



Editor's Essay

Three Pigs and Some Goats

Alfonso J. García Osuna

“To begin to understand this, ask yourself why, if everyone agrees that “we” are entitled to rule ourselves, it is often so hard to agree about who “we” are.¹

K. A. Appiah

“All [prejudices] are founded on shaky historical assumptions. No country has an unchanging essence. No community has an unchanging identity. What it means to be English or Chinese or Spanish or Indonesian or American changes all the time”.²

Felipe Fernández-Armesto

In his recent (2014) book *Our America: A Hispanic History of the United States*, Felipe Fernández-Armesto methodically defines the clearly misinformed manner in which ordinary citizens of the United States continue to build what I’d call our national self-image. The text makes it clear that the problem is not just the consequence of a general lack of information; it mostly revolves around a standardised approach to the construction of that image, one that still, I would add, reflects the mind-set that gave us Manifest Destiny. The term, coined around the year 1845, (newspaperman John O’Sullivan is commonly credited with introducing the term) refers to the philosophy that propelled the United States’ expansion across the continent. According to this doctrine, the United States was destined by God to expand its territory and dominate the continent. This domination was conceived as the inevitable consequence of the natural superiority of people of northern European descent, so it follows that an inherent requirement for expansion throughout a continent already full of people was to deprecate, macerate or jettison every swarthy bastard in it. Perhaps the pompous sense of uniqueness so prevalent among us has its roots there; it is certainly revealed in the seemingly arrogant manner in which the proper noun “America” is used to refer exclusively to the United States and the adjective of nationality “American” to refer only to U.S. citizens, as if other nations on the American continent, having evaded their divinely-ordained responsibility to submit to the United States, were obscure footnotes to the history of the Western Hemisphere. Surely, were Frenchmen inclined to call their country “Europe” and themselves “European” as a consequence, many around the world would be justifiably perplexed. Nigerians don’t call themselves “African” expecting their interlocutors to know that they are specifically from Nigeria.

Truth be told, it can be very problematic to assign an adjective of nationality to citizens of a country whose founders didn’t bother to contrive a proper noun to designate it. Heck, if

¹ K. A. Appiah. (2018). *The Lies that Bind: Rethinking Identity*. [E-reader Version]. Retrieved from [https://books.google.com/books?id=5786DwAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=K.+A.+Appiah.+\(2018\).+The+Lies+that+Bind:+Rethinking+Identity&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwi3wv_K_aPkAhUn11kKHQKsC9EQuwUwAHoECAMQBQ#v=onepage&q=K.%20A.%20Appiah.%20\(2018\).%20The%20Lies%20that%20Bind%3A%20Rethinking%20Identity&f=false](https://books.google.com/books?id=5786DwAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=K.+A.+Appiah.+(2018).+The+Lies+that+Bind:+Rethinking+Identity&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwi3wv_K_aPkAhUn11kKHQKsC9EQuwUwAHoECAMQBQ#v=onepage&q=K.%20A.%20Appiah.%20(2018).%20The%20Lies%20that%20Bind%3A%20Rethinking%20Identity&f=false)

² F. Fernández-Armesto. (2014). *Our America: A Hispanic History of the United States*. [E-reader Version]. Retrieved from https://books.google.com/books?id=WFUIAgAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=our+america+armesto&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwia-Mmx_aPkAhWExFkKHWGUDRsQ6AEwAHoECAUQA#v=onepage&q=our%20america%20armesto&f=false

eventually they're going to conquer the continent, why waste valuable time trying to come up with a provisional name: they might as well call the country by the name of the continent and get home in time for tea and digestive biscuits.

Yes, there have been original names proposed for the country. One that stands out is "Columbia", used by patriots to refer to the United States during the struggle for independence. Yet, although it was subsequently used to name the federal district, a university, a major river, a television network, a Cleveland-class light cruiser and a large number of streets and businesses, it evidently never prospered (to the delight, I am sure, of northern South Americans, who could now employ their version of the name without the fear of infringing upon copyright laws). So it appears that the way the founders found it expedient to proceed was to use a descriptive phrase to refer to the country: Several states united on the continent of America = The United States of America. This was a clever move: The ever-growing dominion would incorporate areas whose original names did not have to be erased or subordinated to the behemoth's name: United States of America was a "one size fits all" cowboy hat.

