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Review/Reseña

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

Something is Coming

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The Age of Empire has not come to an end. Benedict Anderson explains in the introduction to *Under Three Flags*:

If readers find in this text a number of parallels and resonances with our own time, they will not be mistaken. At the 2004 Republican convention in New York, which was guarded by many thousands of policemen and other “security” personnel, the metropolitan police chief told reporters that the danger came not from Communists, or even from fanatical Muslims, but rather from anarchists. At almost the same moment, a monument to the anarchist Haymarket Martyrs was erected in Chicago. The *New York Times* smugly remarked that “only now have the passions sufficiently subsided” for this inauguration to take place. It is true, America really is a continent (7-8).

Under Three Flags is a work of “political astronomy that attempts to map the gravitational force of anarchism between militant nationalisms on opposite sides of the planet” (1-2). In the late nineteenth century, an era of “early globalization,” acts of political violence brought forth “a mass of draconian ‘anti-terrorist’ legislation, summary executions, and a sharp rise in torture by police forces, public and secret, as well as militaries.” Then, as now, this subterranean war frequently burst to the surface for “the assassins, some of whom could well be described as early suicide-bombers, understood themselves as acting for a world-audience of news agencies, newspapers, religious progressives, working-class and peasant organizations, and so on” (4).

But the protagonists of *Under Three Flags* are not Al-Qaeda and American Special Forces. They are *fin de siglo* Filipino nationalists—José Rizal, Isabelo de los Reyes, and Mariano Ponce—who in their struggles against colonial reactionaries in Manila sallied forth to Europe and Asia. In cities such as Barcelona, Madrid, Paris, Berlin, Tokyo, and Hong Kong they met and read the works of anti-colonial nationalists from Cuba and Puerto Rico, Spanish masons, French and Russian anarchists, and modernist poets. They suffered repression at the hands of the Spanish government, from internal exile and execution in the Philippines to imprisonment and torture in the Barcelona fortress of Montjuich. Though they were committed to national independence, anarchism held the promise of radical change in situations of dire reaction. Propaganda of the deed, including assassinations of heads of state such as the Spanish premiere Antonio Cánovas del Castillo and the hurling of bombs into anonymous urban crowds, were weapons of the politically weak and marginalized transferable to anti-colonial struggles.

Rizal contemplated that possibility in his fiction despite his actual refusal to support armed uprisings against Spanish rule. In his second novel, *El filibusterismo* (1891), the mysterious Simoun has in his possession a beautiful jewel-encrusted pomegranate. Inside it holds nitroglycerine. The strange image of the beautiful bomb has captured Anderson’s imagination and, in the book’s most compelling chapters,

launches him on an investigation of the influences and precedents that shaped Rizal's imaginings of colonial violence.

His findings diverge from most readings of Rizal's fiction, which treat it as essentially realistic. For example, several years after Rizal's death, the Spanish Philippine expert W.E. Retana y Gamboa, who during the 1880s and 1890s was one of Rizal's most vicious antagonists, wrote a repentant preface to *El Filibusterismo* in which he explained that the reader would find the Philippines as they actually were in the waning days of Spanish rule:

Every episode is truthful; every sentence has historical value. If the history of a people is the memory of its past, who will be able to write the history of the Philippines' social life with imbibing the blood of Rizal's novelistic books? We can assert that the spirit of the people during the last years of Spanish domination remains sculpted within them.¹

In contrast, in a dazzling chapter, Anderson excavates Rizal's diverse literary influences, revealing novels that cannot be read as mimetic portraits of colonial society. He begins with the beguiling phrase "the spectre of comparisons/el demonio de las comparaciones" (more on this below) from *Noli me tangere* (1886). Rizal had employed it to capture the torment of moving between Europe and the colonial periphery. Anderson finds that this phrase reverberated with the works of Poe ("The Imp of the Perverse"), Baudelaire ("Le Démon de la perversité"), and Mallarmé ("Le Démon de l'analogie").

Anderson finds echoes more directly related to *El filibusterismo* in the novel of Joris Karl Huysmans, *À rebours* (1884). Anderson's entrée to this novel came from the suggestion of a Filipino scholar, Neil García, who was exploring Rizal's sexual orientation. Was Rizal gay? The *Fili* contains some allusions to homosexuality in the Manila demi-monde. In particular, there is a play on the word "homeopathist" that intimates homosexuality (33-37).

¹ Retana, "Prológo," *El filibusterismo* (Barcelona, 1908) quoted in Christopher Schmidt-Nowara, *The Conquest of History: Spanish Colonialism and National Histories in the Nineteenth Century* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2006): 189.

These questions led Anderson to Huysman, where he found striking parallels to the *Fili*. The decadent protagonist, Des Esseintes, is in rebellion against the dominant bourgeois culture of late-nineteenth-century France. He encloses himself in his home, surrounded by his creations, including a jewel-encrusted pet tortoise, which distantly resonates with Simoun's beautiful bomb. Like Simoun, Des Esseintes dedicates himself to subversion through violence, though he combines his rebellion with sensual gratification and cruelty. He introduces a teenager to the pleasures offered by the Jewish prostitute Vera. After several weeks, he cuts off his financial support for these visits. His hope is that the addicted and desperate youth will turn to theft and murder so that he can continue to satisfy himself with Vera: "one more enemy for this hideous society" (40). Though he can find no confirmation that Rizal read Huysman, the accumulation of parallel details and sentiments is irresistible.

