

US Occupation in the Philippines: the Disconnect between Colonizer and Colonized, and a Different Type of Resistance

The words colonialism and colonial resistance often evoke a bloody image in the mind. Conventionally, studies on colonial resistance focus on the violent tactics conquering nations used and the armed opposition of those being oppressed. American occupation in the Philippines began in a similar way. In 1899, Filipino hopes for a seamless establishment of their own republic were crushed as the Treaty of Paris effectively transferred the Philippines over to American possession after the end of the Spanish-American War (“The Philippines”). Though the Filipino people, such as Emilio Aguinaldo, fought against annexation in the Philippine-American War, by 1902 most fighting had been concluded with the Philippines as an American colony. The US didn’t fully remove its presence in the Philippines until 1946, a stretch of time that is much more overlooked than the initial war. As an occupant of the territory, the US sought to change the Philippines’ form of government, establish important infrastructure, make the colony economically dependent on the US, and alter the culture of the region. However, Filipino resistance didn’t end with the war, and it took a different form than before. Resistance manifested itself in Filipino efforts to establish a distinct ethos for themselves rather than outright (and violent) resistance to American influences. This essay aims to elucidate the gap between American aims in altering Filipino society and its reception by Filipinos as they subverted these intentions, particularly through the lens of nationalism and education.

From the perspective of Americans in power, the US was doing the Philippines a favor by reforming their society. President McKinley says as much in a 1900 interview with the

publication *The Christian Advocate* as he shares some of his reasons for deciding to colonize the archipelago:

[W]e could not leave them to themselves—they were unfit for self-government, and they would soon have anarchy and misrule worse than Spain's was; and [...] there was nothing left for us to do but to take them all, and to educate the Filipinos, and uplift and civilize and Christianize them and by God's grace do the very best we could by them, as our fellow men for whom Christ also died. (Rusling *Decision*)

This is a direct account from the executive leader of the United States stating that their attitude toward the Philippines had and the desire to impart a “better” form of society on them. To McKinley, this meant a democratic form of government and a widespread education system that would teach Filipinos how to be citizens in such a governmental system (Paulet 183-4). Joseph Ralston Hadley, vice governor of the Philippines from 1932 to 1941 even goes as far as to frame the the Philippine-American War and the revolt of Filipinos as an act inspired by Western ideologies, thus presenting the US as a new force of mentorship rather than an oppressor (Abinales 4). This approach was not entirely out of a sense of contemptuous good will, however. Americans, who had both economic and military motives in acquiring the Philippines as they wanted easier access to China and an expanded military, endeavored to justify colonization through this approach (Paulet 177).

“Civilizing” Filipinos was largely accomplished through the education system. The US vastly reformed education in the Philippines, as it had been severely lacking under Spanish rule, where only the very elite could access it (Onorato 22). They built around 10,000 schools, increasing the total number from 3,000 schools to 13,000 open to the general public spanning the years from 1903 to 1940 (Mojares 11). Americans hoped that educating the general public of the

Philippines would tamp down on objections to American colonial rule as students would learn about the benefits of an American system of government, and officials hoped students would diffuse these ideas out into their communities (Paulet 179, 191). It's important to note that American objectives shaped the education process more than the Filipinos it was created to serve. The US wanted to teach Filipino society to become virtually the same as American society (Paulet 192-3). American control of the education system, which was facilitated in English, instilled a reverence for American heroes like George Washington and Abraham Lincoln, the notions of freedom and democracy, and individualism (Onorato 24). Filipinos even celebrated America-specific holidays, such as the Fourth of July. Furthermore, though the US government asserted their education was for the eventual self-governance of Filipinos, when Filipinos would gain said independence was ultimately to be determined by America ("The Philippines").

A glaring trend throughout the American narrative of their occupation of the Philippines is the utter lack of consideration for the Filipino perspective on the issue at hand. Even those Americans who saw the actions of the US as impositional and oppressive failed to recognize Filipinos beyond a people to colonize, whether consciously or not. For example, Mark Twain critiques America's actions his satirical piece "To the Person Sitting in Darkness," in which he writes,

"There have been lies, yes; but they were told in a good cause. We have been treacherous; but that was only in order that real good might come out of apparent evil. [...] True, we have crushed a deceived and confiding people; [...] we have stamped out a just and intelligent and well-ordered republic [...] we have debauched America's honor and blackened her face before the world, but each detail was for the best. This world-

girdling accumulation of trained morals, high principles, and justice, cannot do an unright thing, an unfair thing...”

Twain here is calling out America on its righteous, self-gratifying posture on colonizing the Philippines, portraying their explanations of trying to “civilize” Filipinos as a flimsy excuse to cover up the nation’s wrongdoings. However, though he is critical of the government, his usage of the words “crushed” and “stamped out” seems to imply that he too believed that Filipino agency has been effectively destroyed, their society now firmly under the control of the US.

