

The Virgin Islands Consortium

American Colonialism In The USVI: Series Introduction

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Introduction: *For the American creed, the democratic dogma cannot be reconciled with colonialism. As the Governor of Puerto Rico remarked in the Congressional hearings on Public Law 600, no Americans can be possessions of other Americans. The effort to reconcile possession with American-ness has, accordingly, been a failure in both logic and life; and, in Puerto Rico, it has produced the phenomenon of what has been aptly termed American anti-colonial imperialism -Gordon Lewis, Puerto Rico: A New Constitution in American Government.*

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It is hard to believe that the one-hundredth year of American occupation is upon the people of the United States Virgin Islands. However, the United States of America purchased these islands—St. Thomas, St. John, and St. Croix—from Denmark for twenty five million and the islands were formally transferred on March 31st, 1917. This day is commemorated in the territory as “Transfer Day” and the upcoming Transfer Day Centennial of 2017 raises a host of pertinent questions about our time under the American flag. It also begs us to deliberate about our future. What is our vision for our beloved home and how might we achieve these dreams?

As we look to our future we must consider the question, “how are we to understand this complex and incredibly paradoxical relationship between the United States of America and its colonial possessions?” As Gordon Lewis points out in the aforementioned 1953 piece on Puerto Rico, America’s democratic dogma is not easily reconciled with the coloniality of American power, to use Anibal Quijano’s wording. The prevailing American narrative frames the United States’ rise to global dominance as the history of an underdog that defeated greater imperial forces in a revolutionary war against empire. The American colonies won independence from Great Britain in 1776 through revolutionary war. This history of resistance and the individual and collective pursuit of the American Dream drives the discourse towards that of American exceptionalism (Go 2012; Pease 2009), the notion that America breaks away from European logics of domination to be “the leader of the free world.” Recent leaders in American history have echoed the concept of American exceptionalism.

In 2009, President Barack Obama stated, “America is not the crude stereotype of a self-interested empire. The United States has been one of the greatest sources of progress that the world has ever known. We were born out of revolution against empire. We were founded upon the ideal that all are created equal, and we have shed blood and struggled for centuries to give meaning to those words-- within our borders, and around the world. We are shaped by every culture, drawn from every end of the Earth, and dedicated to a single concept: E pluribus unum—‘Out of many, one’.” This particular opinion was also echoed by many of President Obama’s predecessors. Woodrow Wilson, Harry Truman, George W. Bush and many others made similar statements throughout the course of American history.

Yet, Gordon Lewis and the Puerto Rican governor that he cites in his text are correct to point out the glaring discrepancy between America’s prevailing ideologies and the ongoing marginalization of America’s colonial subjects in Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands, the Northern Mariana Islands, American Samoa, and Guam. While this blog focuses primarily on American colonialism in the U.S.V.I, Bartholomew Sparrow (2006) points out that the inhabitants of all of America’s territories are “second class citizens”. Burnett and Marshall (2010) argue that the 1901 to 1922 Insular Cases determined that the predominantly non-white people of America’s possessions would be classified as “foreign in a domestic sense”. In the U.S. Virgin Islands, we see and feel this marginalization in several ways. U.S. Virgin Islanders have truncated voting rights as people in the territory cannot vote for the President of the United States while residing in the Virgin Islands, limited political sovereignty since the territories are placed under the jurisdiction of the Secretary of the Interior, peripheral economies that cater to the

metropole, schemas of racial difference, and no constitutional right to citizenship.

While the last 98 years of American occupation in the U.S. Virgin Islands can aptly be termed “American colonialism”, Americans on the mainland and in the territory are often hesitant to use this particular wording. Colonialism is a heavy word. It carries the weight of European expansion, settler colonial violence against Indigenous people, slavery, systemic racism, hetero-sexist patriarchy, and the rise of unchecked predatory capitalism. Many may shy away from the term American colonialism because they perceive America to be a “soft power” and the Organic Act of 1936 increased local autonomy and dismantled the more formal aspects of colonial government in the U.S. Virgin Islands. Yet, we must also recognize that these efforts to increase autonomy have not necessarily decolonized the U.S. Virgin Islands.

In short, colonialism is the systemic process by which a socio-political power acquires, settles, and controls an external territory and its people. Colonialism is a complex system of domination. Colonizers acquire new territories and maintain control of these spaces through several methods. Political and economic marginalization are key facets of colonialism. People in colonies do not have political sovereignty and their economies are often exploited to benefit the colonizing nation’s economy. However, as Stuart Hall, Frantz Fanon, and others remind us, colonial and imperial power is also rooted in language, knowledge, and systems of representation. Aimé Césaire sums up colonialism in one word, “thingification,” a system with no human contact only relations of “domination and submission”.

The Virgin Islands Youth Advocacy Coalition is working with the Decolonizing the USVI blog (www.decolonizingtheusvi.com) to create this series on American Colonialism in the U.S. Virgin Islands. With the Transfer Day Centennial on the horizon, we hope that this ongoing discussion of the history of the U.S. Virgin Islands and the nature of American colonialism might help us decolonize one of the seventeen remaining non-self governing territories in the world. We hope that this series might increase awareness and give voice to local challenges. We recognize that several scholars in the Academy and many members of the U.S.V.I community are doing a lot of work to address the colonality of American power in our home. We would love for this blog series to serve as a bridge between the Academy and the community. Ultimately, this is a space where we can hold a “reasonin’ session,” to use Rastafari languaging, about freedom and decolonization.

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