

Book Review: *Reproducing Empire: Race, Sex, Science and US Imperialism in Puerto Rico* by Laura Briggs

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Gendered, Sexualized Bodies as sites of Imperial Reproduction

In *Reproducing Empire*, Laura Briggs considers what it would mean to analyze the construction of Puerto Rico both as “backward” and the subject of U.S benevolence through a feminist framework that sees sex, gender, race, and the nation as constitutive. Specifically, Briggs centers the bodies of working-class women as the key site for understanding various sexual and reproductive health policies and theories of “overpopulation” that attributed persistent poverty, economic underperformance, and political instability to working-class women’s ‘excessive’ reproduction. Family Planning was therefore introduced as a way to stem the Third World threat of excess and ‘useless’ non-white bodies simultaneously ensuring the continued reach of U.S’ imperial hand in Puerto Rico. Like Amy Kaplan’s *Anarchy of Empire*, *Reproducing Empire* spends a substantial amount of time exploring this ‘double-bind’; the ways the U.S simultaneously claimed and distanced itself from Puerto Rico with its ambiguous status of citizenship in the empire but without suffrage.

Briggs makes the centrality of female sexuality to her project very clear from early in her book. She writes

From the exotic, tropical prostitute (seductive but brimming with disease), to the impoverished, overlarge family (produced by ignorance and brainwashing by the Catholic church) to overpopulation, to the notion of the “culture of poverty” Puerto Rican sexuality has been defined by its deviance, and the island as a whole has been defined by its sexuality (4).

The structure of the text follows the trajectory of this quote. In chapter one - Sexuality, Medicine and Imperialism Briggs locates the production of Puerto Rico and Puerto Ricans as carriers of diseases in the context of contact with colonial/imperial powers specifically military personnel and other government officials. She does not dispute the presence of venereal diseases or its spread but she marks the agency of U.S soldiers in these sexual relations and is careful to note that by making Puerto Rican Sexuality exceptional there is less space to interrogate how this production of 'diseased' people is itself a tool of empire. She uses a historical method in her discussion of syphilis as a "foreign" disease to argue like *Manifest Manhood as well as Anarchy of Empire* that the domestic/private sphere is inextricably linked to the political and the construction of Puerto Ricans as 'other race' and the disease from 'another place' outside the U.S was necessary for the construction of the U.S as pure, healthy, enlightened and benevolent. Her intervention here also helps us to think through relations of power not only in terms of the circulation of goods and services but in the making of the archive that is also a structuring framework- this point is well argued in her discussion about social sciences research in shaping policies. Briggs writes:

Prostitution policy provides a good window into the ways that imperialism may be viewed, not as a series of isolated policies promulgated in diverse geographic entities, but as an international system developed by imperial powers in communication with one another and constituted in part by ideologies and policies associated with domesticity (29)

She goes further to suggest that social sciences obscured and perpetuated negative stereotypes about Puerto Ricans often by drawing inaccurate conclusions about what different "findings" meant.

In Chapter two, Briggs continues to make her point about the enmeshment of the domestic with the the political. While this chapter perhaps more fully takes up the targeting of working-class women for contraception and sterilization- the colonial interventions as well as those from the Puerto Rican elites that aimed at recreating the very structure of the family as nuclear and formalized by marriage declared before the state and the Christian God- speak more pointedly to the project of 'whitening', of attempts to eliminate relationship not reminiscent of white family forms or white cis-heteronormativity. Further, this chapter made at least two other critical interventions (1) it showed the continued resistance and agency of Puerto Ricans who not only did not get married but those who took advantage of the loophole in the policy designed to encourage marriage and used it to get divorced and away from abusive men (2) that relationships with colonial power were not unidimensional - Puerto Rican particularly the elite on many occasions supported and strategically partnered with the U.S on various policies. It would be overly reductive to think about this in the context of complicity or to even be overly focused on the fact that in large parts Puerto Rico remained economically and Politically disadvantaged, but to focus on that would be to miss the efforts of the Puerto Rican people to fight for themselves and to rewrite narratives about who they are as a people. Nevertheless, it is also important to note the racial, classist and gendered dynamic at play in the interactive process between Puerto Rican Elites and U.S officials on the mainland as exemplified by the 1920 and 1930 debates over birth control that found support and dissent both in Puerto Rico and the U.S Mainland. This debate illustrated a complexity that would be elided if we were to think of Puerto Ricans as always diametrically opposed to U.S political agenda.

The remaining two chapters with which this paper is concerned, that is, chapters three and four, discussed overpopulation, eugenics and birth control between 1920 and 1940 - the backdrop for the mass sterilization campaign in the post World War II era. Briggs discusses how sociological perspectives on the cause of poverty and underdevelopment more broadly were deployed to mask the impact of capitalist expansion and colonialism in Puerto Rico. In fact, she skillfully shows how the U.S created the moral panic that linked middle-class sexuality to social, economic, and political strain and at the same time mobilized those fears for capitalist production vis-a-vis the birth control pill. The pill was a specific technological fix that emerged from scientific research and was to be the answer to the problem of overpopulation. Thus the U.S was both able to position itself as having the answer to this third world problem while denying its role in the social conditions that made necessary (?) widespread contraception in the first place.

Laura Briggs' considers some of the questions under examination in fields of gender studies and critical Ethnic Studies particularly regarding intersections and of race, class, gender, sexuality place, and space. While some of her ideas may not be novel, her analysis is particularly strong because of a specific kind of interpretive historical analysis that allows her to frame the imperial nature of U.S geopolitical influence through an examination of science and public policy archives. As she tells us in her introduction, Puerto Rico, as a site of analysis was also very deliberate if not a strategic choice, for its ability to make a strong case for how gender has been key to U.S Expansionism.