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## The Signs of Empire

Julian Go's *American Empire and the Politics of Meaning* presents an intriguing comparison of U.S. tutelary colonialism as the local elite men of Puerto Rico and the Philippines experienced it. Of particular interest for Go is how American occupation affected these nations' respective political cultures. To this end, he asks first about the meanings behind each group's pre-existing political tropes. Subsequently, he considers why the application of such American tropes as legitimacy by both the Puerto Ricans and the Filipinos conveyed different meanings, despite their having been exposed to the same U.S. colonization policies. While he acknowledges certain commonalities and differences between these two groups, including Spanish rule and the instance of revolution, Go looks to the contemporaneous system of tropes, values, and traditions used by each group in the daily functioning of their societies for his answers. Taking such systems as his definition of culture, he argues that each colony's male elite accepted certain meanings, practices, and tropes imparted by U.S. officials in accordance with their surrounding socioeconomic and political situations. As those situations changed, as it did in Puerto Rico after a devastating hurricane, their incorporation of the American cultural system also changed. Whereas most imperial studies fail to consider the strength of local culture, either contemporaneous or historic, Go's original perspective allows him to illustrate how elites' past experiences, hitherto political and socioeconomic stability, and their political ambitions, played a large role in determining whether or not they adopted the concepts and tropes of U.S. political practices.

To develop his argument, Go divides his book into two parts. In the first, he focuses on the meanings, signs, and practices behind each group's cultural schemas. Beginning with the Americans, chapter 1 delineates their belief that a population is best guided or taught through the manipulation of their common culture. Not surprisingly, their overriding concern was to normalize amongst each colony's leading male citizens the notion that American tutelage was the first step toward realizing their political objectives. This allows Go to deftly move the processes of cultural change and negotiation to the center of his political analysis. Consequently, the succeeding chapters, which examine how the male elite of Puerto Rico and the Philippines received U.S. cultural systems, easily follow. In both cases, Go argues that the elite accepted, and sometimes even welcomed, American occupation and its attendant signs because they already had a definition and vision of self-government, developed during Spanish rule, upon which they could draw. Using familiar concepts both groups gave foreign tropes local meaning, even if they were not the meanings U.S. officials had intended to impart. Subsequently, as the leading men of each colony became increasingly comfortable with U.S. tutelary culture, they each began predicting how occupation would play out and what they could expect.

In the second half of *American Empire*, Go illustrates how American occupation led not only to the reproduction of familiar meanings under different tropes, but also helped change the meanings behind them, thus altering the practice of local political systems. Using the concepts of recalcitrance and revalidation, the crux of his argument lies in the notion that cultural meaning changes as the relationship between pre-existing schemas and the larger surrounding context changes. In Puerto Rico, a natural disaster and subsequent economic downturn weakened the male elite's long-established patron-client relationships. Additionally, the creation of a minority party by American officials challenged Puerto Rican elites' expectation that self-government would give them collectively absolute power. Therefore, the longer Amer-

ican occupation lasted, the greater the disconnect between Puerto Rican elites' schemas and their surrounding socioeconomic context. This led the men to let go of their former notions of self-government by embracing American ideals of party politics, free and fair elections, and disinterested leadership.

In the Philippines, however, the elites' economic resources remained constant, allowing them to maintain their patron-client power structure. Moreover, patronage had always been allocated to individual land owners; unlike Puerto Rican elite, the Filipinos did not develop ties of allegiance to their fellow landowners and political leaders. Consequently, when the Americans developed a system of party politics, it was not perceived as a direct threat to their traditional power base. This meant that the Filipinos did not perceive any reason to create anew the familiar meanings they had initially used to understand U.S. officials' signs. Instead, they merely expanded their cultural systems by adding various new signs imposed throughout occupation.

The methodology used in *American Empire* is complex and draws on divergent approaches. First, it is a comparative analysis. Throughout, Go uses the tools of comparison and contrast to structure the evidence offered by the processes of cultural change and negotiation in each colony. In chapters 6 and 7 for instance, he compares each group's reception of ballots, elections, and transparency. In Puerto Rico, the elite lost their capacity to provide clients, or voters, with traditional forms of support or rewards. As a result, they turned to political transparency and honesty to win voters' favor. In the Philippines, where the elite retained their ability to offer financial incentives to clients/voters, "corruption" continued. As this example also demonstrates, both case studies are well supported as Go draws extensively on statistics, local newspapers, published speeches, and public writings in particular, as well as the letters and dispatches sent by such officials as Cameron Forbes. When taken together, the sources and comparative method allow Go to demonstrate first, how the elite in both colonies imbued U.S. signs with familiar meanings, thereby reproducing their cultural systems. Second, and perhaps more importantly, the rhetorical sources allow Go to highlight how the Puerto Rican and Filipino elite perceived the relevance of both their schemas and those imparted by U.S. officials. Because he places much emphasis on both Puerto Rican and Filipino self-recognition, the use of elites' speeches and writings provides Go with a particularly strong body of evidence from which to plot when alterations began to occur.

