A Contra corriente

Una revista de historia social y literatura de América Latina

A Contra corriente

A Journal on Social History and Literature in Latin America

Vol. 6, No. 3, Spring 2009, 314-320

www.ncsu.edu/project/acontracorriente

Review/Reseña

Julian Go, *American Empire and the Politics of Meaning: Elite Political Cultures in the Philippines and Puerto Rico during U.S. Colonialism*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008.

The Political Cultures of Empire

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The present moment of U.S. intervention in the Middle East has elicited many in academic, policy-oriented, and popular circles to debate about the feasibility of bridging the "deep cultural divergence" between supposedly a Christian-based but secular, democratic U.S. and the religious conservatism ruling the Islamic world. Though problematic and wrong at too many levels, this line of conversation reveals once again the understanding that imperial intrusion and subsequent imperial governance always rest upon the possibility of inducing multiple forms of cultural transformation. Sociologist Julian Go takes on the task of investigating culture as a terrain and tool of colonial endeavors. He does so by exploring an earlier moment in U.S. imperialism: the immediate years after the 1898 incorporation of the Philippines and Puerto Rico to the U.S. constellation of territories and possessions. Go effectively distills the most relevant scholarly contributions of Post-Colonial Studies and Cultural Anthropology to argue, particularly to audiences in the social sciences, that the colonial enterprise not only entailed but also was constituted by cultural negotiations. To explore this cultural dimension, the author focuses on the "tutelary" form of U.S. colonial governance in the Philippines and Puerto Rico to uncover the signs and symbols officials deployed to integrate locals into the colonial project and how the latter made sense of these challenging processes. "Tutelage" signifies the manner in which U.S. officials framed the colonial project, one in which "occupation would itself serve as a 'school of politics' to turn Puerto Ricans and Filipinos into 'truly American types'" (2). While we should remember that these schooling practices permeated other imperial formations (e.g. the late nineteenth-century Spanish empire), U.S. political leaders and officials construed the "educational" impulse as the one attribute that differentiated their military, economic, and political intrusions from an imperialist endeavor.

Redefining Culture

If the forging of an empire is a cultural project, what are the power struggles and negotiations that shape political culture and enable imperial domination? To get at some answers, a more flexible understanding of culture is in order. In an attempt to bring nuance to the structural-functionalist and instrumentalist approaches explaining cultural change, the author defines culture as a semiotic system-in-practice. Go understands culture as a wide array of classificatory schemes, scripts, narratives, key "scenarios," and cognitive lenses individuals employ to make sense of their world (17). Everyday experiences validate one or another scheme, "institutionalizing" them through daily practice as cultural recourses. Because the world—the events, people, things, and happenings—are beyond one person's control, individuals are constantly challenged to discard old, produce new, and/or expand existing meanings and models. Thus, culture is an incoherent but nevertheless systematic array of frames through which to interpret the reality outside the self (17). The comparative analysis of political elites in Puerto Rico and the Philippines as they live the transition from Spanish to U.S. imperial rule allows our author to trace a few of the cultural transformations prompted by the 1898 War and the tutelary approach to imperial domination. Despite the geographic, cultural, and demographic differences, Go contends these political elites underwent parallel class and intellectual formations under Spain and continued as well-defined political cohorts until the 1910s. Most importantly, the elites in both locales navigated analogous institutional and legal arrangements implemented by the U.S. regime. While elites in both sites initially domesticated the tenets of tutelary governance, at a later moment Puerto Ricans and Filipinos diverged in their modes of understanding and thus engaging imperial rule. In this context, processes of domestication mean that political elites in the new possessions took on U.S. officials' words and practices, but infused them with their own meanings. In other words, existing cultural schemas formed through dealings with and against Spain shaped the manner in which Filipinos and Puerto Ricans symbolically consumed the new U.S. mechanisms of rule.

An important contribution of this book is the extensive genealogy Go offers of key ideological constructs in the political culture of the governing classes in the U.S., the Philippines, and Puerto Rico. In the case of the U.S., imperial rule had as a main goal the constitution of liberal democratic subjects through a form of politics (i.e. tutelage) that borrowed from a global ethos of reformism, Lamarckian understandings of race, and the exponential development of the social sciences, particularly public administration and government sciences (27-34). These ideological formations informed imperial officials' effective deployment in the colonies of a rhetoric of legal rationality, efficiency, fairness in procedures, and non-partisanship. In the case of Puerto Rico, the author analyzes the meanings behind the most commonly deployed political vocabulary among elites. To him, Puerto Rican politicians' concepts of *autonomía*, *patria*, *sociedad*, and *democracia* referred to self-government, but over a hierarchically organized society—held together by codes of obligation, honor, mutual dependence, and paternalistic affection—in which the illiterate masses uncritically followed enlightened leaders (65-76). Similarly, Filipino elite adhered to a hierarchical society organized through patron-client relations. Concepts such as reciprocity and *razón* articulated the principles and practices of mutual help, exchange, and prudent judgment that secured peoples' support of a Hispanic-educated political elite (94-108). Go argues that Puerto Rican and Filipino elite visions of self-government contrasted with those in the U.S., where self-government had begun to signify a popular governance system that rejected the preeminence of few self-interested elites (39-45).

