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Reseña de “Colonial Crucible: Empire in the Making of the Modern American State” de Alfred W. McCoy & Francisco A. Scarano
The City University of New York
New York, Estados Unidos

Available in: http://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=37721077018
On April 13, 2004, President Bush asserted that “The United States is not a ‘imperialist power, but a liberating power’ (New York Times, 2004). President Bush’s speech reproduces one of the fundamental characterizations of American historiography: the imperial denial. The imperial denial goes hand in hand with the American “exceptionalism” or the “uniqueness trap” that makes the historical experience of certain “exceptional countries” so different that no one can comprehend it without invoking the very same traits that feature its uniqueness.

The intention of the Colonial Crucible is to interpret American history as in many ways unexceptional, as the history of just another empire, rather than as a special case—this despite the fact that many Americans might seem to agree with President Bush that “America has never been an empire. We may be the only great power in history that had the chance and refused, preferring greatness to power, and justice to glory” (As quoted in Bacevich, American Empire, p. 44). However, as McCoy, Scarano, and Johnson, contributors to Colonial Crucible, argue: “There is little doubt that over the past quarter century putting empire back into American history has been the single greatest achievement of a historiography no longer content with writing solely about U.S. foreign relations” (p. 11). Colonial Crucible, in the tradition of books such as Cultures of United States Imperialism, is the latest attempt to reinstate the question of the American empire as a suitable object of historical analysis. With the exception of Jeremi Suri’s essay, most collaborators take for granted that the United States, at least in the early 20th century, was definitively an empire. The book defies America’s denial of its imperial past while also questioning the limits of American exceptionalism in American historiography and American studies.

One the most important contributions of Colonial Crucible is the union of intellectual contributors from both the center and the periphery to revisit the American imperial legacy. It is precisely this combinatorial endeavor that brings creativity and vivid interpretations to this debate, for otherwise it would be very limited to rethink American exceptionalism only from the center. The academic work from mainland American scholars is matched by articles from scholars from places deeply marked by American imperialism, like Puerto Rico, Hawaii, and the Philippines. It is as if the empire simultaneously had decided both to look and to write back. As the coeditors describe the Colonial Crucible project, it is a multivocal reflection on the United States’ imperial past, and in many ways, a reflection on the contemporary consequences of such history.

Colonial Crucible also adds, as stated by McCoy, Scarano, and Johnson, to the recognition of empire not just as a system of political and economic domination but also as a center of production and reproduction of state, society, and culture on both sides of the imperial split. Jointly, the essays analyze the multiple histories of American expansion in the early 20th century, and the complex ways in which imperial encounters shaped both the United States and the places and peoples it has dominated, especially with regards to state transformation. Colonial Crucible brings
to the forefront of the imperial turn in American historiography and American studies the often-neglected topic of state transformations ensuing imperial encounters. As stated by McCoy, Scarano, and Johnson, the essays in Colonial Crucible represent “the search for some term that can encompass an elusory yet powerful entity, presiding over far-flung island territories, that we might call, for want of better words, the American imperial state” (p. 24). The contributors examine not only the empire’s impact on the administration of the colonies but also, and most importantly, by its influence in different fields of public policy, like law enforcement, racial, education, health, and environmental policies in the United States. Matters of polity, law, and the military are also addressed by contributors. All in all, the essays included in the book show that American imperial encounters had a profound effect on the American state, as these were directly and critically important to forming key aspects of the 20th century American state.

The colonial practices and policies developed by the Americans were also applied in colonial and metropolitan settings with various degrees of success. For instance, Colonial Crucible argues that recent innovations in colonial administration, which dramatically changed the colonies, played a definite role in transforming the American state itself. The section on law enforcement illustrates, how the conquest and colonization of overseas territories strained the coercive power of the American state, resulting in the introduction of law enforcement, intelligence, prison and surveillance mechanisms that were put into operation in both the colonies and the metropolis. The contributors, among them Kelvin Santiago-Valles, Anne L. Foster, Alfred W. McCoy, and Michael Salman, examined constabularies, penal colonies, and the opium prohibition to show that law enforcement policies on the colonies guided later transformations of the American imperial state.

Likewise, Solsireé del Moral, Amilcar A. Barreto, Glenn Anthony May, Pablo Navarro-Rivera, and Courtney Johnson analyzed Americanization programs, industrial training programs, and institutionalized social sciences to demonstrate that just as in the case of law enforcement colonial education programs were also brought about in the metropolis. Educational ideas circulated between the United States and the colonies, with lessons from the colonies informing policies and practices in the United States and vice versa.

The same holds true for American tryouts with racial policies and practices in the colonies. These were reciprocally transformative, key to the transformation of racial formations in both the United States and the island empire. As stated by Clare Corbould in her introduction to this section: “Race was made by empire just as empire was made by race. Ideas about race filtered back to the ‘metropole’ and circulated around various colonial locales, changing and being changed all the while” (p. 193). The section on race include contributions by Paul A. Kramer, Francisco A. Scarano, Alejandro de la Fuente and Matthew Cassey, Christopher Schmidt-Nowara, Rona Tamiko Halualani, Kristin Hoganson, and Michael Salman. They focus on various topics, ranging from the colonial racial State and the suffrage question in the colonies to the saliency of race in public commemorations, censuses, and population control legislation. The forgery of the Code of Kalantiaw and the American consumption of colonial goods are also addressed.

