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## **The Empire of Right: U.S. Imperial Exceptionalism in a Global Frame**

**Book. The American Colonial State in the Philippines:  
Global Perspectives. Editors, Julian Go and Ann L. Foster.**

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# Review Essay

## The Empire of Right: U.S. Imperial Exceptionalism in a Global Frame

JULIAN GO AND ANN L. FOSTER, EDS.

### **The American Colonial State in the Philippines: Global Perspectives**

Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2003.  
Philippine edition, Pasig City: Anvil, 2005.

Glenn Anthony May once acknowledged in passing that “there is . . . no generally recognized subfield of U.S. imperial history” (May 1987, 178). He could have extended this rather rare statement of the obvious—without fear of contradiction from any quarters—to the conspicuous absence of U.S. imperialism studies in general. I am speaking, at least, of the kinds of studies and fields that have been flourishing for British, French, Dutch, Japanese (or even the older Iberian) imperialisms over the past few decades. It is not for nothing, therefore, that we remain unable to point to a related and established field of U.S./Philippine postcolonial studies, one recognized by the American academy or internationally and on the same footing as Anglophone, Francophone, or Lusophone postcolonial critiques (surely the most cutting-edge transdisciplinary formations since the 1980s).

It is only much recently, perhaps from the early 1990s, that a semblance of U.S. imperialism and Filipino postcolonial studies has emerged, pio-

neered by an unlikely mix of scholars and critics: the so-called “New Americanists” in the field of American Studies (the literary critic Amy Kaplan is the most prominent) and a new species of postcolonialist scholars—the young but gifted “Filipino Americanists” now impressively making their mark in the subfield of U.S. Ethnic/Asian American Studies. Some sociologizing explanations have been adduced for this long-due and salutary development, which had the effect of finally ending the long drought of Philippine studies or in academic coverage of things and questions Philippine within American research universities and institutions. This parchy drought, this development of academic underdevelopment—only intermittently quenched here and there in the spasmodic attempts at survival by the long-endangered species of U.S. Filipinology—has been the invidious result of what I myself and a few other observers (such as Amy Kaplan) have critiqued as the politics of invisibility and self-denial of U.S. imperialism. This curious U.S. imperialist politics of self-invisibility (arguably part of its formidable arsenal for self-reproduction) mandated, for the longest time, what is now widely acknowledged as the invisibilization of the Philippines and Filipinos themselves in American academic and public culture conversations.

The volume under review eloquently speaks to the state of scholarly and institutional affairs thus described and is an event made possible, I argue, by the turn from chronic invisibility to partial visibility of Filipinos and the Philippines in the American and international academic/public arenas. What, exactly, might have occasioned this indubitably radical turn? Some have argued that the 1991 Gulf War of Bush the First and, earlier, the end of the Cold War by 1989, have both worked to effectuate a critical distance of the U.S. from its own history of imperial practices and experiments: a record so studded with numberless entries with the passage of the fabled “American Century” that it is almost pointless to dwell on even some of the most representative samples. The U.S. neocolonization of the Philippines, since the bloody Philippine-American War of 1898–1910s, is the most obvious and central case in point. The Gulf War, observers argued, marked the advent of an even newer type of U.S. imperial adventurism, thus presumably rendering obsolete its previous expressions. The end of the Cold War, before it, marked no less than “the end of history” itself, to invoke Francis Fukuyama’s fearless and celebratory forecast of the ultimate triumph of liberal democracy that the U.S. presumably embodied and now promotes with singular fanaticism. Whether one is of the view that both landmark events worked to usher a radically new and more formidable type of U.S. global power, or nurses the belief that by making U.S. hegemony certain and unquestioned

these events paradoxically wrote *finis* to it (the old rise-and-fall of the empire argument), leading scholars agree that we can now speak of a unipolar regime reigning over planetary life and that “globalization” is merely a euphemism to designate the New World Order that is thereby actively reproduced and maintained (Negri and Hardt 2000).

Another sociologizing explanation, to which I lean more, is the demographic drama of Filipino American emergence, when Filipino migration to and settlement in the neocolonizer’s country had reached such a critical mass by the millennial turn that the U.S. census marked it as next only to its Chinese counterpart in significance and scope (with predictions that Filipino Americans are poised and certain to become the largest Asian-origin settler community of the twenty-first-century United States). It is a demographic drama impossible to ignore and needing to be accounted for. Thus have the American academic and publishing establishments found themselves, in recent years and with the unprecedented influx of Filipino American/immigrant graduate apprentices and academic professionals into their groves and ranks, becoming the major site for what comparatist literary scholar Lisa Lowe (2006, vii) has aptly called “a revisiting of the [U.S.] empire by its imperial past,” a revisiting demanded by its postcolonial Filipino American citizens and immigrants (see also Tiongson 2006, 26–42).

In these lights, the release of Julian Go and Ann Foster’s *The American Colonial State in the Philippines: Global Perspectives* by Duke University Press in 2003—the very year of the U.S. invasion of Iraq—is no less than uncanny and auspicious. For it, in effect, makes the potentially controversial argument that current and presumably novel modes of American imperial power are substantially traceable to the “new” and exceptionalist experiment in enlightened U.S. colonial rule in the Philippines slightly over a hundred years back. Go, a prolific scholar who received his training in historical sociology from the University of Chicago, and Foster, who coordinates the Center for International Affairs at the New Hampshire Institute of Politics and a historian by vocation, are to be commended for editing and publishing this volume of essays; Anvil Publishing-Manila, yet again living up to its record of high-quality publishing, is also to be congratulated for making this important book locally available in a handy and affordable edition by 2005.

