

Reviews

The Estados Unidos Affair

Cinco ensayos sobre un “amor” oblicuo

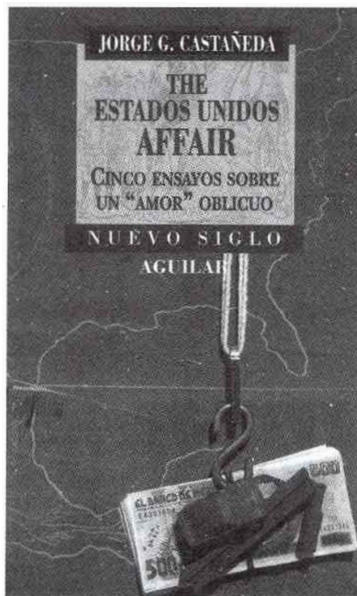
(The United States Affair.

Five Essays on an Oblique “Love”)

Jorge G. Castañeda

Aguilar

Mexico City, 1996, 126 pp.



The last 12 years have witnessed a transformation of considerable magnitude in the bilateral relationship between Mexico and the United States. The intensification of relations between the Mexican government and its northern neighbor have raised, however, a series of questions about the nature of both the new bond being forged and the methods used to strengthen it. For example: What mechanisms have Mexican authorities designed for approaching the United States? Under

what conditions has the bilateral negotiation developed? And, finally, have the means used resulted in a real benefit for Mexico? These questions are posited in a collection of essays published in *The Estados Unidos Affair. Cinco ensayos sobre un “amor” oblicuo*, a book presenting a critical, evaluative and forward-looking view of the way Mexico has positioned itself vis-à-vis the United States from the perspective of our own political, economic and social weaknesses.

There is no question that this analysis will help readers grasp the complexity of the intimate and problematic proximity of Mexico and the United States. In this sense, the book proposes a series of alternatives on how to benefit from it and how to achieve better mutual understanding.

The book is divided into five essays that, when read together, reveal some of the most important aspects of what the author calls an oblique “love,” that is to say, a relationship of unavoidable closeness, but based on a system of marked differences and visible inequalities.

In the first chapter, Castañeda critically evaluates the way in which Mexico, particularly the Mexican elite, has favored a greater approximation to, though not understanding of, the United States. The author believes that the weakening of the Mexican government in the last few years with regard to its neighbor to the north can be seen in phenomena such as migration and the negotiation and subsequent signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) between profoundly disparate partners.

Based on this, the author highlights the urgent need for new strategies and increased awareness between both countries. An objective diagnosis of Mexican reality would allow us to identify the weak points in our economic and socio-political structure that place us at a disadvantage during negotiations. In this way, he alludes to the necessity of fostering a greater democra-

tization of Mexico's political system, generating a greater unity and cohesion in Mexican society, as well as forging appropriate political leadership.

In the second chapter, the author evaluates American democracy in the context of bilateral relations given the challenges it currently faces. He argues the need to transform (or adapt) the United States political system and its institutions in light of both domestic and external changes in recent years. Using the growing heterogeneity of U.S. society as a backdrop, Castañeda alludes to three issues he feels to be crucial: the revival of accountability to the voters, the political system's lack of representation and its insensitivity to the demands of a diversified society and, finally, the deterioration of political debate and intellectual diversity with regard to major national problems. All of these would result in a biased, unilateral vision of the issues shared by the United States and Mexico.

The third chapter, "The Mexico-U.S. Migratory Crossroads," looks at the situation of Mexican emigrants and U.S. authorities' violent reaction against them, without refraining from pointing to the responsibility of Mexican authorities in the matter. What is more, the author formulates a series of proposals related to the Mexican government's capacity for negotiation and decision making.

The fourth part of the book, "Vive la Différence: Inequality?," conceived explicitly for the U.S. public, presents a panorama of contemporary Mexico. The author starts by recognizing that Mexico and the United States are not only two diametrically opposed countries, but that they will always be so. This understood, he reviews the strong differences of economic, social and, above all else, cultural origin that have often been ignored on the assumption that the negotiations were between two equals. These differences lead us, rather, to question how to reconcile a relationship with the United States given such contrasts. The article emphasizes that accepting these fundamental and permanent asymmetries will become the true test of the future of our bilateral relationship.

The last chapter, "New Cycles of Mexican Affliction," analyzes the moment that Mexican society is experiencing. Here he describes the achievements that, from 1994 on, have given the country a new and complex reality, maintaining that transforming the Mexican political system is imperative. Castañeda concludes that the true challenge for Mexico lies in how it will manage to resolve its dilemmas over the long term: economic

crises, lack of leadership, paralysis of the elite, political violence, corruption and governmental inefficiency are the big obstacles that will have to be surmounted to secure a truly democratic life.

Despite the fact that the events have surpassed some of the author's ideas, the analytical and pro-active nature of *The Estados Unidos Affair. Cinco ensayos sobre un "amor" oblicuo*, makes it a fine compilation that contributes to a better comprehension of the relationship Mexico has with the United States.

Bibiana Gómez Muñoz

International relations specialist

Translated by Dianne Pearce