And yet, mystified by the "Manifest Hutzpah" of their overbearing neighbours, American republics that had – partially or entirely – escaped the land-grab came up with unique names for the United States (Yanquiland; Gringolandia). Astonishingly, perhaps owing to a lingering Manifest Destiny mentality, these colourful and eye-catching appellations have yet to be given serious consideration by Washington. Other options have been proposed: "Great Satan", a name preferred by people who don't particularly like us, cannot be broadly accepted due to its impracticality: the adjective of nationality associated with it, "Greatsatanian", is far too difficult to pronounce, and one can foresee a considerable number of Greatsatanians misspelling it.

But I stray.

The event that triggered my bizarre ruminations and a re-reading of *Our America* was a recommendation by the Greatsatanian president to four United States congresswomen, one of them Puerto Rican, that they should go back whence they came because, if they "hate America" so much, they'll be happier "over there" (*New York Times*, 2019, 14 July). The fact that this "send them back" narrative has gained so much traction among the U.S. public is the product, according to some, of a broad-spectrum mentality in a country where so many believe that global warming is a hoax, where 31% of its people reject evolution,³ 26% believe that the Sun orbits the Earth,⁴ 61% don't know that the universe began with the Big Bang⁵ and almost half of them voted for a madcap television personality for president. This mentality has been termed "American Stupidity" by Steven Nadler:

A stupid person has access to all the information necessary to make an appropriate judgment, to come up with a set of reasonable and justified beliefs and yet fails to do so. The evidence is staring them right in the face but it makes no difference whatsoever. They believe what they want to believe. Not only do they have no good reasons for

³ Boston, R. (2019, February 12). How Many Americans Reject Evolution? The Answer May Surprise You. Retrieved from <https://www.au.org/blogs/wall-of-separation/how-many-americans-reject-evolution-the-answer-may-surprise-you>

⁴ Neuman, S. National Public Radio (2014, February 14) Retrieved from <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2014/02/14/277058739/1-in-4-americans-think-the-sun-goes-around-the-earth-survey-says>

⁵ Neuman, S. National Public Radio (2014, February 14) Retrieved from <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2014/02/14/277058739/1-in-4-americans-think-the-sun-goes-around-the-earth-survey-says>

thinking that what they believe is true — there are often good reasons for thinking that what they believe is false. They are not acting in a rational manner.⁶

While I believe that Nadler is correct in stating that citizens have access to much of the information a person might need in order to make appropriate judgments, what we “Americans” don’t have, in my view, is the set of intellectual tools that would allow us to process that information in a wholesome and reasonable way. As such, American Stupidity would be the result of an inept educational system that is buttressed by a set of cultural values that is prejudiced.

Case in point is the nonchalant manner in which the person “Americans” elected as president suggests that Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, a person of Puerto Rican descent born in New York City, should return whence she came. What should be worrying is not so much what was said; what should be very disturbing is that such a dim-witted challenge to reason seems cogent and compelling to large parts of the U.S. public. The reason is simple: the country’s cultural values are the result of a prejudiced, ideologised view of history and an educational system that inculcates that prejudice:

... prejudice that the United States is a country made by Anglo-Saxon Protestants, constructed by anglophone colonists, where concepts of liberty and law are defined by traditions that originated in England; where English language is the basis of whatever cultural unity can be contrived among the ethnicities that make up the population; and where you become “American”—or more accurately, where you qualify to be a citizen of the United States—by subscribing to a canonical version of the history of the country that begins among English colonists on the east coast of the continent.⁷

While this Anglo-centric narrative disregards the 15,000 years of Native American presence and the long and storied history of Spanish exploration and settlement of much of what would become the United States (Englishmen were latecomers to the continent; they would first enjoy kippers and mash on a Virginia beach at a much later time), the “go back to where you came from” proposal ignores the fact that Puerto Rico, where Ocasio-Cortez would somehow or other have to “go back” to, is not only a part of the United States, but *the* part of the United States where the country’s history begins, and it begins with three pigs and some goats. It was on August 8, 1505 that Spanish navigator and explorer Vicente Yáñez Pinzón (who had captained the Niña in the famous 1492 voyage) marooned those animals on the island so that their progeny could provide food for the future colony that he envisioned creating upon his return.⁸ Notwithstanding the fact that they walked on four legs, they are truly the first Europeans to settle on U.S. soil. Perhaps three pigs do not provide a very heroic story of origins for a nation that would conquer a continent, but if Bladud, one of the legendary early kings of Britain, was gainfully employed as a swineherd, why shouldn’t the United States begin its historical narratives with three pioneering pigs and their goat associates? At the very least the pig story could begin to eat away at the prejudice and bigotry that have dishonoured the social and cultural life of an otherwise magnificent country, disqualifying as well those absurd