It’s apparent from the writings of Filipino intellectuals that Twain’s assumption proved false. Many thinkers set upon the task of how to develop Filipino nationalism during and as a result of American occupation. Some believed that the Philippines should use America as a template for their own societal improvement, such as historian, politician, and physician T. H. Pardo de Tavera. In his lecture “The Filipino Soul,” he defends the Americanization of the education system as a way to advance their society to the level of America, writing, “I do not hope or desire the Anglo-Saxon race to provoke violent acts against itself by subjecting other nations; but I rather wish that it sow the seeds of its civilization among them [...] so that the world may make use of it, without regard to race...” (147). Tavera disapproves of militarism in this excerpt, but he believes that there are certain aspects of American society that are, in fact, better than what the Philippines had that can be picked up on. Tavera’s openness for adopting American tactics shouldn’t be misinterpreted as him welcoming colonial rule; rather, he and others who thought like him intended to apply what they learned from the US to their own independent society to form a unique—and arguably better—product. Thus, it was different from the objective of Americans to create a society that strongly resembled America as well. An example of this reveals itself in the content of schooling. Over time, Filipino classrooms began to

teach their own culture besides what Americans provided: they learned about their own national heroes, folk dances, and art (Mojares 16). Additionally, US presence in the Philippines gave way to the creation of a national library, national archives, and national university among other institutions that helped unify and develop Filipino nationalism. Another example that Tavera specifically touches upon in his writing is the centralization of a Filipino language. He writes, "...we need a common common language; and this common language we are beginning to acquire with the spread of Anglo-Saxon education. This education is the only factor that can enable the Filipino people to manage and maintain their own government" (155). Here Tavera is basically saying that the Americanized education system is their surefire pathway to a successful independence, demonstrating the intrinsic link between education and nationalism. Furthermore, increased education and its cultural impact may have even increased Filipinos' desire for independence, since those "who learned English saw that their command of the language allowed them to stand up to Americans in the protection of their individual rights whether in the courts or debating halls" (Onorato 24). Rather than making them more receptive to American occupation, teaching Filipinos the construct of an Americanized government allowed them to resist the US within its own system.

Of course, not everyone was so welcoming to American-based institutions and wanted more openly distinct Filipino traits in society. Returning to the topic of a central language, there was a bit of debate over what language should be utilized. As aforementioned, English ultimately served as the main means of communication throughout the colonial era; however, some Filipinos initially pushed back against this predilection in favor of a language more representative of the Philippines at the time, either Spanish or Tagalog (Mojares 17). Even as English took preeminence, there was a continued interest in learning and preserving these more

culturally relevant languages, so much so that in 1924, the University of the Philippines established the Department of Oriental Languages (18). Some believed that while the US had been beneficial in some ways, Filipinos needed to gain independence in order to fully develop, such as scholar Jorge Bocobo. He writes on the American impact on Filipino values in his address to the American Chamber of Commerce, “Filipino Contact with the U.S.”:

That sound and stout qualities of the Filipino race are in danger, [...] There is an overwhelming tendency toward the frivolous and superficial; and the imperishable values in human existence seem to be at discount. There is likewise a growing urge toward gross materialism to the detriment of the higher and finer things of the spirit. [...] America has been able to help the Filipinos only in things material; but morally and spiritually, its influence has been unwittingly harmful. [...] Let [Filipinos] determine their own mode to life [...] this is not possible with the invasion of ideas, customs, and practices from outside, which are unsuitable for the Filipino character. This [...] is the supreme reason why the Philippines should at once be permitted her own national existence. (297, 303-4)

This excerpt serves as an example of US presence being simultaneously accepted and rejected. Bocobo acknowledges the benefits of American rule on areas like infrastructure and government, which is further bolstered by the fact that earlier on in the essay he refers to America as a “parent.” But after mentioning the positives of the US’s presence, he doesn’t shy away from elucidating how harmful he believes it’s been to Filipino culture. This excerpt in particular, which mentions the detriment to Filipino spirituality (which was majorly Christian), is an ironic twist to McKinley’s claims to elevating and Christianizing Filipino culture. Rather than Christianize Filipino society, it seems that Americans largely secularized it instead (297-8). It highlights the dissonance between what America believed itself to be doing compared to how

Filipinos saw its actions; it thus also provides insight into why they would want to resist the cultural impact of colonization.

Throughout the writings of the Filipino intellectuals, every single one yearned for independence and sought to resist American occupation, whether it be by applying American principles to Filipino constructs or trying to emphasize uniquely Filipino cultural traits. Though the intentions and accomplishments of an imperial power on a specific colony are often discussed, inspecting the interplay between what colonizers presented to those in occupied territories and what those inhabitants made of it beyond violent resistance is not talked about in depth as much as it should. Thus, a study of America's role in the Philippines is of great importance in understanding of the colonial era. The general impression of colonialism is a completely negative one, in which destruction of native societies is the primary event. The US's traces on Filipino nationalism add a shade of nuance to the topic because while America did aim to override traditional constructs in Filipino culture and society, it also served to help develop and fortify these dimensions of the Philippines.

Appendix

When next I realized that the Philippines had dropped into our laps, I confess I did not know what to do with them. I sought counsel from all sides-Democrats as well as Republicans-but got little help. I thought first we would take only Manila; then Luzon; then other islands, perhaps, also.

I walked the floor of the White House night after night until midnight; and I am not ashamed to tell you, gentlemen, that I went down on my knees and prayed to Almighty God for light and guidance more than one night. And one night late it came to me this way-I don't know how it was, but it came:

- (1) That we could not give them back to Spain-that would be cowardly and dishonorable;
- (2) That we could not turn them over to France or Germany, our commercial rivals in the Orient-that would be bad business and discreditable;
- (3) That we could not leave them to themselves-they were unfit for self-government, and they would soon have anarchy and misrule worse than Spain's was; and
- (4) That there was nothing left for us to do but to take them all, and to educate the Filipinos, and uplift and civilize and Christianize them and by God's grace do the very best we could by them, as our fellow men for whom Christ also died.

And then I went to bed and went to sleep, and slept soundly, and the next morning I sent for the chief engineer of the War Department (our map-maker), and I told him to put the Philippines on the map of the United States (pointing to a large map on the wall of his office), and there they are and there they will stay while I am President!

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