Cultural Transformations

From the beginning, Puerto Ricans and Filipino elites employed a political language that resonated with that of U.S. officials and welcomed changes in legal matters—especially at the municipal level—as well as infrastructural, social, and economic development projects. At first glance, it appeared that these political classes were on board with the main tenets of the new imperial regime. However, Go argues that a closer look at political party organization, practices in municipal administration, electoral dynamics, and the written production of politicians/intellectuals reveals that no substantial cultural transformation had taken place in the early years. The political and economic arrangements elicited by new rulers only served to reproduce previous forms of organization: a vast network of socio-political relations based on paternalism, patron-client relations, and partisanship. U.S. observers at the time described each of these two sites as a world of rampant corruption that contradicted the key principles of liberal democracy imperial rulers sought to construe. But Go contends that transformations did begin to occur just few years after the 1898 take-over.

In Puerto Rico, the re-orientation of the economy in particular eroded the political elite's capability to sustain and mobilize their clientelist networks. Their authority was seriously diminished too when U.S. officials were understood to favor the minority party. In addition, the strategies they had previously employed to negotiate with Spanish administrators did not render positive results. Elites' failed attempts to get U.S. officials to meet their demands and the simultaneous changes in the political, social, and economic fields—phenomena the author identifies as recurrent and convergent recalcitrance—forced political elites to seek new modalities of engagement (138-139; 188). The author reads Puerto Rican politicians' eager study of key U.S. political figures and history as their mode of learning the new political ethos. Puerto Rican leaders' drafting of new plans for administrative re-organization following models implemented within the U.S. nation-state borders is understood here as a sign of cultural transformation. The Philippines also experienced cultural changes, but not the profound transformations the author observes in Puerto Rico (190). Discursive analysis of letters and petitions from Filipino elites to U.S. officials suggests that after years under tutelage they continued understanding governance as the elite leading the masses, thus rejecting U.S. institutional models. While there were significant context changes, Filipino elite did not suffer the dislocations Puerto Ricans faced thus enabling them to reproduce in innovative ways and expand their long-standing socio-political formations. In other words, Filipino elite resisted the principles of liberal democratic governance and remained anchored in patron-client modalities. They extended those patron-client networks from the local to the national level and integrated new actors into their intricate web of reciprocity obligations (254).

Future Directions for the Study of Empire

Through the study of cultural transformations, the author seeks to steer social scientists away from conventional analyses of empire that privilege institutions and/or highlight the unavoidable reach of imperial control. In here, Go looks at imperial governance as a more open-ended process of contestation between imperial officials and local political leaders, a process in which the latter engaged on their own terms and modified in unpredictable ways. However, without a clear sense of the symbolic and material violence (i.e. war, death, surveillance, dislocation, dispossession, and impoverishment) embedded in U.S. imperial formation, the political elites in the possessions under study here appear, in spite of the author's best effort, as naïve and constrained by their historical socio-political modes of organization. Future studies of this moment of imperial formations may seek to re-conceptualize the multiple stories of corruption/bad administration as well as the various (favorable and unfavorable) claims about and appeals to U.S. officials not as descriptive statements, but as arguments in the midst of a heavily contested race for political power. Similarly, Liberal Democracy may be examined as more than an intrinsically beneficial set of values to be appropriated or rejected. Instead, it comprises varied forms of socio-political and economic organization that recasts sexual, gender, class, and racial hierarchies of power. In the case of Puerto Rico, at least, political elites soon recognized that the U.S. was not distinct from Spain but another imperial order to work with, once again, from within.

Future studies should follow Go's lead in analyzing the various levels of engagement with the tutelage system but by investigating in depth how it resonated with the liberal democratic projects these political leaders had imagined and worked on for decades before 1898 through strategic cross-class, cross-racial alliances. They had envisioned their own tutelary/colonization projects towards the laboring classes—framed under similar discourses of social reform later deployed by U.S. agents—and were not willing to become subjected to similar endeavors but sole leaders or partners in them. For Puerto Ricans, this overlapping in interests among the political upper strata (U.S. agents and Creole politicians, intellectuals, and reform professionals) can begin to unravel the intricate connections that have sustained the colonial relationship for over a century.[1] Finally, I hope future students in Critical Imperial Studies, American Studies, and

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[1] On the nineteenth-century reform projects, see Teresita Martínez Vergne, *Shaping the Discourse on Space: Charity and its Wards in Nineteenth-Century San Juan, Puerto Rico* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999) and Eileen J. Suárez Findlay, *Imposing Decency: The Politics of Sexuality and Race in Puerto Rico, 1870-1920* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999).

Latin American Studies undertake, like Go has done, comparative work on localities apparently drastically different. Processes of imperial formation do connect dissimilar peoples and spaces through complex networks of circulation. We have to be careful, however, not to underestimate the different (though shifting) "positionalities" specific collectivities and locations occupy within imperial imaginations, which infuse distinct meanings to the otherwise analog institutions ruling over them. Regardless of these few limitations, I believe all students of imperial formations should seriously engage Go's text as he leads us toward promising and productive lines of inquiry.