Riveraberruz on Zambrana, 'Colonial Debts: The Case of Puerto Rico (Radical Américas)'

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In Colonial Debts: The Case of Puerto Rico, Rocío Zambrana advances the argument that debt functions as a form of coloniality. By centering Puerto Rico, Zambrana demonstrates how debt actualizes, re-entrenches, and materializes the colonial condition. More pointedly, she articulates how debt operates as a form of capture, predation, and extraction wherein the race/gender/class hierarchies characteristic of coloniality are reinscribed and intensified. A project of decoloniality subsequently, she argues, can be found in turning the present into the past through the subversive interruption of debt that can operate as a form of historical reckoning.

Colonial Debts is divided into four chapters. The first chapter, “Neoliberal Coloniality,” advances an understanding of debt that is both spatial and temporal, and actualizes disposability and culpability of certain bodies through the truncation of the race/gender/class hierarchies. Here we can understand coloniality as intimately entrenched in the contemporary neoliberal economic order. The second chapter, “Colonial Exceptionality,” explores the environment of indebted life that creates a “no-place” out of the colony through the logic of disposability explored in the first chapter. Puerto Rico demonstrates the mechanisms of colonial exceptionality whereby the state of emergency is not aberrational, but rather the rule in an economy of catastrophe where the capture of value is bound to quotidian violence and decay. The third chapter, “Historical Reckoning,” unpacks the structure of debt as a social relation that indexes dispossession but also, and importantly, makes possible modes of taking account that can open up a time of reckoning that questions to whom debts are really owed. The fourth and final chapter of the book, “Subversive Interruption,” explores how action can seize the power of debt that binds through the political power of protest and failure. Importantly, Puerto Rico emerges in Colonial Debts not as a case study, an object of analysis, but rather a place from which to think from that orientation and elucidate the catastrophes of coloniality. In so doing, Zambrana opens an important conversation about the nature of coloniality from a world that is not postcolonial. Debt serves as the window into the worlds of Puerto Rico and marks the ways coloniality operates in a neoliberal economic ordering as both entrenching its mechanisms but also offering the space-time for reckoning.

The central argument of Colonial Debts rests on unpacking the way in which debt operates to entrench and promulgate coloniality. As Zambrana argues, it operates as an apparatus of capture
that generates precarity and augments blame. I want to center and engage with this insight.

Debt, for Zambrana, elucidates the social bonds that index interconnectedness and because of this fundamental social nature, debt augments blame where payment is not necessarily its end. Debt is a social relation and a mode of social power. It holds moral authority through the articulation of guilt that presumes the debtor can pay back what is owed and exploits a temporal gap that is opened up by the failure of repayment. However, if debt functions as an apparatus of coloniality in the ways that Zambrana has so aptly described, I am left wondering about the relationship between debt and personhood.

At the heart of coloniality is the way in which it assembles the subject of personhood through marking certain bodies as disposable and categorically entrenching race/gender/class as mechanisms of said dispossession. So, I wonder, can a subject that is a nonperson really ever be a subject of debt? Does debt presume a particular type of personhood, one that can instantiate guilt and blame as well as social interconnectedness? It strikes me that in the insights Zambrana offers about debt at the heart of coloniality is a deeper question about the subjects of debt and their scaffolded status as persons. If I am not considered a person in the exchanges and landings of debt through the very mechanisms of coloniality, then how, I wonder, does debt operate for the “nonperson”? Can nonpersons be the subjects of debt? There is a minimal subjecthood produced through the social mechanisms that Colonial Debts traces, but does it link to personhood? The connection between the subject of debt and a personhood is an important one in that it signals further complexities elucidated by the capture of debt that Zambrana articulates. Personhood is a central feature of how coloniality wields its power by defining the limits of the human, the living, the dead, the alive, and the disposed. Yet these features remain opaque in the project, which might be the product of the very mechanisms of debt but one that seems important to consider.

A second key insight I want to engage with is Zambrana’s articulation of resistance. Resistance to the catastrophes of debt comes via historical reckoning. The subject of debt can, as a result of the mechanisms of debt, create a space where subversive interruption is possible. The fact that debt operates as a social relation makes possible a reckoning that questions to whom debts are really owed. In the context of Puerto Rico, Zambrana elucidates this point by centering examples that reflect the possibilities of pasarse políticamente, or to politically cross the line in ways that go beyond normative measure. Here Zambrana brings to readers’ attention student strikes (2010-11) at the University of Puerto Rico, the concept of vagancia queer (queer laziness) in the face of the Banco Popular campaign centered on echar pa’lante (moving forward), and perreo intenso (a political articulation of reggaeton’s style of dance) in the context of the 2019 protests and ousting of the governor, Ricardo Roselló. For Zambrana, Vagancia queer indexes a hopeful failure that interrupts capitalistic norms of production while perreo intenso operates as an instrument of public disobedience that interrupts the body as territory and colony. The examples speak to the way Puerto Rico emerges throughout the text as not merely a case study but a point of contact (as well as divergence) in the histories that structure global coloniality as well as its resistances. Puerto Rico is the orienting force of Colonial Debts. It is centered in a capacity that is important to name given that Puerto Rico rarely emerges as a place from which to do philosophy, let alone from which to draw on when trying to understand coloniality. It is itself a peripheralized space, albeit a very complex one, as it sits at the crosscurrents on the borders of empires. Puerto Rico remains a colony and an occupied state; its economy illuminates the ways debt operates as an apparatus of coloniality as well as how, in
the context of Puerto Rico, historical reckoning demands a conversation about reparations in the context of decolonial praxis—reparations understood as taking back what is owed, a form of dismantling the power that binds debt. The afterlife of the colonial condition in Puerto Rico does not carry a temporal after, but rather the past remains the present in multiple senses. Hence, the project of decoloniality is one where the present is made past. Reparations make an intervention on the material conditions, not merely existential, that have the power to unbid the present and give it new life, new meaning—a fact that is made clearer by centering Puerto Rico.

The fact that Puerto Rico is the location from which these arguments develop is important. However, this fact needs to be taken in context, and leaves me with the closing thought of divergences. If Puerto Rico is not a case study, then how can we use the insights Zambrana gives us to breathe life into other histories that need to be undone and made anew? Zambrana gestures toward this possibility but at the same the possibility is limited by the contingencies of what it means to think from Puerto Rico. So, I wonder, what are more specific ways in which we can take back what is owed? How can this be done? And finally, what lessons extend beyond the context of Puerto Rico? What are the specific ways in which Puerto Rico sits as a node of both convergence and divergence in the stories of global coloniality? There seems to be a tension here, a tension about how to think from a place without violently objectifying. The tension is unresolved and yet an important one to identify, as the project Zambrana is putting forth forthes the possibility of extension beyond Puerto Rico. I offer this reflection as a broader philosophical one, however, in that thinking through specificity (Puerto Rico) puts into question how that specificity expands, moves, shifts as its insights travel. What would it mean to ensure that Puerto Rico not be a case study even as it so importantly needs to be looked at through the lenses offered in Colonial Debts?

Colonial Debts makes an important and timely contribution to Puerto Rican studies, to philosophies of coloniality and decoloniality, and theories of political economy. It opens windows to worlds that for many only show up on the fringes of history, as an afterthought. However, as Colonial Debts makes clear, Puerto Rico is far from a fringe story, and its complexities are brought to life in this book. Our understandings of debt, reparations, coloniality, and its resistances must, at minimum, include Puerto Rico. To this effect, Colonial Debts succeeds in demonstrating how debt operates in the colony that is still a very present reality, revealing a past that continues to violently permeate the present and thus demands critical attention.

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