Negotiating Empire: The Cultural Politics of Schools in Puerto Rico, 1898–1952

By Solsiree del Moral

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Del Moral’s research is in an area of inquiry with many unanswered questions. The significance of Puerto Rico as a topic of research is stated by the author:

When I discuss my research with friends, colleagues, and students, inevitably, at some point in the conversation, I declare unapologetically: “Puerto Rico is the center of the world!” A historian of empire must consider the case of Puerto Rico. “The oldest colony in the world,” Puerto Rico has much to offer in historical understandings of Spanish colonialism in the Caribbean and the United States as empire since 1898. (p. xi)

Until quite recently the concepts of imperialism and colonialism were absent from most of the tomes dedicated to the history of the United States. Also, Del Moral correctly affirms that “dominant narratives of U.S. history rarely reflect on Puerto Rico” (p. xi). She further states that “contemporary colonialism has real consequences for the discipline of history” (p. xi). It also has had grave consequences for the societies that have lived under colonialism.

The primary research question posed by Del Moral is “How can the history of schools and teachers in Puerto Rico help scholars understand the practices of U.S. empire, the process of colonial state building, and the construction of national identities in Puerto Rico, the Caribbean, and the United States more broadly?” (p. 10).

Del Moral acknowledges that the source material available on educational policies and teachers in Puerto Rico during the period under study have not been fully examined, affecting the depth and breadth of any inquiry. Still, the author does an
excellent job of exploring possible answers to the research questions while gathering significant primary and secondary sources available in this important field.

According to Del Moral, training teachers for the colonial enterprise was a crucial component of colonization. To this end the government established summer institutes for educators soon after the 1898 occupation, founded a Normal School in 1900, imported teachers from the U.S., and sent Puerto Rican teachers to U.S. colleges and universities. In 1904 540 public school teachers from Puerto Rico were sent to a summer teacher education program at Harvard and Cornell Universities. This total represented 47 percent of the teaching corps in Puerto Rico. With a similar objective the U.S. had sent 1,273 Cuban teachers, more than 40 percent of public school teachers in Cuba, to Harvard for a teacher training program in 1900.

The author identifies Americanization and assimilation as definitional of U.S. rule in Puerto Rico. It is a top-down effort led by government officials and educators, she argues. A compelling argument can be made to support this position. An alternative explanation could be that rather than attempting to make the conquered similar to the “Americans,” the objective was to socialize the inhabitants of the conquered lands to be accepting of conquest and domination. In this sense, we might want to look at Americanization and assimilation as terms promoted by empire rather than concepts that accurately describe the objectives of domination.

Key to U.S. objectives during the period under study was the imposition of English as the language of instruction in Puerto Rico. Del Moral states that “English-language instruction provoked fears of cultural genocide” (p. 16). This effort “generated resistance from teachers, parents, politicians, intellectuals, and others. The resistance was not a myth but a fact” (p. 16). She adds that “Teachers led the opposition to English-language instruction and suffered the consequences: professional repression, black listing, and firings” (p. 16). Poet Juan Antonio Corretjer described the Puerto Ricans of the early years of conquest and colonization as “the most tortured generation” (Meléndez 1983).

Commissioners of Education led the efforts to impose English in Puerto Rico. A similar practice was instituted for the populations conquered by the U.S. during what has been referred to as the Spanish-American War. The Philippines was one such case. A similar effort was made by the U.S. to impose language and culture to Native Americans. In 1889 Commissioner of Indian Affairs Thomas J. Morgan referred to the need to socialize the American Indian in the “white man’s ways” and the role of English in this effort. Morgan affirmed that:

The Indians must conform to the ‘white man’s ways,’ peacefully if they will, forcibly if they must. They must adjust themselves to their environment, and conform their mode
of living substantially to our civilization. This civilization may not be the best possible, but it is the best the Indians can get. They can not escape it, and must either conform to it or be crushed by it. (Prucha 1973: 75)

Resistance to the imposition of English was part of a larger effort to resist invasion and colonization. In his book *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said describes resistance as:

The slow and often bitterly disputed recovery of geographical territory, which is at the heart of decolonization, is preceded as empire had been by the charting of cultural territory. After the period of ‘primary resistance,’ literally fighting against outside intrusion, there comes the period of secondary, that is, ideological resistance, when efforts are made to reconstitute a shattered community, to save or restore the sense and fact of community against all the pressures of the colonial system.... (1993: 209)

In *Negotiating Empire* Del Moral refers to Juan B. Huyke, who was the first Puerto Rican to be appointed Commissioner of Education and served in that capacity from 1921 to 1930. A key ideologue of U.S. rule, Huyke was one of the teachers that participated in the 1904 summer program offered at Cornell and Harvard (Navarro-Rivera 2013). He became a leading supporter of what Del Moral refers to as Americanization and assimilation. In his book *Combatiendo* Huyke affirmed that:

Día llegará y Dios quiera que esté cercano, en que todo nuestro gobierno sea totalmente portorriqueño, desde el Gobernador hasta el último funcionario. Entonces el único símbolo de nuestra unión con América será la bandera de las estrellas confiada a nuestra lealtad. Vamos a amarla nosotros como nuestra, vamos a predicar a nuestros hijos que la amen, vamos a levantaría en nuestros hogares, vamos a decirle a nuestro pueblo que le rinda sus respetos. (1922: 29)

U.S. officials underestimated the place of Spanish in Puerto Rican culture. By 1898 Spanish was firmly rooted in the population of approximately one million and was fundamental in how “la puertorriqueñidad” was articulated. Spanish was also one of the leading international languages, through which Puerto Ricans were in contact with the world. It was the language in which culture was communicated.

The level of opposition to the imposition of English was such that it led to the failure of U.S. language policies in Puerto Rico. Resistance came from the political, cultural, legal, and educational sectors. This opposition is described and analyzed in the historical accounts of this period, including *Negotiating Empire* by Del Moral.
The failure of the language policies irritated U.S. policymakers, including President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. In his letter of appointment of José Gallardo as Commissioner of Education in 1937, Roosevelt informed Gallardo that he, Roosevelt, was extremely frustrated with the situation of English in Puerto Rico. According to Roosevelt, after 38 years of Puerto Rico being under the American flag, and 20 years since United States citizenship was extended to its inhabitants, hundreds of thousands had little, if any, knowledge of English.

During the years studied in *Negotiating Empire*, at least six different language policies were implemented in the public schools of the Island. After 39 years of the imposition of English at the University of Puerto Rico, Spanish became the “preferred” language of instruction in 1942, and in the public schools the vernacular of Puerto Ricans became the language of teaching and learning in 1949-50 (Navarro-Rivera 1999).

By the 1940s, the U.S. government moved to a new model of colonialism (p. 184). Late in that decade, colonial administration was delegated to Puerto Ricans and the policies concerning public education were to be instituted by such administration. In 1952, the new model had a formal name: Commonwealth of Puerto Rico.

Today, more than a century after the occupation of Puerto Rico in 1898, language remains an issue of significant controversy (Torres-González 2002: 1) In what Del Moral refers to as the “oldest colony in the world,” the political status and the language of instruction remain at the fore of the national debate (p. xi).

It is a huge undertaking to tackle more than half a century of events that transformed both empire and colony. *Negotiating Empire* is a rigorously researched treatise. It is well organized and superbly written. Undoubtedly this book is thought provoking and will contribute to the so important debate on imperialism and its impact on colonial societies like Puerto Rico. Furthermore, Del Moral’s impressive level of scholarship presents readers with a blueprint for future research. Students of empire and colonialism will welcome this important contribution.
REFERENCES