Germinated and begun from a conference panel at the 1997 Chicago convention of the Association for Asian Studies, which featured the editors’ early work, this ambitious project seeks to account for U.S. colonial state-building in the Philippines and the ideology of American exceptionalism that subtended and indelibly shaped it within the context of what Go, in his

editorial essay, calls “the global-imperial field.” For the editors and contributors, U.S. imperialist-exceptionalist claims in respect of its Philippine neo-colonial experiment only cohere precisely through the agency of inter-imperial comparisons and contrasts, long demanded as a necessary framework but little, if ever, assayed. U.S. colonial state building in the Philippines in the aftermath of the Philippine-American War could only be construed as singularly novel—which is to say that it is doubtful if “in the world’s history, anything similar has been attempted,” in the triumphant words of Philippine Commission Secretary Daniel Williams (quoted in Go’s introduction, 1–2)—when ranged against the presumably more tyrannical regimes established in the colonial world by its European and Japanese peers or even precedents. Although some might quibble, as I do, with this volume’s net effect of affirming the old shibboleths and self-righteous canard of imperial American exceptionalism in such otherwise critical work as it offers, no one can quarrel with the wisdom and gesture of beginning to smash the self-protective insularity of U.S. imperialism as this book actually makes, and makes eminently possible. As editor Go rightly argues, “A global perspective on U.S. colonial rule in the Philippines serves as an exciting and fruitful approach. It opens novel lines of inquiry overlooked by existing studies and sheds new light on old questions” (25). Not least, an approach of this kind, never tried or, if tried, never sustained, by previous Filipinists, can show “how inter-imperial and cross-colonial connections shaped the efforts and self-fashioning of U.S. colonial agents,” to cite just one instance (*ibid.*).

Go’s cogent and elegant editorial essay sets the project within the larger frames of comparative imperialism studies and “institutional rubrics of ‘Philippine Studies’ and ‘Philippine-American relations’” (13), and his own contribution is a solidly researched comparative critique of U.S. colonial state building, including the tutelary political education that such colonial states administered, in the differential sites of its Philippine and Puerto Rican territories (182–216). Go’s latter essay here nicely complements and builds upon the pioneering efforts of University of Puerto Rico social scientist Lanny Thompson to specify the apparatuses of U.S. colonial rule in accord with the local conditions, and the veridical claims of U.S. imperial ethnologies of its various subject peoples in the Asia-Pacific and Latino-Caribbean regions. And apart from coeditor Foster’s extremely interesting discussion of salient changes in American narcotics policy and the regulation of opium-use in the Philippines within a panoramic canvas of colonial Southeast Asia for the years 1898 to 1910 (92–117), this anthology features the contributions of five other scholars working within American, East Asian, and Southeast Asian

historiographic, sociological, and political science traditions, who are now spurred, in these essays, to coextend their own specific inquiries with the expansive optics of the global-imperial field being surveyed even as the axial focus remains the establishment of the U.S. Philippine colonial state.

Paul Kramer's essay (43–91) thoroughly updates and critically refines the impossibly voluminous literature on the role of Anglo-Saxonism as an ideological rampart for the legendary “Anglo-American rapprochement” first comprehensively mapped by diplomatic historian Charles Campbell Jr. (1957/1980). This rapprochement, graphically detailed by Kramer in the language of Anglo-Saxon racial kinship, emerged at the time of the U.S. conquest of the Philippines and effectively supervened the residual and historic bitterness between the U.S. and Great Britain as a consequence of the 1776 American Revolution and the 1895 Venezuela border disputes. Readers will find Kramer's extensive documentary and explanatory notes a marvel of scholarly rigor and a helpful guide for navigating the shoals of a literature on the subject that is huge and still keeps growing. East Asianist Paul Barclay's highly informative and well-conducted comparisons of relatively benign U.S. colonial rule over the Gran Cordillera Central Igorots and Japan's relatively more brutal treatment of Taiwan's aborigines (217–55) constitute, to my mind, this collection's most surprising and brightest gems. Rarely do we see American and Japanese colonizations—both recently and correctly tagged by Tokyo University international relations scholar Kiichi Fujiwara as “latecomer empires”—compared with such sensitivity and specificity (involving as it does colonial policy toward minority subject populations). Barclay's essay is a model to be emulated for any difficult attempt at comparative colonial/imperial critique.

Donna Amoroso's critical considerations in the American and British colonial policies toward Moro and Malay populations, and Patricio Abinales's very suggestive—but still underdeveloped—discussions of the reciprocal effects of metropolitan and colonial political structures and processes upon each other are the sorts of careful work we have come to expect from this powerhouse couple of scholars. Vincent Boudreau's essay, a little too distended for comfort (with its efforts to compare the Philippine and Vietnam experiences), ends up offering a provocative explanation for the kinds of Filipino nationalism and anticolonial resistance that have emerged in the colonial and postindependence periods. But it is low yield: there is nothing that he says on this score that Rey Iletto has not already touched upon in recent work.

My only problem with this anthology is its working although implicit assumption that from 1901, or with the arrival of the two Philippine Com-

missions (Schurman and Taft) shortly before, the American colonial state-building project proceeded unmolested, as if the Philippine-American War that was coterminously raging and against which, in fact, the state-building project was directed, could be ignored. This kind of assumption is insupportable, for it has the effect of uncritically affirming the U.S. dismissal of the Aguinaldo republic as a competing center of power—with a state-building project of its own, which it was heroically erecting upon the war's ruins—and as the important factor/Other crucial to the formulation of American imperial power itself. It is too bad that the editors and the volume had to repeat such a dismissive gesture of a century ago, whose fatal consequences we are still reeling from in the present.

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