

Solsiree del Moral

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

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The history of education in Puerto Rico in the first decades of the twentieth century has focused, with few exceptions, on the hegemonic process of Americanization imposed by the new colonial regime. Most historians have examined only the official documents of the colonial administration. In contrast, Solsiree del Moral examines the archives of the local Teachers Association, formed in 1911 by Puerto Rican classroom teachers and administrators. These include newspaper and journal articles, minutes of meetings, essays written for the Association's literary contests, and memoirs. She also analyzes hundreds of letters concerning scholarship programs that were sent by students and teachers to the Department of Education.

An explicit revision of the historiography on Americanization of Puerto Ricans by means of public education, this book seeks to avoid the simplistic dichotomy, often found in the literature, between colonial officials, intent on complete cultural assimilation, and the heroic nationalist defenders of Puerto Rican identity and the Spanish language. Instead, del Moral argues that "colonial citizenship" was "negotiated" by Puerto Rican teachers and this resulted in a configuration of "cultural nationalism" which later found its political expression in the creation of the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico in 1952. She suggests that teachers created an ideological reinterpretation of Americanization in line with their emerging class interests as "intermediate actors" situated between the officials of the colonial state, of which the public school was a central institution, and thousands of Puerto Rican students and their parents. The "political culture" of the teachers was developed precisely within the principal ideological institutions of the colonial regime: the public school.

The notion of "national citizenship" was at the center of this cultural politics of negotiation. On the one hand, the colonial administrators were intent on assimilating the local population to U.S. culture, values, and patriotic precepts. On the other, the teachers imagined a modern nation, Puerto Rico, in which the values of home/school/*patria* would contribute to the regeneration of the Puerto Rican people. The difference between the two positions was negotiable precisely because both sought modernization and progress in the country. Even when Puerto Ricans became U.S. citizens (in 1917), the teachers continued to inculcate the values of the *patria* without openly assuming political positions, which was formally prohibited to teachers. They simultaneously affirmed a unique Puerto Rican identity and accepted colonial citizenship.

The notion and practices of patriarchy were also negotiated as hundreds of women became influential teachers and wage-earners. Masculinity entered a period of crisis when, in the context of the recruitment of soldiers for World War I, it was discovered that many Puerto Rican men were physically unfit for military service. But at the same time, new ideas of domesticity and hygiene required that women be educated in order to fulfill their obligations to their homes and, by extension, their nation. Modern Puerto Rican patriarchy was based on the ideology of “social feminism” which stressed the physical and moral “regeneration of the race.” Physical education for boys and girls, and domestic education for girls were important elements in the movement to improve the physical condition, domestic economy, and morals of Puerto Rican children and their families.

Del Moral suggests that these negotiations were not direct confrontations but rather indirect reinterpretations of common concepts. In one example, however, she shows that the leading intellectuals of the Puerto Rican teachers argued cogently and aggressively against the negative stereotypes of Puerto Rican migrants that were promulgated in Hawai'i and New York during the 1930s. In her detailed analysis of several reports on the state of migrant children she demonstrates that in Puerto Rico these reports were refuted both for their stereotypes and their methodological inadequacies. She argues that Puerto Rican intellectuals described the characteristics of the islanders as different from those of the diaspora and in this way sought to define authentic Puerto Rican identity in contradistinction to that of lower-class migrants. This tension regarding Puerto Rican authenticity has persisted in various forms into the present.

In an unusual move, del Moral compares education in Puerto Rico to that of the “revolutionary” Latin American states of Mexico, Cuba, and Nicaragua. In contrast to these independent states, nation-building in Puerto Rico was predominantly a cultural rather than sovereign, political project. In another unusual move, she views the struggle over the language of instruction—English or Spanish—as relatively unimportant when compared with the other negotiated elements of “colonial citizenship”: home/school/*patria*. Brief sections in the book suggest that teachers addressed the language issue in less confrontational, more pragmatic ways. Some argued that primary education was insufficient to teach a command of English and detrimental to the broader goals of primary education since the mother tongue was Spanish and few students stayed in school for more than three or four years. It not clear, however, why struggles over Spanish language instruction, which certainly did take place through the 1920s and 1930s, were not more important to the teachers.

This book is a valuable contribution to the study of Puerto Rican education and cultural nationalism and raises issues regarding identity that will continue to be discussed and debated.

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