⁶ S. Nadler (2017. September 12) “How to Fix American Stupidity”. *Time* <https://time.com/4937675/how-to-fix-american-stupidity/>

⁷ F. Fernández-Armesto. (2014). *Our America: A Hispanic History of the United States*. New York: W.W. Norton and Co., n.p.

⁸ F. Fernández-Armesto. (2014). *Our America: A Hispanic History of the United States*. New York: W.W. Norton and Co., n.p.

statements and incongruous chronologies that disguise so many real people and conceal events that have contributed to the development of the nation.

The issue, as I see it, is rooted in the concept of historical truth as understood by U.S. historians and educators. Having been formed in an ideological environment that proposes prejudiced narratives as truth, these people have mechanically and instinctively endeavoured to accommodate the political imperatives of a prodigious national project. As such, their “truth” has a task: that of facilitating the “appropriate” interpretation of a present wherein the United States, in the unrelenting pursuit of its Manifest Destiny, is the world’s major superpower. Interpretations like this are apt to be subjective, carrying with them a generic, compelling point of view intended to create the image of a “standard” American, representative of a defined group whose virtues (and ethnic background) enabled the remarkable growth of “American” power, a standard individual that is the inheritor of an intrinsic set of values and traits that justify our hegemony.

So, a “truth” like historical truth, divorced as it is from the bygone context that generated it, is in a synergetic relationship with those who produce and consume it. As such, the process of generating that truth and then conveying it does not take place in an ideological vacuum, but rather it is directed towards an objective that is in harmony with the requirements of a national project called the United States of America. Someone like Ocasio-Cortez, because her ethnic background has never been palatable to the framers of the ideology that generates that “truth,” can be portrayed as alien to the national project and be told to return to “her country”. After all, nearly half of the U.S. population is unaware that Puerto Rico is part of the United States and that Puerto Ricans are US citizens.⁹ So the suggestion that the congresswoman should leave “our country” actually makes sense to many people: It is as if our education and our historical narratives have *prepared* us for ignorance so that we can accept suggestions that advance the fundamental ideology of the sectarian national project. And this is a national project that has as its ultimate objective the strengthening of the status quo, traditionally labelled as “American democracy”. So preparing the young to accept the values of that ideology can displace one of the essential requisites of education, which is that of supplying students with the unsanitised content upon which they might build knowledge that is not ideologised. In the December 6, 2011 piece in *Time* magazine, Jon Schnur comments on what he believes is one of the truly critical tasks incumbent upon our schools: “...schools should help students acquire the knowledge and skills needed to become active participants in American democracy”.¹⁰ While we can understand Schnur’s well-meaning attitude, we must also keep in mind that at present too many active participants in American democracy are ignorant of the status of Puerto Rico, do not know about the Big Bang, consider Darwin an atheist liar (if they’ve even heard of him), deem Global Warming to be an anti-American hoax, accept that people that don’t toe the line, like the four congresswomen, should go back to “their” country, and get the derisory option of voting (2016) for one of only two sanctioned (and largely unpalatable) candidates for president, an option that was deemed tragically inadequate by a considerable part of the country’s population.¹¹ Moreover, such political

⁹ Dropp, K and Nyhan, B. (2017, Sept. 26). Nearly Half of Americans Don’t Know Puerto Ricans Are Fellow Citizens. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/26/upshot/nearly-half-of-americans-dont-know-people-in-puerto-ricans-are-fellow-citizens.html>

¹⁰ Schnur, J. (2011, December 6). Can We Teach Kids to Be Good Citizens? *Time*. <http://ideas.time.com/2011/12/06/can-we-teach-kids-to-be-good-citizens/>

