

Book reviews

Reviewer [George Simons](#), SIETAR member
[Liliana Cantu Licòn](#), SIETAR member

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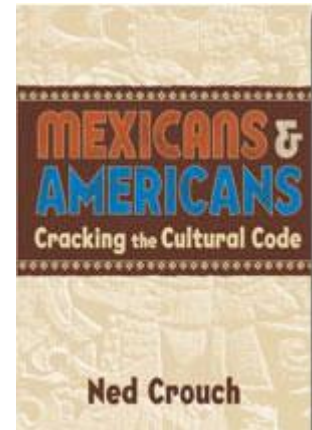
Author Ned Crouch

Title Mexicans and Americans, Cracking the Cultural Code

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George: Ned Crouch has written a book about the people next door just as some his family members are building a fence to keep them out of the garden. It is a book essentially about doing business together. US lawmakers consider making it a felony to be illegally in the US while a million people take to the streets to protest. It seems a bit bizarre for us to be reviewing this book in such a context. What do you make of the current US schizophrenia about Mexico?

Liliana: I believe that the relationship of our countries has always had a very delicate balance; one that has tilted in different directions in many occasions. This is only comprehensible between two countries that are as different and as close as Mexico and the US.

The current happenings, I believe, are only the result of years of economic and politic factors in Mexico that make the most needy try to find a better life across the border, and years of the Latin American “minority” slowly becoming one third of the US population in very specific and controversial social and working conditions. But I am glad that we have the opportunity to review this book and show a different face of the US-Mexico relationship, as Crouch focuses on: that of business partners.

George: In recent months, when people ask me where I am from, at least in casual conversations, I have been responding with Mexico ocupado. Then I explain away their bewilderment by explaining that I mean California. As Manifest Destiny has turned into contemporary empire building as the agenda of the neo-con right in the USA, I make this mild sort of protest to say that we don’t all think that way. Whether this is useful or not, I don’t know, but one of Ned Crouch’s intentions in “cracking the cultural code that separates us has a lot to do with presenting the reader with hard cultural realities in stories and reflections that truly challenge us if we are to take each other seriously and respectfully.

Liliana: That is one of the things I enjoyed the most about this book. Crouch really makes a point in showing Mexico from the INSIDE, so it is not a visit to the zoo (if you excuse the comparison): “Here are the Mexicans”, “Here is how they behave”, “Look how exotic”. He rather almost turns the mirror around and brings up the US American behaviors and attitudes

that typically can prevent them from really understanding a culture that has a “million-years-old” complexity.

George: Crouch is talking to US folk in very US language most of the time in this book. His words are high context and addressed to his own. Moreover, a lot of this book is about how differences between Mexican and US culture are embodied in language. Given his strong Foreign Service background, I am guessing that Crouch grew up in an environment where strategic terminology was a part of everyday conversation. While sports and military expressions are rife among US business people, I have to say that I was a bit put off by their frequency in this book, e.g., “cracking the code,” “weapons,” “war stories,” and on and on. He defines culture as something that “binds people together in common defense,” and enables them to “identify “friend and foe.” For me despite the author’s intention of bridging cultures, or at least making things work between us, there seems to be an antagonistic assumption about the relationship that is embedded in a kind of cultural conflict. For example, he says, “When you are out there in the trenches, you won’t be dealing with cultural differences one at a time. They’ll be coming with you as combination punches.” Maybe he feels that US business people need to be talked to in this way to get the message. I am curious as to how the language and tone of the book strikes you?

Liliana: I did notice Crouch addresses his fellow country members in a way, that, well, no Mexican would ever would, even though we would love to be able to. But, after all, “we are agreeable”, “we don’t want to offend”. So it is nice to find a book that tells what a Mexican would like to tell a US American in a way a US American will get it. Because chances are a Mexican would never dare to tell it so candidly and upfront.

I also liked the analysis Crouch makes on languages and their characteristics on Chapter 5. At some point I was asking myself “What does French have to do with Mexico and the US?”, but after a while, I got into the analysis and found it extremely interesting.

George: Having talked a bit about the context and the medium of the message, and worried that the medium might be the message, it is obvious that Crouch has a lot of experience and insights to share with his US family. I think it stands above a lot of books of this kind by the quality of the experiences and stories that it conveys. A quick look at the table of contents reveals that it is structured strictly along the lines of the Hall, Hofstede, Trompenaars et al., i.e., the Western intercultural boilerplate, context, time, space, directness, hierarchy, group vs. individual, etc. Yet one has the impression that it is a story book with ample morals to draw from the experience of the protagonists and of the story teller himself. There seem to be enough tales for their meaning to sink in. What I mean is that we get not only cultural data about each other’s tendencies, but it is delivered with enough human impact to enable us to both consult our own feelings and examine our US attitudes.

Liliana: I agree. I like that, even when an interculturalist may identify the formal structure based on the pillars of our field, the average person will not need to know the intercultural jargon or concepts to understand each chapter. And each example of the MANY, MANY this book contains, makes a clear point to the subject at hand. And every situation will be one that the average US American doing business in Mexico will be able to relate to at one point or another.

Yet, and to keep it appealing to the US American practical eye, the book is FULL of practical advice that, while sometimes maybe a bit too oversimplified, will definitely work as a starting

point and a safe line for the confused businessman or for someone that needs a quick recipe for immediate success.

As a Mexican, I personally felt naked on the chapter about contextuality and building relationships (Chapter 12). I once had a Spanish consultant comment after a book that the theory on cultural dimensions we had just covered had explained his life to him in one hour. Something similar happened to me, throughout Crouch's book, but especially in this chapter. Would it be, as Hall said, that "what [culture] hides, it hides best from its own participants"? No doubt about it. But it is definitely an interest experience to see your culture from the eyes of someone else; someone with the adequate experience, intercultural knowledge and desire to go to the root of things while keeping it simple to the average mind. I believe Ned Crouch successfully fulfills the role of those eyes, and as a Mexican and an interculturalist, I find this book highly recommendable for the US American about to embark in business relationships in Mexico.