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Negotiating empire: the cultural politics of schools in Puerto Rico, 1898-1952
Amílcar Antonio Barreto
Northeastern University, USA
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Following the Spanish-American War of 1898, and lasting until the Commonwealth era in 1952, Washington policy-makers overtly and proudly endeavoured to forge Puerto Rico’s inhabitants into a new configuration. The classroom was their anvil of choice. Although federal policy-makers’ resolve varied from one administration to the next, their objective remained the same: pupils were enjoined to adopt Anglo-American practices, and norms, and above all to learn English. Although official pronouncements claimed their aim was limited to fomenting bilingualism, few doubted that their true objective was propelling a language shift from Spanish to English – a crucial step in the creation of ‘tropical Yankees’. Newcomer-native daily interactions, coupled with English-language instruction in the classroom, facilitated a culture shift for millions of European immigrants. While hiring native-English-speaking teachers was a simple indulgence on the US mainland it proved highly impractical on a Caribbean island two thousand kilometres distant. Cartographical and budgetary pragmatism compelled US officials to staff the new territory’s schools with the only sensible alternative: island-born, Spanish-dominant teachers. Puerto Rican teachers’ gingerly perfidious response to Uncle Sam’s marching orders is the focus of Del Moral’s book.

As the author expounds, the teachers’ rejoinder to Americanisation directives was resolute, but measured. Teachers were independent political operatives in their own right. They did not blindly follow Washington’s dictates; neither did they marshal their comrades to mutiny. Educators transmutted the classroom into an arena where they ‘challenged and negotiated Americanization ideologies’ on a routine basis. Defensively they recuperated the nineteenth-century idea of the gran familia puertorriqueña (great Puerto Rican family) as their emblem. This trope romanticised an era when the common folk were culturally, spiritually and administratively led by a familiar and Catholic ruler who spoke their language. This idealised familia was headed by a loving patriarch who lorded gently over his wife, children and plantation workers. Armed with a classically Arielist ethos, Puerto Rican teachers contrasted the convivial embrace of the gran familia with the frigid clasp of US-styled white supremacy and racial segregation. While the nation-building project eschewed the Anglo-North American prototype it was still delivered, as Del Moral noted, within the ‘dominant framework of empire’.

Hoisting the banner of island pride accentuated the contrast between islanders and the presiding outlanders. This represented the obverse side of the nation-building coin. Its reverse was inward looking, elitist and regressive. As Del Moral documented, pedagogues from this era fancied themselves as social engineers. Many within their ranks perceived the island’s racially mixed illiterate peasantry as a backward mass pleading for their deliverance from poverty and ignorance. Although their ranks were mostly female by the 1920s, the hierarchy of the Asociación de Maestros de Puerto Rico (AMPR, Puerto Rico Teachers Association) remained male-dominated. And yet, cast in the image of AMPR’s leadership, the exemplary educator-hero was presumed to be white, male and connected to one of the island’s leading families. Consciously the official historic narrative celebrating memorable educators shunned the noteworthy contributions of nineteenth-century
black pedagogues, such as the sibling schoolteachers Celestina and Rafael Cordero Molina. Furthermore, the idealised Puerto Rican was born and resided on the island. Although the number of Puerto Rican migrants to the United States was relatively small until the 1940s, this community’s presence was sufficient to attract the attention of US business and civic leaders who expressed alarm at the arrival of colonials deemed unfit for American education and amalgamation. Teachers, or, more accurately, the upper ranks of the Education Commission, castigated mainland migrants as a non-representative, hybrid, and inferior fraction of the greater Puerto Rican whole. Their salvos in this *kulturkampf* against both the United States and poor, rural, black Puerto Ricans reflects the conservative origins of most early twentieth-century teachers, many of whom descended from downwardly mobile smallholding and artisan families.

