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ELECTIONS ISSUE

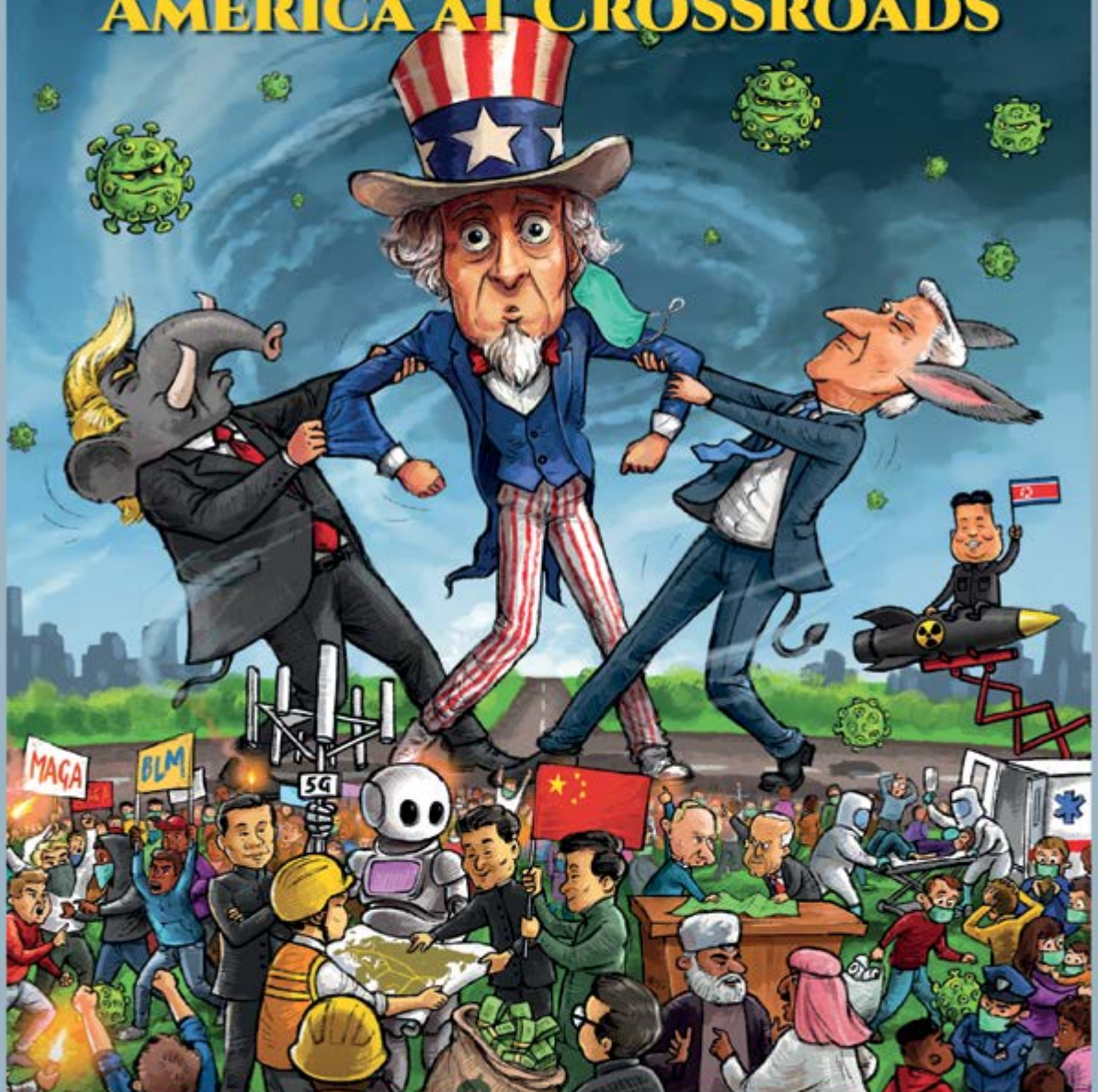
AUTUMN 2020 / ISSUE NO.17

\$ 15.00 | € 10.00 | 1500 RSD

# HORIZONS

JOURNAL OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS  
AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

## AMERICA AT CROSSROADS



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# WOEFULLY TORN

## CLIMATE CHANGE, CHINA, AND AMERICAN CIVILIZATION

Jorge G. Castañeda

IT HAS been claimed that the truly distinguishing feature of the United States has always consisted in being a middle class society. Not an ordinary one: rather, a society that allowed and encouraged equality for many, and exclusion for the rest. Who the rest were was no secret: Native Americans, enslaved peoples from Africa, disenfranchised, dispossessed, and discriminated-against women, African Americans, Mexicans, and subsequently other Latinos, plus Chinese, Muslims of many lands, and more.

