the United States—in the form of a travelogue in which he recognized that the U.S. giant was divided, wounded, split. The country suffered from the disorientation caused by being caught between its imperial destiny, which, as Fergusson accurately commented, it has never dared recognize, and its democratic horizon, which has been the inspiration for so many peoples.

Now, a large part of the interpretational approaches and biases that have until today conditioned our perceptions of the United States deserve to be revisited in light of the three dynamics that are simultaneously having an impact on its current situation. In recent decades, the United States has experienced a feeling of being at a crossroads—in fact, this was the title of a book by Fukuyama—, two apparently irreconcilable roads forward that branch off in different directions. On the one hand is a country that lives in the central part of its territory, drifting toward a

* Researcher at CISAN, UNAM; leonardocurzio@gmail.com.

polarizing conservatism; and on the other hand, a country living on the coasts, much more cosmopolitan and leaning toward understanding that, in addition to being a nation of continental proportions, it is also the leader of the international system.

The United States today is immersed in a hegemonic transition that tends to reduce its economy's relative importance in global figures. This specificity has created growing tensions with China and a few other Asian countries and has awakened in the strategic debate the concern about its relative decline as a power. Undeniably, the Asian economies have high growth rates and a model of economic organization that has proven effective for guaranteeing rapid growth, which the United States has not achieved due to a combination of factors ranging from its inability to renovate its infrastructure to an increasingly dysfunctional political system. However, the United States maintains its military primacy. No other power will be able to challenge it in this field in the foreseeable future. It is also preeminent in the most dynamic sectors of the economy. The main firms that shape the fourth industrial revolution are U.S. American, and its universities continue to be functional for guaranteeing that U.S. particularity of linking science to the productive sector. As Tom Wolfe said derisively, a country that invents the iPhone is not in decline. It also has an enormous reserve of soft power that allows its cultural industries to ensure unparalleled hegemony worldwide.

The United States has undergone a demographic change that is challenging for its white, Anglo-Saxon population. The issue of race, as Eduardo Porter has said, is a poison more present than ever. A poison that explains the political polarization and social tensions due to police mistreatment of African-Americans. It is equally present in the country's original sin: being a democracy of whites. The United States has not managed to develop solidarity-based systems to care for vulnerable populations, among other reasons because solidarity breaks down when it is a matter of helping people whose skin has different pigmentation. The racial difference did not divide the United States only in the nineteenth century due to slavery; other communities, such as the Latinos and the Asians, have been growing in numbers and in geographical presence, generating cultural imbalances, and, therefore political imbalances in communities that were previously homogenous. I will not stop here to analyze all the political

The United States has undergone
a demographic change that is challenging
for its white, Anglo-Saxon population.
The issue of race is a poison more
present than ever.

impacts of this population change. Suffice it to state that the issue of belonging to an ethnically differentiated group has opened up a profound debate in academic circles about identity, communications media that stridently underline the differences instead of focusing on shared identities, and a politically nativist, white supremacist discourse that experienced the presidency of Barack Obama as an affront.

The United States is also going through a domestic debate about its role in the world. In the 1990s, still drenched in optimism after the fall of the USSR, people talked about the nation that was indispensable for providing global stability. Gingrich maintained that there was no nation as diverse ethnically, as complex culturally, and with values as universal as the United States. But growing numbers of voices questioned the idea that U.S. interests could be guaranteed through an international system that defended values in a scattered, imprecise way. George W. Bush's victory over Al Gore brought to the fore, among other things, the difference between a cosmopolitan United States that could sell politically in New York very well, but was less and less understood in Montana or Idaho. From a reductionist point of view, the idea that the United States' global projection and its global responsibility clashed with the interests of those communities that, due to the political system's particularities, might be over-represented in the presidential election began to filter into the political discourse. It is not surprising that Donald Trump said at the United Nations that the world was not one of the globalists, but of the patriots. The driving force of globalization was prisoner of the dilemmas that many other countries face; that is why several authors have suggested that U.S. exceptionalism is coming to an end.

Perhaps the two parts of the society that in the last elections have shown enormous stability in their predictions understand each other less and less and remain that way because the voting system continues to allow for an over-representation of the agricultural states that

have frankly shifted regressively in recent years. This reactionary turn has loudly expressed itself in a militant conservatism that Velasco analyzed a few years ago, and has now been dissected by Jorge Castañeda in a recent book.

Castañeda has written a book that fits in the tradition already alluded to of great intellectuals who reflect on the U.S. condition. The effort of using the telescope and the microscope to understand that country's complexity is interesting. Castañeda was educated in the United States and therefore has perceptive personal experience. He has been a professor at different universities, from Princeton to California and today at NYU. But he has also been a left-leaning intellectual who, from a tradition that combines a French vision and a Latin American spirit, has clashed with the United States on different headlands.

