

Donald S. MacQueen, *American Social Studies. A University Primer* Lund, Sweden: Studentlitteratur, 1997. 2nd. ed. 256 pp; ISBN: 91-44-00504-0; paper.

Writing an introductory work on something so extensive as a country is a challenge, because the author easily gets caught in generalizations, or at least it will seem so to some readers. Generalizations of course are necessary, and MacQueen's book is meant as an introduction to further and more focused studies of American society, culture and history.

MacQueen's book falls into five chapters. The first chapter (*Places*) focuses on the geography of the United States, and interestingly points to the mistake we all commonly make that we tend to think New York is located on a parallel roughly halfway between London and Paris. Placing the country on the correct parallels, MacQueen briefly describes the topography, indicating the tremendous variations in the American landscape, and then in more detail outlines the various regions. He deals with the regions both concerning geography, history and dialects. The second chapter (*People*) is for any survey study the most challenging: describing and discussing the United States as a nation. As is very common, MacQueen speaks of the country as a salad bowl with various recognizable ingredients. The reasons for immigration, waves of different ethnic immigrants, and legislative limitations are hinted at, but the chapter primarily deals with the issue of minority groups. Women as a group are also discussed under this section, and treated separately, as if gender were not related to race and class. It would be welcome if the next edition of the book chose to discuss women not as a separate entity, but in relation to gender. The role of religion in American society concludes the chapter, alluding to the religious diversity which characterizes this nation of immigrants.

Government is the topic of the third, and probably most useful, chapter of the book. Concisely and with good figures for illustration, it describes the structure of government, the system of checks and balances and the electoral system. Chapter four is devoted to an outline of the education system. It offers a history of primary, secondary and higher education, as well as a presentation of the unique features of American High School life. The chapter concludes with an overview of the present circumstances of the American educational system, and the many debates about the education crisis which periodically occur. *Challenges* is the title of the final chapter, and it focuses on the many challenges Americans confront, still recognizing that a large majority of Americans are living a normal life, but advising us that the issues of poverty, homelessness and crime cannot be ignored.

MacQueen's book offers many interesting pieces of information, but many of the subjects he deals with are subject to crude generalizations. Although various aspects of the Civil Rights struggle are mentioned, in discussing African-Americans' right for equality, for example, the reader is likely to conclude that desegregation happened overnight. Though the target audience for a survey such as MacQueen's will naturally be newcomers to the field of American Studies, students' prior knowledge is nonetheless likely to be varied, and MacQueen's book does not offer many challenges to the university level student. In the final chapter the author makes a point of describing the country's

weaknesses, but an experienced reader is left with the feeling that, despite the author's good intentions of representing all aspects of contemporary America, the work is too generalized. The many web-sites references are, however, valuable

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