

PLAS

Program in Latin
American Studies

Princeton University

Boletín

Bulletin

Boletim

Winter 1998



1898

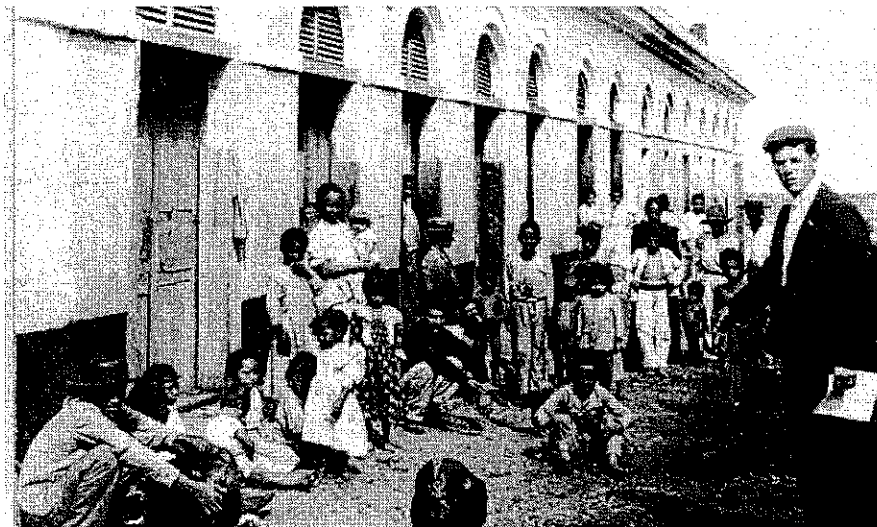
by

Arcadio Díaz Quiñones

The road that leads from 1898 to our national and post-national 1998 is long and winding. An emblematic year, 1898 appears like an undisputed historical marker, a crucial turning point, but its meaning is quite elusive. It is still surrounded with obscurities and with elaborate deceptions centering on questions of empire, nationality, race and religion. Undoubtedly, the wars in Cuba (1895-1898) and in the Philippines (1896-1902), as well as other U.S. interventions in the Dominican Republic, Haiti and Panama, generated a new cartography for business and military purposes, as well

as an impressive array of institutions in the fields of health and education. There is no aspect of Spanish, Cuban, Filipino, Puerto Rican or North American life that was not marked by the geo-political and cultural consequences of '98, from the history of a new displacement and mobility of workers to the development of nationalist historiographies in the former Spanish colonies and of "Latin American" studies in the United States.

1898 is also the story of a complex bilingual, cultural experience. A significant literary and journalistic production was stimulated by U.S. hegemony and by the astonishing turn of events: from chronicles to travel books and business and tourist guides to orient the eyes of the North American viewer, from military memoirs and extensive



American photographer in Puerto Rico (courtesy of the McConnie Family, Puerto Rico)

missionary reports to major scientific studies. A new photographic visibility and iconography of Spain's former colonies became available in the press and in books such as *Our New Possessions* or *Our Islands and Their People*, which allow us to study a range of attitudes, values and racial biases implicit and explicit in the United States. Equally important, the humiliating defeat of Spain in the Philippines and Cuba, the "virile" avant-garde of Theodore Roosevelt and his "rough riders," and the fear of what seemed to be an all-powerful, all-pervasive "Americanization" encouraged a long debate in Latin America in which writers like Eugenio María de Hostos, Rubén Darío and José Enrique Rodó – to name but a few – participated. These are far-reaching issues.

Nevertheless, it is revealing that both in Spain and in the United States the term "Spanish-American War" took hold in the official vocabulary, putting a reassuring distance between the two powers and Cubans and Filipinos, as if only imperial masters were historical subjects. It is certainly no accident that this language has shaped historical understanding

ever since. These were largely the terms set by the United States and Spain in the negotiations that culminated, under the guns of the victors, in the Treaty of Paris (1898). Cubans, Filipinos and Puerto Ricans were not even entitled to sit at the negotiating table.

Nationalist narratives seriously limit the field, blocking the view of other historical and perhaps discordant actors. This is not to deny the importance of nationalist historiographies or to claim that we cannot learn from them. But linear, continuous narratives tend to erase the political and cultural interactions with both the old and new empires. They also exclude connections and interactions between the islands and neighboring territories in the Caribbean or with the process in the Pacific.

Perhaps it might be profitable to begin with a history of how 1898 and its consequences has been written and rewritten in the countries involved. It would be, in some measure, the history of certain keywords and silences revelatory of how 1898 was experienced and communicated. In Spain, for example, it rapidly became the year of the "Disaster," the waste and sadness of the wars and the devastating destruction of the Spanish fleet in the Philippines and Cuba that energized the literature of the "Generation of '98." In that literature the old colonies were only a diffuse landscape behind the Spanish national debates. The proof is that significant interlocutors – a true variety of voices – seem hardly to be noticed in Spain and the United States, in spite of the fact that committed intellectuals such as Puerto Ricans Ramón Emeterio Betances, Salvador Brau, Luis Lloréns Torres, Pedro Albizu Campos, Antonio S. Pedreira, or the Cubans Fernando Ortiz and Enrique José Varona, reflected on the ruins of the Spanish empire. José Martí, who as a very young man had been marked deeply by the experience of prison during the first Cuban war of independence (1868-1878), elaborated in an enthralling narrative his harrowing testimony of "The Political Prison in Cuba." Taken together, the writings and the political practices of these figures represent an enormous project, but for the most part they remain unknown in Spain and in the United States, or do not enjoy sufficient authority to be references in the debates.