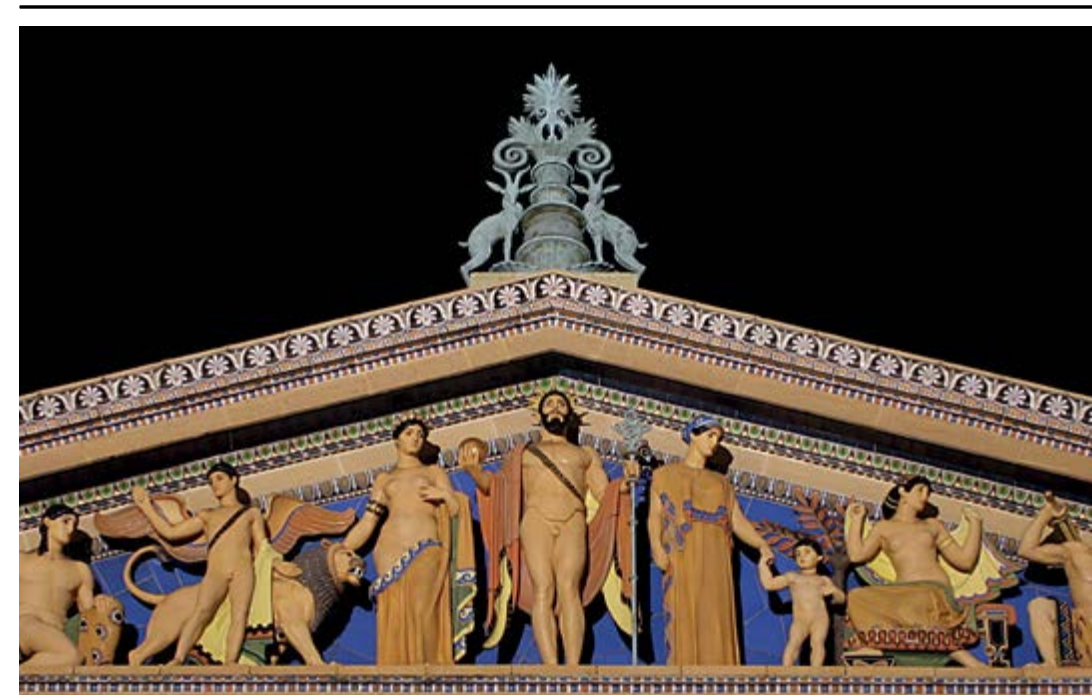
With time, different cohorts of the excluded were brought into the fold, or elbowed their way into it. Some are now closer to equality, though still far removed: women in general, white women in particular. Others are still waiting. But for those inside the fold, a majority of the population enjoyed a common trait, and it was not poverty. It was the fact of equality, though not the aspiration to it or the thought of it.

*Jorge G. Castañeda is Global Professor at New York University and a former Foreign Minister of Mexico. This essay was adapted from the conclusions of his most recent book, America through Foreign Eyes (2020). You may follow him on Twitter @JorgeGCastaneda.*

### (IN)EQUALITY

Over the years, that equality was transformed by the gradual inclusion of groups of the once excluded, and distorted by the appearance of immense wealth for a few, particularly from the Gilded Age onward. These two processes, however, did not fundamentally alter the basic equation. This boiled down to a large middle class; a small, fabulously affluent minority; and enough poor people gradually and repeatedly brought into the system to promise a minimum of social mobility but also to provide the low-skill, low-wage labor indispensable in a market economy.

The country constructed a political system to match this configuration. Little by little, it established the holding of relatively free and fair elections for most executive and legislative offices. Everyone inside the system participated on equal grounds, while those on the outside did not participate



*Pediment entitled "Western Civilization" on the building of the Philadelphia Museum of Art*

at all. Gradually, the franchise was extended: to non-property-owning males, to freed slaves (only for them to be de facto deprived of it soon after), to women, Hispanics, and other newcomers. Those in the system were, once again, pretty much all alike. Those who were different found themselves for long periods denied entry to that system.