The second major tenet of Go's methodology involves the question of culture itself. Behind his definition of culture as "semiotic system-in-practice," the main assumption is that such systems have an internal support structure provided by contrasting signs found within the general societal structure (p. 12). A primary function of a cultural system is to help its subscribers maintain the integrity of their respective practices and meanings as they navigate through their daily context. In the case of Puerto Rico and the Philippines, the context is American occupation, and it was either traditional power structures or the socioeconomic context that changed, or, as was the case in Puerto Rico, a combination of both. By incorporating into his theory of culture the idea that it is both a function and a product of a larger context, he is able to plot why cultural change occurred, thus completing his comparative analysis that first illustrated when change took place.

Despite the strength of his analysis, Go's notion of culture as a semiotic system-in-practice does present some theoretical challenges. When discussing the processes of recalcitrance and validation throughout the second half of his book, it seems that Go relies too heavily on neat divisions of national and class lines. Scholars including Ann Laura Stoler have demonstrated how the mixing together of people and world-views previously unknown resulted in altered or novel social categories.[1] Consequently, during events like colonization, labels of class, nationality, and race gained new or modified connotations, which caused them to become increasingly ambiguous and unstable. Go, however, relies on unequivocal conceptions of class that retain their grounding in property ownership and political titles. Moreover, even though each colony's men witnessed Spanish rule and American acquisition, articulated their changing conceptions of international place, and altered the political values of their cultural schemas, Go remains confident that their conceptions of racial and national backgrounds remained consistent.[2] Consider the following passage:

By [incorporating tutelage], the elites' categories did not only posit things about tutelage and self-government, they also referred to social relations. Who is to be governed? The "unconscious masses." With whom do patrons exchange, and over whom do they thereby rule? Clients, or "the directed classes." The elites' categories thereby assumed certain social relations and material resources.... The implicit prediction here was that social relations and the resources endowing them would persist [during U.S. occupation] as they had during late Spanish rule, when the elites' patron-client schemas of governance had been institutionalized in the first place. The

related prediction was that the so-called directed classes would act as they should. As long as the elite provided them with resources, the "unconscious masses" would remain subservient clients who … "follow the counsels of the people who are immediately above them." (p. 141)

Given the dynamic and ambiguous nature of race, nationality, and class, amongst other social categories, as well as the apparent connections between such categories and cultural systems that Stoler highlights, it does make the reader wonder about the benefits of maintaining divisions between "social" and "culture" when considering historic change. Instead of approaching this question by trying to contain cultural change within static social categories, as Go seems to have done in American Empire, perhaps it might be more efficient to ask how various structural systems and social categories that comprise everyday life are both a function and a product of culture.

Theoretical issues aside, Go's *American Empire* makes an important contribution to debates over imperialism. First, he acknowledges the decision-making capacities of colonized individuals in both the Philippines and Puerto Rico. Thus, Go accords to these elite men a degree of agency as yet unseen. Secondly, because he explores how local alterations to pre-existing schemas allowed two different communities to incorporate American cultural systems, he is able to historicize both empire and culture. In turn, this also allows Go to offer important suggestions about the fundamental social change caused by American intervention. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, by focusing on local experiences during U.S. occupation, he places American empire in a global framework. That is, Go narrates the story of American intervention from the perspective of non-American individuals. Instead of attempting to internationalize U.S. history by emphasizing novel groups or ideas that Americans encountered abroad, Go turns the table on the debate by delineating how U.S. ideals, signs, and practices affected change and were changed abroad by "others." For these reasons, I would recommend students of imperialism, cultural theory, postcolonial theory, amongst others, consider adding Go's *American Empire* to their reading lists.

Notes

[1]. Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power; Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

[2]. See, for example, Eileen Findlay, *Imposing Decency: The Politics of Sexuality and Race in Puerto Rico, 1870-1920* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999); and Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge.* Also see selected contributions in, Myra Rutherdale, Katie Pickles, eds., *Contact Zones; Aboriginal and Settler Women in Canada's Colonial Past* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2006); and Stoler, *Haunted by Empire: Geographies of Intimacy in North America History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006). For a related discussion, see: Donna Guy, *Sex and Danger in Buenos Aires: Prostitution, Family, and Nation in Argentina* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991).

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