
HOUSE ORGAN

An Alien Observes the US. US-watching is a mandatory exercise for the rest of the world. Its military might and the uses to which it is put (the “ultima ratio” of globalized capitalism); its aggregate wealth and the leverage that the US exerts over other countries; its alliance with neoliberal governments all over the world; its cultural messages which clog the media — all trigger many emotions in citizens of other countries, among them nervous curiosity. As has ruefully been said, all citizens of the world ought to have the vote in US elections, as whoever gets elected in them will affect their fates. Ironically, and as another example of US singularity, over half its citizens choose not to vote .

How did this hegemonic US situation develop? Geographical determinism first. A vast landmass with indented coastlines and a plethora of navigable rivers, fertile plains with fairly regular rainfall, a variety of climates, the dominant of which is extreme by European standards but does not go as far as preventing the growth of crops. Political developments, second: An open and stable society by 19th century standards and a prosperous one by 20th century ones, which drew and keeps drawing immigrants from all over the world, at a triple stroke creating economic spaces, providing manpower for industry and services and generating political legitimacy for the whole. Geopolitics third: Only two neighboring countries, one with a guaranteed protection from a metropolis which in any case was uninterested in military adventures, the other so weak that it gave up to the US with hardly a struggle over half its territory; one internal challenge to the hegemonic thrust from an enclave providing raw materials for export which was weak and — at the cost of 600,000 dead — was crushed. The follies of others, fourth: A succession of European wars which turned the US from one of the world’s greatest debtors to its greatest creditor, which eliminated for a while its economic rivals and allowed the US to establish its local currency as the world’s parameter, and the interests of its capitalists to set most of the rules for international trade and its regulation.

As it clearly appears, many of these developments were not an expression of the national will but of outside or external circumstances cleverly and skillfully exploited. As a result of the weakness of internal

stimuli to institutional modernization, the US enters the 21st century with societal organizations that are outdated, and which are associated with past successes rather being the result of current wisdom. Developments and institutions which have grown to be strong in other central countries are weak in the US, and disquieting symptoms keep appearing in its society. Furthermore, as the country's internal problems mount, and the political legitimacy of its polity weakens, the responses to this are largely unsubtle and likely to compound the problems that originally challenged a consensus. Some of these elements will be briefly mentioned next.

The development in the US, which has become the most Christian country in the world, of a particularly extreme fundamentalist version of that religion could be seen as the expression of a shift in a national "mentality," and thus the subject for historians. At the same time this shift has been stimulated by most of the country's political class, which may profit from this development. A new legitimacy is found to replace the upward mobility historically offered by a society which no longer provides it, with the current growing wealth differentials, with growing subsidization of its rich, and with the increase in general resentment which results from all this.

Alone among central countries, the US has never had a major political party identifying itself with the workers or with the poor . The US working class has always preferred to co-opt the benefits of a general prosperity rather than mount a challenge from the outside. The vague promise of upward mobility and increased prosperity (in which the US was so generous until historically recent times) was a powerful argument for this decision. As a result, the US has never had a government-run health service, which always appears as a concession to working class demands or as an effort to placate them. The current US health non-system is both very expensive and very inefficient, US health indicators the worst among central countries, internal health level differentials the largest — and there is no likelihood of a change. The big unspoken logic of US health is that it offers a maximum of possibilities for capitalist profit, and those benefiting from this hold veto power over political decisions to change the status quo.

The US singularity extends to its educational nonsystem, which is very uneven, with an extreme of excellence which is perhaps the highest in the world, with another extreme which is resolutely thirdworldish, and with an average which is low by central country standards. US students rank consistently poorly in international examinations.

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