Until the early 1960s—and with the exception of certain New Deal reforms (for example, Social Security)—given limitless available resources, an immigration spigot that could be turned on and off at will, and a weak labor move-

ment, the great American middle class functioned as a substitute for a welfare state comparable to that of other rich countries. With full employment, high wages, and the exclusion of broad minorities with scant political clout, there was no real need for health care for all, a decent pension for everyone, proper unemployment compensation, and so on. In the 1960s, Medicare, Medicaid, and food stamps joined Social Security as the scaffolding of the bare-bones American welfare state that thrived during the three odd decades starting with the end of World War II: the American equivalent of France's "trente glorieuses."

Then the spell was broken. For a series of reasons including Ronald Reagan’s economic and social policies, globalization, and a relative loss of American competitiveness, and the rising influence of lobby groups, starting from the Nixon years, inequality began to rise, wages and real overall income stagnated, and the middle class ceased to expand, and perhaps even to shrink.

These trends have persisted until today. They partly explain Donald Trump’s election in 2016.

The need for a plain-vanilla welfare state like elsewhere became apparent, as American society started resembling everybody else’s. The comparison with France is illustrative. Both countries were roughly as unequal before the Great Depression; inequality rose enormously during the 1930s. But after World War II the United States became significantly more egalitarian than France. Then came 1980. Inequality began to rise dramatically in the United States, but remained relatively stable in France. The trend has persisted.

But this was not evident to everybody in mainstream American politics. In fact, the middle class substitute for a cradle-to-grave welfare state was quickly disappearing. In 2019, however, something changed. In one way

or another, the principal Democratic contenders for the Presidency in 2019-2020—even Joe Biden—espoused many of the tenets of a modern version of that welfare state. So much so that Trump and the Republican Party centered their attacks on them for seeking to bring socialism to America, something that conservatives believe should never be allowed to occur.

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The programmatic proposals offered by many of the presidential contenders in the 2019-2020 Democratic nomination campaign also pointed in that direction. The most obvious example was Medicare

for All, or a National Health Service, or a single-payer health care system. They did not all mean exactly the same thing; several candidates did not agree on the details, or simply did not spell them out. But they had all learned the lesson of Barack Obama’s attempt to fix the American health care disaster with half-way measures, albeit the only ones possible at the time. Democratic politicians seeking the White House took far more ambitious stances. Previously existing fringe positions entered the mainstream.

The same was true for other issues: universal childcare and parental leave, a wealth tax on fortunes over \$50 mil-

lion; free public college tuition for all; raising marginal income taxes back to levels pre-dating Ronald Reagan, George W. Bush, and Donald Trump; a carbon tax on non-renewable energy sources; almost doubling the minimum wage. All of these promises were exciting, innovative, disruptive, and would have been considered appropriate only for the extreme fringe as recently as 2016. They would not create an American welfare state overnight, but as the conservatives said, tended to reshape the United States as Denmark, or Scandinavia and Europe in general. The Green New Deal also fit into this narrative.

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**CLIMATE CHANGE**

Then came the pandemic. It made the necessity of (re)constructing an American welfare state much more acute. COVID-19, as Warren Buffett might have said, was like a financial crisis or low tide: only when the tide moves out can you see who is wearing a bathing suit. The coronavirus revealed what many knew or suspected, but also what many denied: the social safety net in the United States was woefully torn, and was dramatically shredded by the ravages of the virus. It hit the neediest—African-Americans, Latinos, poor whites—harder than anybody else, and in all walks of life:

health care, education, childcare, unemployment insurance, professional training, nursing homes, and so on. If Biden and the Democrats thought before March of 2020 that a major overhaul of the American social safety net was necessary, this became all the more obvious once the true effects of the pandemic became known.

Building this new welfare state, which might have appeared illusory or naive before the election and the pandemic, is probably a necessary condition for dealing with the other three major challenges the United

States faces in the coming years. Two are of an international nature, but with huge domestic consequences. The first and foremost is climate change.

The Trump years notwithstanding, it seems increasingly clear, in Washington State and California just as in Germany and Holland, that there is an effective national and international approach to climate change, different from Trump’s totally useless, impotent one. Disbelieving climate change, leaving its diminishment to the market or seeking purely national solutions to it—what many have done over the past half-century—leads nowhere. The global essence of the issue, its public goods nature, and the cost of any of the

conceivable tools necessary to face the challenge all demand a level of social and governmental coordination such as is emerging in Western Europe and on the American west coast. The Chinese solution—supposing it is one—is simply unacceptable to societies accustomed to democratic governance.

Taxes, international cooperation and enforcement, stringent regulation, civil society participation, major public sector investment in renewable energy and new technologies, are all better suited to a modern welfare state than to the more free-market, laissez-faire, deregulated American status quo. In this case it is not the stagnation of the middle class that brings up the need for change; it is a new phenomenon singularly unsuited to the old American scheme.

