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Review/Reseña

Anderson, Benedict. *Under Three Flags: Anarchism and the Anti-Colonial Imagination*. London and New York: Verso, 2005.

The Three Flags of Philippine Anti-Colonialism

Koichi Hagimoto

University of Pittsburgh

Benedict Anderson's *Under Three Flags* provides a comprehensive study of world politics and cultural identities in relation to the birth of Philippine nationalism during the 19th century. Anderson focuses on three Philippine writers: Isabelo de los Reyes (1864-1938), a polemical journalist and folklorist; Mariano Ponce (1863-1918), a coordinating organizer of Philippine independent movement; and most importantly, José Rizal (1861-1896), one of the greatest novelists of Philippine literature. By examining the impact of avant-garde European literature and politics on Rizal and his contemporaries, Anderson attempts to recover the dynamic yet often overlooked relationship between the international anarchist movement of the nineteenth century (above all in Spain, France and Italy)

and nascent Philippine nationalism. Anderson explains the purpose of the text as follows: “the book is an experiment in [...] political astronomy. It attempts to map the gravitational force of anarchism between militant nationalisms on opposite sides of the planet” (1-2).

Unlike his previous *Imagined Communities* (1983), in which Anderson established a universal theory concerning the nature of nationalism, this book concentrates on the particular study of Philippine anti-colonialism. Anderson demonstrates his attachment to the Philippines: “I am deeply attached to it, and have studied it, on and off, for twenty years” (4). The first chapter opens with the history of “a 23-year-old *indio* named Isabelo de los Reyes,” followed by an explanation of what the title *filipino* meant in the Philippines of the nineteenth century (9). According to Anderson, *un filipino* implied two different meanings at the end of the nineteenth century: Creole who enjoyed the privilege of any association with Europe and one related to Las Islas Filipinas *except* for the indigenous population (15). The bulk of the following chapters is dedicated to illustrating how Filipino nationalism had its origins in Spain rather than in the colony as well as how Rizal formulated his anti-colonial ideology during his early years in Europe.

Today Rizal is often considered a national hero in the Philippines, perhaps to the similar extent as the heroic figure of José Martí in Cuba. As opposed to the Cuban political writer, Rizal spent much of his time in Europe between 1882 and 1891 and produced two important novels, namely *Noli me tangere* (1887) and *El filibusterismo* (1891). Anderson regards the first text as a genuine *filipino* text and the second as a “novela mundial” (53), a claim that accurately reflects the two novels’ distinct scene settings. While almost all events in *Noli me tangere* occur within the Philippines, *El filibusterismo* makes frequent references to different parts of the world, including Cuba, Germany, Egypt, Russia, France, China and Japan.

One of the essential contributions of *Under Three Flags* is Anderson’s careful analysis of *El filibusterismo*, which he describes as “probably the first incendiary anticolonial novel written by a colonial subject outside Europe” (6). Nevertheless, Anderson’s perspective on the

novel's political purpose seems contradictory. Although Anderson first argues that the novel is "narrow and lacking in any coherent political position" (107), he later discusses political aspects of the novel by emphasizing that "Rizal marked the crisscrossing of anticolonial nationalism and 'propaganda by the deed,' with its planless utopianism and its taste for self-immolation" (119). Contrary to Anderson's earlier affirmation, Rizal's political position upon writing *El filibusterismo* seems relatively consistent: to create a sense of anti-imperial and anti-colonial nationalism by denouncing not only the Spanish colonial system in the Philippines, but also the corrupted clergy who exploited the poor and the illiterate in the colony.

In *Under Three Flags*, Anderson alludes to numerous comparisons between the life and the works of Rizal and Martí, although he never seriously discusses the theme in any detail. Anderson states that, for instance, "the comparison with Martí is illuminating," yet only a few paragraphs are dedicated to such comparison (131). What Anderson's narrative offers for the Latinamericanist is an extensive study of the multilayered frameworks that created similar and/or different socio-political situations of Cuba and the Philippines under the Spanish colonial rule in the late 19th century. I believe that this study allows us to examine a fact that is often disregarded in the field of Hispanic literary and cultural studies: the two countries were both colonies of Spain during the 19th century, and Philippine literature was produced in Spanish language at that time. In fact, like many of *fin-de-siècle* writers in Latin America, Rizal wrote his novels as well as many of his essays and personal correspondences within the Spanish imperial system.

Finally, the title of Anderson's book, *Under Three Flags*, remains perplexing. Although Anderson offers no compelling explanation for the title, it seems that the "three flags" mentioned here refer to the spheres in which Anderson places his protagonists. They are 1) anarchism (the black flag); 2) Katipunan—the leading organization of the Filipino independence movement—the red flag with the phrase "KKK"; and 3) Cuba's national flag. However, none of the subjects of *Under Three Flags* can be adequately analyzed "under" these three flags because they all transcend the specific

groupings. For example, Isabelo's identity as an "indio" and his contribution to the new science called "el folk-lore" cannot be described accurately under any of the three categorized mentioned above. On the other hand, Rizal's journey to various European and Asian countries suggests that his complex philosophy goes beyond anarchism and Katipunan (in fact, he constantly distances himself from the insurrectionary activism which often characterizes Katipunan). Martí, who symbolizes Cuban independence, is not just a revolutionary figure of Cuba but a mediator between "Our America" and "Their America." In short, these individuals experienced the world of multiple and overlapping currents. Therefore, they did not live "under" the three flags, but rather around and even beyond the worlds expressed by each.