
United States: That Can't Happen Here

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Literature, like history, always comes in handy when reflecting on current political processes. It stimulates the imagination, encourages interest, provides frames of reference and, at times, anticipates the visions provided by social science studies. In this sense, it's worth remembering that, in 1935, the first American intellectual to win the Nobel Prize in Literature, Sinclair Lewis, wrote a novel ironically titled *It Can't Happen Here*, in which he outlined the possible rise of fascism in the United States. The narrative was set, in the style of political satire, in an imaginary scene in that country during the crisis of the so-called Great Depression, in the 1930s, in which Franklin Delano Roosevelt lost the presidential elections and the candidate of a totalitarian party, through a populist and demagogic speech that appealed to the ideals of the nation, assumed power at a crucial moment in the history of the 20th century. The initial context of said president's government had not yet exhibited the results of the project known as the New Deal, which would overcome the deep capitalist economic crisis and articulate a broad coalition of support. Roosevelt was attacked internally by the conservative and extreme right sectors, while a fascist movement emerged in Europe.

Although certain anticipations of fascism were already recorded previously in North American literature, such as in Jack London's dystopian novel *The Iron Heel*, published in 1908, and which was later raised with concern by several exponents of social thought, such as the sociologist Theodor Adorno in *The Authoritarian Personality* and the political scientist Bertram Gross in *Friendly Fascism*, in the face of palpable trends in the political culture of the United States - which were affirmed, respectively, after the Second World War and during the so-called Conservative Revolution or "Reagan Era"-, Lewis's work is the one that has best summarized the cultural harvest of dark passages in which values and actions of a reactionary nature have flourished, which distanced the nation from its democratic traditions. The domestic and international North American context, as stated, was fertile ground for the deployment of such a process and for the consequent unrest, which early appeared in intellectual circles.

Sometimes it's surprising how much space such positions find in the United States, since the version that has prevailed in the world about that country is the one that presents it as a symbol, par excellence, of democracy and freedom, where it reigns the bourgeois liberal thinking. Strictly speaking, the historical particularities that lead to the formation of the North American nation explain the fact that the political debate there actually takes place within a

very narrow ideological framework, in the sense of the great kinship between liberalism and conservatism. Unlike what had happened in Europe, where they were opposite ideological expressions, due to a past based on the clash of ideas born with the bourgeois revolutions, which raised themes such as democracy and the republic, in the United States there was no such thing as Medieval absolutism and the monarchy at the time of English colonization. There was no feudal society to leave behind, but a new world, with large virgin territories to conquer and an indigenous population to dominate. So, from the beginning of what would be the first modern nation, a social, economic, political and cultural structure inherent to nascent capitalism was implemented, so conservatism was born within a liberal matrix, instead of being articulated as an opposing ideological tendency. For this reason, the image with which the United States is identified in the world, as a paradigm of liberalism, is more a myth than reality.

On the one hand, there's a historical basis, from which the country has been the scene of radical right tendencies, with marked political extremism, visible from the Ku-Klux-Klan, the National Rifle Association, the nativist movement, the southern populism, fascist-oriented groups, such as the "skinheads," to the organizations of the so-called "new" right and evangelical religious Protestantism, in the 1980s, and the Tea Party, in the 2010's. On the other hand, it happens that, in its evolution over the last forty years, the United States has ceased to be the country that North Americans believed it to be. The contradictions in which it has lived and lives today, in ideological and partisan terms, can no longer be sustained or expressed by simple rhetoric. They escape traditional discursive manipulation (media, government, politics) and place the system before dilemmas that the parties, with their rivalries, are not able to face, and that do not crystallize into a new national consensus. The 2024 electoral process and those that preceded it in the current century fit into a similar picture. The importance of the matter makes it advisable to retain, even briefly, that trajectory.

The Republican victory in the 2016 race, when Donald Trump was elected president of the United States, showed the possibility that conservative, right-wing ideas and proposals would find space -- in a context of cultural crisis, as occurred in the 1980s--, in the political system and civil society in that country. Even though they do not constitute a practice and an institutionality like those that accompany the historical expressions of European and Latin American fascism, from an ideological point of view they form a vision of the world and an eventual political project with many points of contact. The most worrying thing is the resonance that Trump's ideas retain, which arouse sympathy and support in many social segments.

For many, the conservative rise unfolding in the United States and Trump's victory in 2016 was something similar to Sinclair Lewis's ironic recognition: that could not happen there, in the realm of liberal democracy. However, the initial surprise that the Republican victory entailed was very relative, to the extent that, although the vast majority of analyses, forecasts and opinion polls pointed with high percentages of certainty towards the Democratic victory of Hillary Clinton, there was an objective framework of conditions and factors - often insufficiently weighted, if not ignored -, which made it possible to predict Democratic defeat and the Republican return to the White House. This background had and has to do with the crisis that has defined North American society for four decades. It has not only kept itself, in the midst of partial recoveries - especially in the economic, propaganda and technological-military spheres, but it has deepened between intermittencies and ups and downs, in the cultural, political and ideological ground. In a lucid and well-known analysis, Michael Moore anticipated the result of November 2016 presidential election. Several months earlier, in July, he had already published an eloquent work predicting Trump's victory.