The relative success California has enjoyed on environmental matters in general, and in combatting climate change in particular, can be partly attributed to the coastal “state of mind,” but much more so to state legislation approved and paid for by Californians for decades now. In this regard, and all power to it, California is a bit like Denmark, Germany, Holland, and Washington State. All of these entities are combatting climate change effectively, ambitiously, and through a comprehensive approach. It is difficult to envisage a national, American approach to this immense threat

to everyone’s wellbeing, and notably that of the younger generations, that can be much different. Which implies building a truly American version of a modern welfare state.

**CHINA**

Secondly, unlike the fears of previous “declinists” during the twentieth century, which mostly turned out to be exaggerated, there is a long-term issue with China, accompanied by short- and medium-term implications. Demographics are not mechanical nor automatic, but a nation with four to five times more inhabitants than the United States, and a growing industrial and technological base, is eventually bound to catch up with its rival. The key question is obviously the word “eventually:” next month, next year, or thirty to forty years from now. If, as most experts surmise—i.e., if America has sufficient time to adapt to this approaching challenge—the sticker shock of Chinese parity should be more than manageable.

Militarily, even if practically half of all Americans think their country is “only one of several leading military powers,” they are wrong. China, in particular, possesses nowhere near the American capacity to project power on the seas, the air, space, and even on land away from its own perimeter or in cyberspace. Its economy, measured in per capita terms, thus controlling for

population, is infinitely smaller than the American one. Technologically, despite ambitious plans for the future and undeniable advances in recent years, Chinese firms and/or the state are not yet in the United States’ league.

Washington harbors undoubted vulnerabilities today, especially in the financial field, but most extrapolations of past growth into the future have proved unreliable. Lastly, Chinese soft power, while rising, is light years away from the potency of American civilization, despite significant efforts such as the Belt and Road Initiative, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, Chinese-language missions in Africa, the String of Pearls plan, and multiple bilateral agreements. China, in these areas of international endeavor, is not yet ready for prime time.

None of which implies that the challenges are not real, nor that psychologically and even culturally, Americans are ready to navigate these uncharted waters. The United States has not faced a perceived threat to its hegemony since the Cold War; there has been no real menace to that hegemony since World War I. The Soviet Union did not pass muster as

a credible rival, brouhaha, red scares, and all. Addressing this unfamiliar experience is not something great powers manage easily: witness Britain, France, and Russia today.

On occasion, this implies sacrifice, not necessarily in human lives—though that too can take place—but in resources and burdens many Americans do not want to shoulder. Surveys by the Center for American Progress and the Eurasia Group in 2019 discovered what American foreign policy priorities should be and are in the minds of ordinary citizens. The rivalry with

China did not truly figure; almost all of the top issues were “negative:” stopping bad things from happening. The young were the most adamant. They were particularly reluctant to see the United States attempt to prevent human rights abuses. Even Trump’s tariffs on Chinese exports to America were not well received by consumers, and were disapproved by U.S. exporters to China hurt by Beijing’s reprisals.

As time passes, the adjustments to the end of single power hegemony will become more painful, though none that can be foreseen today will be fatal. But without fixing the store at home, they will be much more difficult to face.

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## CIVILIZATION

Thirdly, after responding to the challenges of climate change and China, consolidating, deepening, and strengthening American civilization represents an additional pending task. Defining it remains complicated; describing it is often simpler. Fatima Asghar, a Pakistani-American writer and poet gets it right when she attempts to define her belonging to that civilization when it is viewed from abroad, instead of when she is seen from within: “I both belong and don’t belong to America. When I’m in America I’m constantly reminded that I’m not actually from here. But when I’m abroad, I feel the most American I’ve ever felt: hyperaware that my cultural reference points are American, that I can’t shake my American entitlement, that once I open my mouth and talk, I am perceived as an American.” She is perceived as a member, representative, and expression of American civilization, even if in her own country she does not feel a part of it.

American civilization will encounter new threats or challenges, starting with those that began on 9/11; though present before, they became dangerously evident after that date. Inevitably, resistance to the growing presence of American civilization will swell. Some of the societies that for different reasons seemed amenable to the influence of American civilization are transformed—partly by that civilization—

and will react negatively to what they view as excessive proximity.