The silencing of the former colonies in the Spanish debate blocked understanding of how the military and colonial culture and the war in Cuba and the Philippines had transformed Spanish society itself, with consequences visible until the Civil War of 1936. 1898 in Spain did not carry – although there are exceptions – a critical examination of its own imperial history, nor a knowledge of the great military leaders of the Cuban war, like Máximo Gómez, Antonio Maceo and Calixto García, or the Filipino patriots José Rizal, Andrés Bonifacio and Emilio Aguinaldo. Also, very little was said about the consequences of the terror of the concentration camps in Cuba. Thousands of Cubans were rounded up in such camps, a policy carried out with enthusiasm by the Spanish general Valeriano Weyler.

From another angle, relentless negation — always with strong racist shadings — normally silences the Philippine-American War and Filipino voices. The Caribbean is also excluded from the United States' national history, in spite of massive immigrations of Haitians, Dominicans, Puerto Ricans, and Cubans, of decisive colonial interventions of the United States in the region, and of the considerable body of scholarship created by "native," European and North American scholars. Suffice it to remember that José Martí, who lived in New

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David Myhre
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Drawings by Consuelo Gotay,
Puerto Rico

"1898," continued from page 2 . . .

York from 1880 on, saw the city as a powerful emblem of modernity, became an observer of its politics and culture, and wrote fundamental essays on Emerson, Grant and Whitman. Admiration for the United States was mixed with reservations: Martí, like the Puerto Rican Betances, saw U.S. power as profoundly threatening to the Caribbean and Latin America. But it was in U.S. territory that Martí founded the Cuban Revolutionary Party in 1892, preparing for war in activity all along the East Coast and in Tampa and Key West.

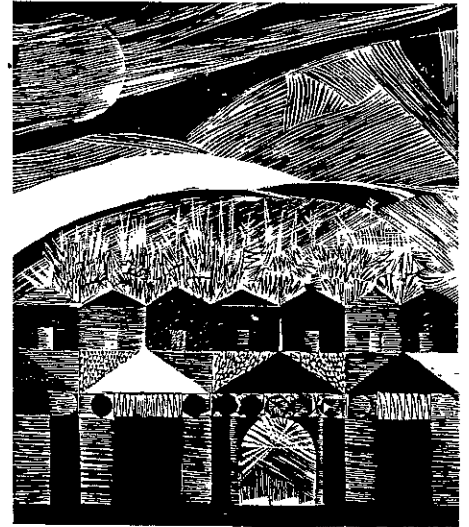
On the other hand, these connections also tend to disappear from Cuban and Puerto Rican nationalist historiographies which have their own insiders and outsiders. Here again the crux is language. In Puerto Rico, for example, the "autonomy" conceded by Spain in 1897 has been intensely mythologized. But, paradoxically, the cruel war in Cuba is seldom recalled, in spite of the fact that the Charter of Autonomy granted to Puerto Rico cannot be dissociated from that context. In parallel, the exclusion of Puerto Rico from Cuban historiography is especially noteworthy. Very often, Cuban historical discourse limits itself to the use of Puerto Rico to underline triumphant distinction in a simple story which allows little concentration on internal conflicts: Cuba, converted into the norm of a heroic struggle toward a fully decolonized national culture; Puerto Rico, the colony that never made it to be a nation-state, remaining unfulfilled and "incomplete."

Neither has it been easy to study the contradictory Spanish legacy still binding the former colonies. It has been seen from two positions that entail strong emotional and political reactions. Puerto Rican debate is a

case in point. On the one hand, there is a rhetorical *Hispanidad*, similar in some ways to that of the Franco regime in Spain: Spanish Catholic culture and language extolled as a form of opposing the "Yankees" and of cultural preservation. This archetypal and White *Hispanidad*, intended to emphasize the ongoing link with the "Mother Country," has simultaneously served to silence the centrality of the Afro-Caribbean world and the importance of freedom of religion after 1898. On the other hand, there is a kind of antipathy regarding all that is Spanish, generated *between empires* by the desire felt by many to identify themselves without reservations with a "modern" and "progressive" North American culture.

Those two different perceptions have indeed forestalled a full consideration of the cultural, ethnic, and political complexity of Spanish legacy as well as of the intensity of African cultures – and of racism – in Cuba and Puerto Rico. There is yet another complex irony: this polarization has made it difficult to see that the commercial, political and cultural links with the United States were established long before 1898. This story is anything but simple: it is rather a process unfolding within the histories of the United States and Spain during the 19th century. Things slowly changed as the century progressed, and the changes have a lot to do with trade and the history of sugar, coffee and tobacco in the islands, as well as with liberal, anti-colonial and abolitionist traditions.

How to return to 1898 from our own 1998? There is no perfect road. Instead, the centennial incites us to ponder anew a labyrinth of segmented images, a puzzle and a set of paradoxes whose significance cannot be penetrated completely: it depends in some measure on the



present and on new projects. It is the story of different points of view, positions and evasions that do not necessarily coincide with the space of the "nation." As Edward Said suggests in *Culture and Imperialism*, there are ways in which we can "reconceive the imperial experience in other than compartmentalized terms." Perhaps it might be possible to rethink the contested space *between empires*, the new political and cultural frontiers stimulated by the events of 1898. Participants in those events were in a position of having to navigate institutions that were not equipped to handle the range of problems hurled into their arenas. The enduring impact of the old and new empires on consciousness and institutions deserves more attention. In these years in which the nation-state has lost its political and utopian monopoly, the difficult and challenging alternative is to open another interpretative horizon that would go far beyond the necessary but insufficient national histories, and to propose new points of departure toward another memory.

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