

John Svendsen og Leif Vangdrup. *USA: Samfund og ressourcer i politisk perspektiv*. København: Munksgaard, 1989. 216 pp. illustrated, incl. index and statistical appendices.

With the cover depicting Jasper John's "Map" (1961), with the title alluding to Dos Passos—and with their dedication of the book to Frank Zappa—the authors make it clear that they have a large claim in mind. Although the book is written as an introductory textbook in American history and geography, *USA* contains, nonetheless, a virtual reinterpretation of the way to perceive contemporary America, and, by implication, a significant critique of a viewpoint often associated with American Studies.

One of the persistent themes of American Studies—a theme which has repeatedly inspired official speech writing—states that in America nature redeems culture. American geography served to renew the political system. From Turner's frontier to Silicon Valley, the abundance of nature exploited by human ingenuity made possible a society where each could claim his own, including the right to vote. This way of perceiving the US ultimately depends upon John Locke, the father of liberalism, who taught the Founding Fathers of the Constitution to understand political society as the result of a social contract, the terms of which were conceived in the liberty of a "natural state" characterized by plenty. Countless political addresses, countless books, and innumerable movies have replayed this basic theme of American civilization. "America was the only country which began in perfection and aspired only to progress," as the historian Richard Hofstadter once put it. It seems to follow that the ideal citizen is born with a geographical mission: to get going and to

make himself available for 'free land'/new jobs/new opportunities. This set of assumptions is taken for granted by many standard textbooks teaching one to expect that historical accounts of the United States be prefaced by a geographical presentation which cannot but inculcate a sense of the exuberant blessings bestowed on the continent by holy nature itself.

By reversing this pattern—by proceeding from a comprehensive historical account to a number of chapters that provide detailed information about the salient environmental issues in the US—USA undermines the basic American myth, which has been remarkable for its ability to perpetuate the hope of a new (re)invention of America. It effectively dispels any notions of 'a fast fix.' USA is not a theoretical work, but an exposition of the basic assumption that American geography is constituted by a specific distribution of economic and political power, and thus, that the 'natural' environment is deeply politicized and can only be fully comprehended by political categories.

The "historical section" is concluded with a concise summary of the problems that are recognized by most commentators: the debt issue, the loss of economic, military, and political power abroad, and the domestic social problems that have been further aggravated during the Reagan administration. It is illustrated by a picture of Ronald Reagan addressing the world through the Voice of America. With Reagan's melodious voice still in the ears, the reader is next confronted with the angry roar from Mount St. Helens, 1980, as an introduction to examples of the interaction between natural resources and interest politics. Thus, the journey through historical consciousness is followed by an exploration of the American political subconsciousness—a realm largely banished from the official image of the nation.

Past inequities were not undone by the magic of the Civil War, the Progressive Reform movement, the New Deal or the Great Society, but are shown with an amazing array of statistics to have been carried forward—and, in fact to accumulate with the passage of time. The present ecological state of the Union is the consequence of a politics that go back as far as the founding of the Republic. Contemporary America is faced with the prospect of scarcity embracing even the basic collective conditions for life. Adequate supplies of air, energy, and water can no longer be taken for granted, but appear now as commodities that are rapidly becoming objects of intense conflict. Thus, a narrative structure unifies the tale of USA. The past is carried into the future—not in a rhetoric of gloom—but accompanied by cool, sobering facts, mostly based on official records. Despondency is a luxury that the authors cannot afford in view of the character of the situation.

Although the historical and the geographical sections form an integrated whole, the text is actually divided into separate chapters that accommodate the reader's expectation about the integrity of each discipline. USA is one of the few works that attempts to treat American regional diversity in some depth. It

is, in addition, highly innovative in terms of pedagogy. Its red skein of official statistics is spun with elegance. Its use of "boxes" for singling out special topics, such as "the political system," "nativism and racial unrest," "oil and the American empire," and "supply side economics and monetarism," make it useful as a handbook for quick and precise reference. Ideological analysis is elaborated in numerous photographs that are presented for a purpose of reflection and analysis rather than as simple illustrations.

Although *USA* is presented as a textbook in American history and geography at the level of *gymnasium* teaching, its scope and concerns are addressed to any serious observer of the United States. A translated version would be highly valuable for university teaching in the Nordic countries and elsewhere.

Niels Thorsen

Copenhagen University