The section dealing with “American health imperialism,” with contributions by Warwick Anderson, Mariola Espinosa, Natalie J. Ring, Gabriela Soto Laveaga, and Paul S. Sutter, shows that imperial encounters transformed public health and hygienic practices in both the colonies and the metropolis. Contributors examined
“biomedical citizenship” and the “poetics of purity and danger” in the context of public health programs in the Philippines, the eradication of yellow fever in Cuba and Panama, and the politics of empire and scientific advances in synthetic cortisone and progesterone in Mexico.

Additionally, Christina Duffy Burnett, Vicente L. Rafael, Owen J. Lynch, Anna Leah Fidelis T. Castañeda, and Paul D. Hutchcroft examine how Americans used law to remake colonial societies and the troubles associated to such efforts. They also showed how law reforms and advances in the colonies served as frameworks for eventual legal transformations in the United States. Areas addressed in this section include the citizenship status of colonial subjects, discourses on sovereignty, the U.S. constitution and the colonial question, and the formation of the colonial state.

The section on the U.S. military examines imperial massacres, military governance, and the National Guard role in the colonies, war conditions and social reforms in the island empire, subaltern military roles in the colonies, and the relationship between the U.S. military and private contract labor in the colonies. Joshua Gedacht, Patricio N. Abinales, Christopher Capozzola, Jorge Rodríguez Beruff, Humberto García Muñiz, Rebeca Campo, Jana K. Lipman, and Brian Mcallister Linn demonstrate that imperial encounters had a profound effect on the American military and its practices home and abroad.

Finally, J. R. Mcneil, Greg Bankoff, Daniel F. Doeppers, Stuart McCook, and James Francis Warren examined tropical forestry, tropical botany, water and vegetable sanitary efforts, and colonial meteorology to reveal how the United States’ trials with environmental management policies and planning in the colonies were mutually transformative, essential to resource and environmental management in both the colonies and the United States.

Located within the field of cultural studies of imperialism, Colonial Crucible is then an important contribution to our understanding of various issues concerning American imperialism, past and present, including questions about state formation and the character of the American empire as well as questions about cultural and national identities. We must acknowledge that just as conquering an overseas empire in 1898 called into question the American identity, so do contemporary imperial issues question that same identity. Thus, in so many ways, our days are also a time of crisis, a break within the existing sociopolitical order that questions the American national identity and the legitimacy of the order itself. The mounting academic interest on the question of today’s American empire confirms it.

There are several good reasons to revisit the American Empire: If we want to delineate the peculiarities of American imperialism, both its awesome strengths and its debilitating weaknesses; if we are interested in the ways today’s empire becomes a “lived experience”; if we want to know how we are conceived as subjects, colonial or otherwise, in the context of empire; and if we wish to explore what imperial narratives enable us to construct identities we are identified with or are set against, and how we internalize or reject those narratives, then we have no option but to ask questions about America’s imperial past, even though American contemporary imperialism is in many ways different from American imperialism in 1898.

There are, however, continuities. It is in this particular venue that the Colonial Crucible is without a doubt a valuable essay collection, for it provides an opportunity to continue to both ask and answer questions about the history of the American empire, including the continuities and discontinuities among the various forms of American imperialism.
Finally, *Colonial Crucible* displays a profound commitment to the analysis of imperialism as a political and economic process tied to social relations and cultural representations of Americans and their others. Yet the authors in *Colonial Crucible* often overemphasize the cultural and political over the economic rationale. To be sure, most authors acknowledge that American expansion involved very diverse set of motivations, some of which were economic. There was a strategic opportunity to remove the Spanish empire from the hemisphere and thus do away with economic competition. The war also represented an opportunity to prevent other empires from moving into Spanish colonies and compete with the United States. Further, the economic depression and class conflict of the 1890s encouraged a distinctively American capitalist imperialism. It was believed that expanding overseas markets could stop the falling domestic demand, and some even argued that expansion abroad could sidetrack and even prevent domestic class, racial, and ethnic conflicts by reinforcing nationalist sentiments. However, even though most contributors to *Colonial Crucible* are aware of the connections between capital, state, and overseas expansion, and often address them, the book falls short in revealing the intricate connections linking capital, imperialism, and state transformation in the United States and the colonies. This is an area requiring further research; it is a significant topic in fully understanding state transformations in the United States. The shift of American state capacities toward realizing internationally interventionist goals versus domestically interventionist ones has been crucial in pushing American capital’s global expansion, with tremendous effect in both the colonies and the metropolis. The American state has been deeply implicated in the facilitation of capital expansion, meaning that its policies shaped colonial economies through various strategies. Nevertheless, economic policies and practices were instrumental in the transformation of economic courses of action and practices in the United States. In spite of these critical comments, *Colonial Crucible* goes a long way as an impressive, remarkable and exciting achievement in American historical scholarship.

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### ¡Llegó La Gringada!: El contexto social-militar Estadounidense en Puerto Rico y otros lugares del Caribe hasta 1919

By Héctor R. Marín Román  
San Juan: Academia Puertorriqueña de la Historia, 2009  
698 pages; $39.00 [paper]

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For more than six decades now, as Roger Spiller comments in an article on moral responsibility and the writing of military history, “Historians have posed for themselves an ever-expanding range of interpretative and methodological questions, produced a dizzying variety of approaches, divided and subdivided into schools, camps, and tribes—all in an unprecedented intellectual and global ferment, a worldwide quickening of pulse” (Spiller 2006). Most recently, the global approach in historiography has opened the way to uncharted research territories, and to yet another revision of the simplistic postulates and all-encompassing theories concerning our recent past. Within this current trend, Héctor Marín Román’s