¹¹ “Nearly 18 million voters cast ballots this election despite believing that neither Donald Trump nor Hillary Clinton were qualified to be president”. In Heath, D. and Agiesta, J. (2016, November 11) How voters who found both candidates unfit broke. *CNN*. Retrieved from <https://www.cnn.com/2016/11/11/politics/hillary-clinton-donald-trump-voters-dislike/index.htm>

manipulation of knowledge and disregard for content might explain the dismal ignorance of facts that is rampant among us. After all, we've been prepared to be active participants in American democracy, to aptly perform a guided political role, and *that* is what matters most. So, because there is a dogmatic political *purpose* behind the manner in which our dominant ideology interprets the past and imposes a subjective evaluation on its events, inexpedient facts can be devalued or even erased. It follows that supervised ignorance needs to be a critical part of the process of "culturing" citizens into the political system.

Because the conveyance of knowledge has political purpose, events that took place at a particular time and place in the past must assume the form of Petri dishes for culturing insights and preconceptions that can evolve into "historical truths". If we fail to recognise that historical "truth" is in fact the narrative truth of historians who've filtered the raw material of past events through their ideologies and their social, ethnic, class and national identity, we will also fail to see how historical truth is an allegory that, *re ipsa*, conveys alleged "truths" and conventional generalisations about the past that make it relevant to ideological environments in the present. If in future we in the United States come to discern these limitations, we will be in a better position to correct historical prejudices and rectify the way in which we, a well-informed public, process the wealth of information available to us.

I suggest that we begin that process by rescuing three pigs and some goats from the hidden files of U.S. history. The pigs might even provide an adjective of nationality for us.

How does Swineans sound?

Reference

- Appiah, K. A. (2018). *The lies that bind: Rethinking identity*. [E-reader Version]. Retrieved from [https://books.google.com/books?id=5786DwAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=K.+A.+Appiah.+\(2018\).+The+Lies+that+Bind:+Rethinking+Identity&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwi3wv_K_aPkAhUn11kKHQKsC9EQwUwAHoECAMQBQ#v=onepage&q=K.%20A.%20Appiah.%20\(2018\).%20The%20Lies%20that%20Bind%3A%20Rethinking%20Identity&f=false](https://books.google.com/books?id=5786DwAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=K.+A.+Appiah.+(2018).+The+Lies+that+Bind:+Rethinking+Identity&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwi3wv_K_aPkAhUn11kKHQKsC9EQwUwAHoECAMQBQ#v=onepage&q=K.%20A.%20Appiah.%20(2018).%20The%20Lies%20that%20Bind%3A%20Rethinking%20Identity&f=false)
- Boston, R. (12 February, 2019). How many Americans reject evolution? The answer may surprise you. *Wall of Separation Blog*. Retrieved from <https://www.au.org/blogs/wall-of-separation/how-many-americans-reject-evolution-the-answer-may-surprise-you>
- Dropp, K and Nyhan, B. (2017, September 26). Nearly half of Americans don't know Puerto Ricans are fellow citizens. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/26/upshot/nearly-half-of-americans-dont-know-people-in-puerto-ricoans-are-fellow-citizens.html>
- Fernández-Armesto, F. (2014). *Our America: A Hispanic history of the United States*. [E-reader Version]. Retrieved from https://books.google.com/books?id=WFUIAgAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=our+america+armesto&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwia-Mmx_aPkAhWExFkKHGUDRsQ6AEwAHoECAUQA#v=onepage&q=our%20america%20armesto&f=false
- Heath, D. & Agiesta, J. (2016, November 11) How voters who found both candidates unfit broke. *CNN*. Retrieved from <https://www.cnn.com/2016/11/11/politics/hillary-clinton-donald-trump-voters-dislike/index.html>
- Nadler, S. (2017, September 12) How to fix American stupidity. *Time*. Retrieved from <https://time.com/4937675/how-to-fix-american-stupidity/>
- Neuman, S. (2014, February 14). 1 in 4 Americans think the Sun goes around the Earth. *National Public Radio*. Retrieved from <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2014/02/14/277058739/1-in-4-americans-think-the-sun-goes-around-the-earth-survey-says>
- Schnur, J. (2011, December 6). Can we teach kids to be good citizens? *Time*. Retrieved from <http://ideas.time.com/2011/12/06/can-we-teach-kids-to-be-good-citizens/>