Review/Reseña


**Spanish Colonialism and the Production of Knowledge**

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Beginning with the premise that colonialism and the production of knowledge are intimately related, Christopher Schmidt-Nowara’s interests in this book lie in the versions of national and imperial histories elaborated by nineteenth-century Spanish and Antillean intellectuals. The production of knowledge and memory is a rich field that has recently begun to receive attention from historians of Iberian empires and Latin American and Caribbean nations. This welcome addition to that field aspires to be truly Atlantic in its perspective, not only by paying attention to history-writing on both sides of the ocean, but also by demonstrating the ways in which Spanish and Antillean intellectuals constituted a real field of dialogue and
inquiry. Ambitiously, Schmidt-Nowara also includes the Philippines in his purview, underscoring the expansive nature of Spanish imperialism.

Writing against arguments about the rise of Hispanismo out of the ashes of the crumbling empire, he locates celebrations of Spanish imperialism that were articulated much earlier as part of ongoing efforts to unify a fractured Spain. In the eighteenth century, for example, historians such as Juan Bautista Muñoz defended Spain against accusations of imperial incompetence by collecting manuscripts and creating archives devoted to colonial chronicles. By the time decolonization did come around, Spanish historians and intellectuals had a rich archive from which to draw. They mined those manuscripts for versions of Spanish colonialism that refuted the many iterations of the Black Legend, including its most recent incarnation as Adam Smith’s celebration of British colonialism. In this context, Spanish historians such as Antonio María Fabié wrote histories of Spanish colonialism that emphasized what Schmidt-Nowara calls Spain’s “civilizing mission,” with arguments about the salutary effects of miscegenation and the spread of Catholicism. Sounding uncannily like José Vasconcelos who was to write similarly about the cosmic race, Fabié apparently used a speech at the Congreso Internacional de Americanistas in 1881 to sing the praises of the “superior race” that was created out of “fusions” between Spaniards and indigenous people (40).

The problem was that Antillean intellectuals did not often agree with Spanish interpretations of the past, and reworked them to their own ends. The memory of Christopher Columbus serves as a perfect example. Not only was his commemoration a point of contention for the Spanish, who in the end managed to produce a national hero out of an Italian born explorer, but intellectuals in the colonies in turn rejected the heroic version of Columbus and replaced him with versions of their own. For them, the Columbus to be remembered was either the one imprisoned and mistreated by an ungrateful Spain, or the unthinkingly cruel destroyer of a utopian, pre-Colombian past.

Ultimately European heroes held limited potential for Antillean nationalists, who were interested in generating historical narratives using as much autochthonous material as possible. For this, they looked to the
indigenous past—hazy as it was, since most of the indigenous inhabitants of
the islands were decimated within decades of the European arrival—for the
stuff from which to cobble together alternative versions of the colonial
period. So they used archaeology to find concrete evidence of pre-
Columbian civilizations, and pored over the chronicles to find indigenous
martyrs like Caonabo and Camagüey.

But as Schmidt-Nowara points out, these efforts to rewrite histories
contained their own silences, particularly in relation to slavery and peoples
of African descent, a thorny question for Antillean patriots looking to
distinguish themselves from the most objectionable Spanish practices. The
results were convoluted interpretations and reinterpretations of canonical
figures which worked very hard to create discursive spaces in which
critiques of Spanish colonialism and justifications of slavery and empire
could coexist. The Cuban intellectual José Antonio Saco’s interpretation of
Bartolomé de Las Casas, the Dominican friar who in the sixteenth century
wrote a scathing indictment of Spanish treatment of its indigenous slaves,
works in precisely this way, to simultaneously defy and legitimize Spanish
imperialism. In the end, although this is beyond the scope of Schmidt-
Nowara’s study, this would become an ongoing battle, made more
interesting by the participation of former slaves and their descendants in
these conversations as the twentieth century progressed.

This volume should open new avenues of exploration. Particularly
interesting are the allusions to the material aspects of the production of
knowledge, such as book collecting, the creation of archives, and the
struggles over ownership and publication of certain manuscripts. The
dimensions of this story grounded in circulating manuscripts and their
copies may prove fascinating and fruitful venues of inquiry. More
importantly, it will undoubtedly alert readers to the high stakes involved in
the practice of commemoration. As demonstrated by the recent spate of
occasions remembering the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804) or the British
abolition of the slave trade (1807), anniversaries of all sorts seem to prompt
more and more commemorations. These are always fraught occasions as
competing versions of the past vie for primacy. The Conquest of History
reminds us that history does indeed need to be conquered time and time again.