It's convenient to keep in mind, given the importance that Trump's figure and possibilities as a presidential candidate project a few months before the contest next November, some outstanding elements in those circumstances, which led him to become the president of the most powerful nation in the world. First of all, it's useful to remember that he was elected by the majority vote of the Electoral College, which did not coincide with the result of the popular vote, which is explainable by the peculiarities of the North American political system. If the reader would like more elements on the latter, they could consider reading or rereading, if applicable, "Understanding the United States and imperialism: a model to assemble" and "The puzzle: the United States between crises and elections." , articles previously published by Cubasí.

Trump represented an unprecedented style in the electoral processes in the United States. His demagogic speech promised to empower, with a protectionist spirit, the capitalist businessman and the worker with poor employment, with which he mobilized a significant base of electoral support, adding to the unemployed and segments affected by the policies developed by the economic policies driven by neoliberal globalization, including those of Obama. He declared persona non grata those who did not meet the stereotypical characteristics that Hollywood cinema, graphic cartoons and television serials have created around the American family: white, middle class, disciplined, individualistic, protestant. Thus, he achieved the sympathy and support of racist sectors, by fueling their

discriminatory feelings, especially against Latin American immigrants, especially Mexicans, and Arabs.

The crystallization of Trump as a Republican pre-candidate and his subsequent development until his nomination as a candidate and election as President would constitute a political phenomenon that emerges from a crisis that transcends that of the political parties in the United States. Strictly speaking, Trump was not a rare bird, something unusual, without ignoring his eccentricities, histrionics and apparent madness. There were conditions that explained its appearance and resonance, related to structural changes and to that hidden side of North American society, which, although transformed, remains essentially white, racist, with a sense of ethnic and religious superiority, and a part of which had felt affected and forgotten. Trump came from a phenomenon with antecedents from the times of the 1960s and 1970s, when what would be known as the “new” right emerged and which later became more and more concretized in what was reflected in the neoconservative movement that flourished in the 1980s, and in the 21st century in the Tea Party.

In the context of the double Obama Administration, the resentment of that sector, made up of white, adult people, who were hit by the 2008 crisis and its aftermath, identified as “blue collar” workers, had deepened; these are individuals with low educational levels, who lost their homes, their jobs, whose problems were not resolved or attended to by the Democratic government. Trump relied on that situation and on that social base, he created scapegoats and managed, with skill, to manipulate and capture the support and vote of that sector. The enthusiastic support of misogynists and white supremacists was assured, who did not tolerate the possibility of having a woman as president (displacing the figure of Hillary Clinton), after two terms of a man with black skin (whom Trump himself “accused” for years after being born in Kenya), and also from those who are in favor of total deregulation of gun ownership – the support of the powerful National Rifle Association was key – and against the decriminalization of abortion.

Although the result of the 2020 elections confirmed how divided North American society was, in the sense that although the popular decision at the polls favored Biden, a considerable number of more than seventy million votes showed sympathy for Trump. Along with it, there was no less notable activism from far-right sectors, gathered around the so-called hate groups, which mobilized immediately, and won public spaces through massive demonstrations in the following weeks, encouraged by the rhetoric of Trump, still president, before leaving the White House. The volatile situation caused by Trump's intransigent reaction - refusing to accept the results, calling for protest actions, prosecuting the established procedure, promoting civil disobedience and stimulating the subsequent assault on the Capitol -, challenging order, governability and thereby deepening the crisis of legitimacy that was already foreshadowed, laid bare the limits of democracy in the United States.

Although the meaning of such events is unquestionable, the most important thing, which justifies the fact that attention is still devoted to the phenomenon, is that the recognition of the seriousness of what happened does not translate into a unanimous reaction in North American society, of rejection towards the figure of Trump and what he symbolizes, above his personal figure. What's disturbing is the lack of memory that surfaces in social awareness, in political culture, in public opinion, in civil society. The popularity achieved and kept by Trump, the fact that the image remains in subjectivity that what so-called Trumpism represents is an alternative, as a national project, reveals the viability of an irrationalist philosophical worldview, of a fascist political proclivity with a dangerous capacity to attract people throughout the country, concomitant with the definitive exhaustion of the old liberal tradition. The founding values of the nation are being left behind. There's no dynamism, capable and interested, in recovering the dynamism that makes that flag its own. Neither in the Democratic Party, nor in emerging groups in the social movement, nor in intellectual and academic circles. Nor outstanding individual leadership, with charismatic resonance. It seems as if the shielding of the mechanisms of domination that protect the power elite limits - in a deeply polarized society between wealth and poverty, with superlative levels of class exploitation - the possibility of contrasting, rebellious trends to thrive, with effective organizational expressions of emancipatory, progressive, revolutionary social subjectivity.

The satirical view of Sinclair Lewis's novel is absolutely valid, as a tool for reflection in the light of the present. Above all, because his warning must be understood beyond what may result from the 2024 elections. What's happening there is nothing more than a symptom of the profound decadence of American society whose political orientation, visualized by Lenin from very early, is that of the full turn to reaction. It's clear that the growing contradictions of capitalism in the imperialist era will continue in the long term, accentuating such decadence, along with the decomposition and parasitism of a system in total crisis, but armored by powerful ideological and repressive apparatuses.