In the following chapter, Anderson turns to the novel's proleptic quality, in which he also revisits his discussion of Rizal in an earlier work.² In *The Spectre of Comparisons*, Anderson scrutinized Rizal's first novel, *Noli me tangere*, a literary sensation that polarized the colony because of its caustic treatment of Spanish friars and colonial officials. Spanish reactionaries like Retana dug in deep and undertook a protracted smear campaign against the young author. Rizal, in turn, was defiant and continued to publish books and essays that lambasted not only the current colonial situation but also the entire trajectory of Spanish conquest and colonization of the archipelago.

The phrase from the *Noli* that intrigued Anderson was the "spectre of comparisons." The novel's protagonist Ibarra returned to Manila after years of study in Europe. While contemplating the Manila Botanical Gardens, his imagination was suddenly transported to the European capitals he frequented during his studies. For Ibarra, this was a moment of maddening frustration. He could not forget the wealth and relative freedom of Europe amidst the underdevelopment and dogmatism of the colony; they

² *The Spectre of Comparisons: Nationalism, Southeast Asia, and the World* (London: Verso, 1998).

were spectres that haunted and tormented him as he traveled through his native land.³

In the *Fili*, comparison gives way to imitation. Anderson argues that Rizal transfers Spain, Europe, imperialism, Bismarck, Nobel, and the Second International into the Philippines:

Europe itself, Rizal thought, was menaced by a vast conflagration among its warring powers, but also by violent movement from below. *El filibusterismo* was written from the wings of a global proscenium on which Bismarck and Vera Zasulich, Yankee manipulations and Cuban insurrections, Meiji Japan and the British Museum, Huysmans and the Commune, Catalonia and the Carolines, Nihilists and anarchists, all had their places. *Cochers* and “homeopaths” too. (121)

Hence the beautiful bejeweled bomb. Simoun, Ibarra transformed, is an “*espectro mundial* come to haunt the Philippines” (121).⁴ He plans to

³ Javier Morillo-Alicea prefers to translate “el demonio de las comparaciones” as “that devil comparison.” Rather than ghosts or shadows, Rizal is suggesting an actively malicious imp: “I have chosen to translate the phrase as ‘that devil comparison’ because I think the original Spanish phrasing suggests that Ibarra’s urge to compare is caused by a sort of trickster demon—the character does not *want* to compare; after traveling from Europe he has no choice.” See his essay “Uncharted Landscapes of ‘Latin America’: The Philippines in the Spanish Imperial Archipelago,” in *Interpreting Spanish Colonialism: Empires, Nations, and Legends* eds. Christopher Schmidt-Nowara and John M. Nieto-Phillips (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2005): 53, n.77. Emphases in the original. Morillo-Alicea’s exploration of the parallels and links between Antillean and Filipino nationalism and anti-colonialism makes for intriguing comparison with Anderson’s.

⁴ Anderson notes that Rizal had access to the novels of Benito Pérez Galdos and other contemporary Spanish writers but seems to have expressed admiration only for Cervantes and Larra. Yet, Simoun/Ibarra’s peregrinations and transformations are resonant of some Spanish novels of his day, especially if we consider that the character Simoun has a connection to Cuba. Could these Filipino travelers be inversions of Spanish *indianos*? The indiano was a Spaniard who made his fortune in the Indies before returning to the metropolis. In the nineteenth century, Cuba was the major site of Spanish migration and investment but there were also important regional links to Puerto Rico. By the 1880s, metropolitan interest in the Philippines reached new heights, a change that warrants more scrutiny. Historians have lately called our attention to the wealth and the political influence of prominent nineteenth-century *indianos* such as Antonio López y López and the Marques of Manzanedo. The novelists of the era have also left us some record. These characters often carried about them an air of mystery (how did they make so much money?), corruption, and disorder. See for example Galdos’ *El amigo manso* (1882), in which the life of the narrator, a Krausist philosopher, is thrown into turmoil by the return of his indiano brother and his Cuban household, slaves included.

throw the colony into chaos by exploding his bomb at a gathering of dignitaries. Only such an unexpected act of terror will allow Filipinos to tear down the colonial institutions that had oppressed them for centuries. Like the French anarchist hero Ravachol, a “violent Christ” (114) in the words of Spanish admirers, Simoun would redeem his people and take his revenge through violence. Rizal himself was not a revolutionary. As Anderson shows, though fiercely and steadfastly critical of the regime, he would not support the insurrection planned by Andrés Bonifacio and the secret society the Katipunan. Nonetheless, his last novel augured the changes that would come shortly after his cruel execution in 1896: “This is the feel of *El Filibusterismo*. Something is coming” (122). Not unlike the Europe that he left behind, Rizal’s fictional Philippines felt on a threshold. Can the same be said of the twenty-first-century empire that haunts *Under Three Flags*?

For recent studies of the circuits that linked the colonial and metropolitan economies, see Astrid Cubano-Iguina, *Un puente entre Mallorca y Puerto Rico: la emigración de Sóller, 1830-1930* (Colombres: Archivo de Indianos, 1993); Josep M. Delgado Ribas, “Bajo dos banderas: sobre cómo sobrevivió la Compañía General de Filipinas al Desastre del 98,” in *La nación soñada: Cuba, Puerto Rico y Filipinas ante el 98* eds. Consuelo Naranjo Orovio, Miguel Angel Puig-Samper, and Luis Miguel García Mora (Madrid: Doce Calles, 1996): 293-304; Martín Rodrigo y Alharilla, *Los Marqueses de Comillas, 1817-1925: Antonio y Claudio López* (Madrid: LID, 2000); and Josep M. Fradera, *Colonias para después de un imperio* (Barcelona: Edicions Bellaterra, 2005).