As we have all seen with Trump, now and then what the world may consider as the most unattractive features of American civilization will come to the fore. They will provoke responses even among those nations closest to the United States. There will be issues of inclusion and exclusion within the *limes*. The strongest traits of this civilization—a certain type of economy, representative democracy, respect for human rights, freedom of expression, a large, though shrinking middle class, mass culture, and consumption—may be criticized or rejected on their own merits. Or some societies might discard them precisely because they are inherent to American civilization.

America will find the appropriate answers to these questions and conflicts if and only if it is able to show the world that among its many virtues, the inherent capacity to constantly re-invent itself is perhaps the most seductive one. This implies addressing the age-old challenges still awaiting a solution—racism, violence, an aggressive and unilateral defense of perceived national interests abroad, insularity and retrenchment when things go awry at home, disrupting the environment. Reinventing itself also entails jettisoning exceptionalities that have no place in the modern world, much less so in American civilization:

guns, mass incarceration, the death penalty, the recurrent war on drugs. These are, by definition, anachronisms that should no longer have a place in a society that claims to be world’s most modern, and probably is.

## TWO-WAY STREET

The lasting triumph and enhanced longevity of American civilization will come when Americans themselves acknowledge the decline and end of their difference with the rest of the world—or at least with its rich countries. Accepting that it has become like every other wealthy nation is both an arduous task for any society, and one that has been underway for some time in the case of the United States. It is especially strenuous for a society that was born with the ingrained notion of exceptionalism, and that has sought to reproduce it from generation to generation

This is, obviously, a two-way street. As the classic author Mary Beard described a previous process: “the interaction between Rome and other cultures in the empire is striking for the variety of forms it took and for the very diverse hybrid versions of Roman [...] culture [...] that were the result.” Affluent European

and Asian countries are also changing and converging with the United States, whether in regard to issues of climate change, poverty, inequality, immigration, violence, drugs, rights for all, or many others. The narrowing and gradual elimination of differences does not mean that all countries will become the same.

*The strongest traits of American civilization: a certain type of economy, representative democracy, respect for human rights, freedom of expression, a large, though shrinking middle class, mass culture, and consumption.*

This has been occurring in the rich world over the past decades, and even in some countries—geographically in the case of Mexico, for example, or economically with East Asia.

The process involving greater proximity to American civilization will not be exempt from perils and unpleasant consequences. Those

nations that do not participate in it are increasingly likely to resent it, and react negatively to its progress. The gap, if not the clash, between civilizations, might be exacerbated by this evolution. This exacerbation may incorporate forms of exclusion and rejection that no one should approve of or countenance. It is also an uneven process. American civilization is rapidly expanding into China and India, which comprise more than one third of the world’s population, but where it is also generating antibodies. Which brings us to a final point about the *limes* and civilization.

French author Régis Debray stresses how Rome—the civilization as such, not the republic or the empire—transformed itself over the centuries, in the eastern (Byzantine) and western empires, as well as how it uniquely adapted to new circumstances. As he reasons: “[Emperor] Caracalla (for whom the famous baths of Rome are named) was mad, but extending citizenship to all of the Empire’s free men (in 212) was wise.” The extension of the *limes* changed Rome, and Rome of course changed the location and nature of the *limes*. A civilization is influenced by those beyond the *limes*; the exchange works both ways. The main point, as a recent historian of the Pax Romana framed it, is “that people living as far apart as the Tyne and the Euphrates may have watched the same stories and hummed the same tunes.” Or from the Hudson to the Yalu.

American civilization, and the United States as a nation, are both being modified by what lies beyond the borders and the hinterland of the “empire;” like Rome, at least until the very end, for the better. It could not be otherwise, if we are to take the notion of an American

civilization seriously. From the most immediate, nearest and simplest impact (i.e. the growth of Hispanic influence on the mores of American society: language, cuisine, music, sports), to the more complex and contradictory (how the United States responds to climate change, and domestically and in foreign policy to China’s rise and its gradual Americanization) America is less of an island than ever before. Being Rome means extending the language, taxes, the roads, the legal code, military practice and aqueducts, hygiene, and amphitheaters across the world, but also receiving the inspiration and impulse of the northern neighbors, the Christians, and eventually the Eastern Empire.

Will American civilization last as long as Rome—either the empire or civilization? Certainly not, if only for demographic reasons. But it has a long way to go still, especially if it shows Rome’s adaptability, and understands what American civilization is, and what it still lacks to consolidate it. A fulfilled modernity would perhaps be the best name for what is missing. The journey toward that modernity—and full-fledged civilization—is underway. It will be arduous, but ultimately successful. ●

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