He has done so from the field of journalism: he demonstrated, for example, that it was easy to forge a green card, and therefore exposed the hypocritical way in which undocumented migration is combatted. He was also Mexico's minister of the exterior, and it fell to him to negotiate briefly to create a migratory accord and a new general understanding with the United States—the former was cut short because the 2001 terrorist attacks permanently closed the window of opportunity that the beginning of the Fox administration and the audacity of the foreign minister had opened up.

No one could deny that the author of *Estados Unidos: en la intimidad y a la distancia* (The United States: In Private and at a Distance) enjoys a unique experience and combines experiential proximity with the broad reading of the intellectual. The book maintains that the United States is losing the exceptional character that it has self-defined it. Social mobility begins to be as normal as that of any other country. The idea of an American Dream, the hope of several generations, has stopped being a clear truth in the last 50 years; the inclusion of vulnerable groups has been quite a bit slower than in other times of history.

The idea of an American Dream, the hope of several generations, has stopped being a clear truth in the last 50 years; the inclusion of vulnerable groups has been quite a bit slower than in other times of history.

Some bases for mobility like a meritocracy of professionals that could change their fate in a few years begin to be questioned with figures that show that the concentration of wealth is no different than what exists in any other country. The presidential system that was the touchstone of U.S. exceptionalism is beginning to be dysfunctional; at least twice in this century, the winner of the popular vote has not won the electoral college.

Race continues to be at the center of the great polarization in the country, and the question is if the original sin of having maintained slavery as an engine for economic growth but with racial segregation can be fought with mechanisms of inclusion that today are part of the political debate and that a new generation of U.S. Americans will have to look at through new eyes. Castañeda maintains that the new generations already have different values that could lead to a change in the medium term and make the United States a country with universal systems of protection that will avoid those breaks that so damage the national community. We'll see.

The most interesting issue is the way he links the inertia rooted in the political system and the need to co-exist with aberrant elements that are leading them into blind alleys. He puts forward four elements based on a combination of denying reality and a radical normative response. Harsh laws combine with a prudent will to ignore what is happening right around them. The most obvious case is the drugs consumed more and more—and more systematically—by millions of people. The overwhelming reality reflected in movies and TV series in which everyone smokes or consumes psychoactive substances completely naturally, while outwardly being Puritanically prohibitionist. The also overwhelming reality of thousands of people who die every year from overdoses or populate the downtown areas of many cities in worse and worse conditions. A harsh reality that it is better to partially ignore if you can use the prohibitionist paradigm, particularly if you also have a third country to blame.

It is also interesting how they have viewed migration historically. In an article published in the journal *Norteamérica*, I called it "strategic ignorance," that is, the counterpart of strategic intelligence: everything that must be ignored in order to be able to move ahead. Castañeda explains the double standard that U.S. Americans have used to preserve a *status quo* that conservatives dub unsustainable but will not touch. A bloody paradox.

The issue of mass incarceration is also revealing. The United States is the OECD-member country with the largest number of prison inmates. In 2019, there were more than 2.2 million, the product of jailing the largest number of persons for the greatest number of crimes possible as a response to a crisis of insecurity. Another factor that helps explain why our neighbor to the north has so many people behind bars is the power of district and state's attorneys. The country of freedoms is the one that prohibits and punishes the most.

Other flies in the ointment involve guns and capital punishment, but the most peculiar one is intelligent design, an elegant way of talking about creationism in society. The intrusion of religious discourse in educational systems is only thinkable in a system like that of the United States.

This is how the United States is moving through the twenty-first century, like a country that is less and less exceptional, where even the sitting president can argue, like in many republics south of the Rio Grande, that he is the victim of fraud. ■■■

Further Reading

Castañeda, Jorge, *Estados Unidos: en la intimidad y a la distancia* (Mexico City: Debate, 2020).

Fergusson, Niall, *Coloso: Auge y decadencia del imperio americano* (Madrid: Debate, 2005).

Fukuyama, Francis, *America at the Crossroads. Democracy, Power, and the Neoconservative Legacy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).

Johnson, Paul, *Estados Unidos: la historia* (Buenos Aires: Javier Vergara, 2004).

Lévy, Bernard-Henry, *American Vertigo* (Paris: Grasset, 2006).

Porter, Eduardo, *American Poison: How Racial Hostility Destroyed Our Promise* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2020).

Tocqueville, Alexis de, *La democracia en América* (Mexico City: FCE, 1957).



EL COLEGIO DE MÉXICO | Novedad editorial | libros.colmex.mx

Historia
M·Í·N·I·M·A
DE
Los feminismos
en América Latina

Dora Barrancos

Síguenos en redes sociales   