Del Moral situated her book within a larger body of scholarship in Puerto Rican studies termed *cultural nationalism*. This corpus focuses on autonomism, historically Puerto Rico’s strongest political movement. Autonomists rejected independence and also dismissed calls for a closer political union between San Juan and the colonial capital. They channelled their creative energies in the arts and limited their political demands to modest petitions for self-rule under the empire’s protection. *Cultural* nationalism is invariably juxtaposed with *political* nationalism. While the island’s partisan arena conflates nationalism with the pursuit of independence, nationalism studies in most other settings acknowledge that these movements oscillate along a spectrum ranging from mild autonomism to separatism or irredentism. As the author documented, ‘Public schoolteachers were not revolutionaries’. Autonomism was the genuine political preference of most teachers. Still, for an unknown minority their moderate nationalist statements more accurately reflected fears of unemployment, persecution or even incarceration. The main point is not lack of attention to the closeted separatists within the ranks of Puerto Rico’s schoolteachers. Rather the critique here focuses on the larger scholarly trend, one that all too frequently unnecessarily downplays, or even ignores, the extraordinarily political nature of so-called cultural nationalism. True, it operated within the framework of the colonial state. And yet it also defied the empire’s core pedagogical injunction: a good and obedient subject shares Washington’s ambition of recasting Puerto Ricans in the image of the superior Anglo-Americans. As Del Moral noted, early twentieth-century teachers responded by proclaiming *nuestra patria* (our homeland) as Puerto Rico and not the United States. Indeed, we should keep in mind that to this day Congress resuscitates these insurrectionary phantoms from the past whenever it debates Puerto Rico’s status.

In contrast to previous studies of this period, Del Moral’s work analyses Americanisation and Puerto Rican education policy from the teachers’ point of view. Her primary sources — education journals, periodicals, newspapers, and other documents in the AMPR archives — conveyed a nuanced story of how teachers articulated their perceptions of *puertorriqueñidad* (Puerto Rican-ness). Still, as the author acknowledged, most of these writings were produced by the leadership. Ultimately, our take on the teachers’ point of view is based on what ‘elite teachers’ thought. We cannot assume that these elites completely reflected their base. Then again, the pitch of their voices is far closer to the classroom teacher than are other archived sources that focus on the perceptions of Washington-appointed bureaucrats. In all likelihood the first-person accounts of these early twentieth-century teachers are secluded in the far recesses of their descendants’ homes. Most, sadly,
were probably discarded. This is not meant as a criticism of Del Moral’s methodology. Rather, the point is to highlight the substantial challenges associated with retrieving the reflections of non-elites in a broad range of historic studies. This leaves researchers, in most cases, with one option: examine the commoner through his/her elites’ lenses.

Del Moral’s book makes significant contributions to our understanding of the unfolding construction of Puerto Rican identity in the context of empire. Although many scholars will likely view this work as one situated squarely in Puerto Rican historiography, in time, I suspect, others will see it as a model for studying the interplay between teachers and the state in mediating the multiple meanings of citizenship and national identity.

Amílcar Antonio Barreto
Northeastern University, USA
a.barreto@neu.edu
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The application of new technologies to military purposes during the American Civil War (1861–1865) and in the Franco-Prussian War (1870–1871) not only changed the way that wars were fought but also influenced the international outlook of spectating non-combatant nations. Trains moved armies quickly; balloonists tracked enemy deployment; the telegraph provided rapid communication; machine guns and fast-loading rifles strengthened defences; and iron-clad warships made older fleets obsolete. In the wake of this military-industrial revolution, imperial nations – including Britain, France and Germany – no longer saw each other as partners in an international brotherhood whose aim was to civilise and bring harmony to the world, but as defenders of colonies already seized and competitors in the hunt for more. The prizes on offer were commercial gain and national glory. Edward Thring, the contemporary headmaster of Uppingham School, was remarkably prophetic when he confided to his diary on 29 October 1870 as the French armies at Metz collapsed before the Prussian onslaught: ‘What will be the next great European temptation and tempter; is it England, with its greed of gain and money self-worship? A new page is turned – what is that page going to be?’ (quoted in George Parkin’s Edward Thring: Life, Diary and Letters, London, 1898, vol. 1, p. 225. See also Malcolm Tozer’s Manliness, 2015, in preparation).

In this period of fundamental ideological shifts, William Gladstone’s liberal socio-imperialist vision of self-government as the eventual goal for all British colonies was cast aside and replaced by the determination of Benjamin Disraeli and his conservative successors that Britain should keep its empire in subjugation forever. To have, to hold and to expand became the new creed: ‘Wider still