

Book Review: America Through Foreign Eyes by Jorge G. Castaneda

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Jorge G. Castaneda. *America Through Foreign Eyes*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020. VII+ 307 pages. Hardcover, \$27.95.

It is difficult to revisit the history of the United States of America objectively without offending the slave masters—people of European descent who took over the land, North America, from the indigenous people (Native Americans) and later enslaved Africans. In his book, *America Through Foreign Eyes*, Jorge Castaneda, a Princeton graduate, a former foreign minister of Mexico, and a college professor who lived most of his life in the United States, chronologically attempts to present both sides of America, the good and evil, through the lens of a foreigner. His ten-chapter, 307-page book chronicles America's exceptionalism, culture, dysfunctional democracy (i.e., the Electoral College), greed, religion, race, attitude toward guns, and immigration. The book is not written from a Mexican immigrant outsider perspective, but from that of a broader "sympathetic foreign critic" (p. 1) who knows the ins and outs of American policies and can amalgamate both historical and current events to throw more light on structural and institutional inequalities and racism in America. The author goes on to express the personal observations and experiences that led him to write the book, which is rooted primarily in Latin America and Western Europe, with a few references to Africa and other parts of the world.

Even though the author admits this is not a scholarly work, but rather a reflection on his nearly five decades of direct contacts with Americans, I strongly argue otherwise, as this book is more likely to meet the standard of any academic thesis given the depth of the research, citations, references, and how well it is written. Ideally, given the book's title, it was expected to provide an in-depth account of the author's personal experiences and reflections in America, yet it also includes numerous citations from other foreigner

observers of the United States. Castaneda seeks not to explain the superfluously complex American political system to outsiders, but “to share one foreigner’s view of the United States with Americans themselves” (p. 3). It was expected that the number of contemporary issues covered by the author would have been filtered through his personal experiences and observations, but rather he allows the literature to influence and eclipse his writing at times, which leads to a number of questionable dates with the abolition of slavery in France and the United Kingdom. For example, discussing the “love-hate relationship” (p. 220) in America, Castaneda provides a plethora of names including Jean-Paul Sartre, Thomas Mann, and Ricardo Flores Magon, whose historical experiences are similar to new immigrants, especially during President Donald Trump’s era (2016-2020) where “foreigners [are] subject[ed] to bullying” (p.224).

Among several issues raised in the book, the author is exceptionally worried about mass incarceration, the death penalty, and Americans’ love of guns. To Castaneda, mass incarceration undeniably affects mostly the poor and people of color. Imprisonment does not only become a stigma on these groups, but it affects them on the job market. On the death penalty, Castaneda provides data to show that the death penalty does not prevent crime, but since it mostly affects people of color, whites have historically taken delight in this form of punishment. In fact, as the author puts it, regarding capital punishment, the United States finds itself in the company of authoritarian countries such as North Korea, Cuba, Iran, and Saudi Arabia. For centuries foreigners have admired and criticized the United States for unjustifiable behaviours, even though Americans may view those behaviors from a completely different lens—for example, slavery, international laws, and the possession of guns. Of course, the Second Amendment of the

Constitution guarantees Americans “the right to bear arms,” although whether this is an individual right or the right of individual states to field militias is in question. The author marvels at the various types of arms civilians purchase. Possession of arms by Americans went large scale in the 1850s. Mass shootings in America are greater than any comparable country in the world. However, to many American, guns are for protection and do not kill people, rather “people [that] kill people, and guns don’t kill people” (p. 240). To the foreigner, such an argument is insane and impossible to comprehend. Despite the mass shooting tragedies, American president after American president only pays lip service to gun control, making gun laws impossible to change. On international laws, America only recognises them when they are in the country’s favor but rejects them when they do not address America’s immediate interest.

While the book may not represent the views of all foreigners, all immigrants are most likely to identify with at least one or two sentiments of the author. Castaneda’s submission of issues (racism, inequality, white supremacy) facing America need jettison as the citizens deserve an “effective, modern, and well-suited political system than the one they are today condemned to suffer” (p. 83). The book clearly authenticates a case for what most foreigners may not be able to say openly. However, the classical presentation of a foreigner’s view affirms the appropriateness of the book as it offers both sides of America creating room for tolerance, equality, acceptance, and togetherness.

Policymakers and administrators stand to benefit from *America Through Foreign Eyes*.

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