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## Imperial Blues: On Whitewashing Dictatorship in the 21st Century

By Miguel A. Cruz-Díaz

May 31, 2016



“For goodness sakes, this is the 21st century. We’ve got to get over what happened 50, 100, 200 years ago and let’s make money for everybody.”

— Hillary Clinton

It seems as though empires also get the blues from time to time. Sometimes empire, like the rest of us, suffers from a crisis of confidence and needs to find itself, and it looks like our American empire has finally found a more relaxing way of flexing its muscles other than bombing brown people in the Middle East. On Friday the 19<sup>th</sup> of May MSNBC joyously celebrated the push towards a bipartisan deal to approve a bill that would provide Puerto Rico with much needed debt relief for its economic woes. The title of the article says it all: “Despite some issues, Democrats get behind Puerto Rico bill”. Even Hillary Clinton, the Democrat’s presumptive nominee, came out in favor of the bill: “without any means of addressing this crisis”, Clinton said, “too many Puerto Ricans will continue to suffer”. Clinton expressed that she had some “concerns” regarding the nature of the oversight committee that would rule over the island, but nevertheless she supports the bill. All hail bipartisanship! What a stroke of luck that the Puerto Rican debt crisis has joined both parties in their attempt at providing debt relief! Isn’t there a disarming nature to that? No relief effort could be bad. Itch relief, pain relief... all of these things are great. Yet this bill seems awfully familiar, and that familiarity quickly becomes full recognition after a passing glance at it. Regurgitation, it seems, is an old political ploy, and it is present here in full force. The more things change, right? First it was H.R. 4900, and now it’s H.R. 5278. Indeed, this is a second attempt at passing the beloved “Promesa”.

Hillary Clinton’s support for the “Promesa” bill should not be at all surprising. Clinton has time and again trampled on Puerto Rico. The Democratic Party’s Clintonista wing’s preferred scare-tactic revolves around a Donald Trump presidency, but Trump is a symptom of current political indolence, the product of McCarthyism, the Red Scare, and Fox News. Clinton is a vector of transmission of this disease. She is against the release of our political prisoner, Oscar López Rivera. She represents the most reactionary conservative elements of her party and is inexcusably tied to the neoliberal agenda of Wall Street. Is it at all surprising that she would support a bill that seeks to impose a neocolonial Congressional dictatorship on Puerto Rico?

Recognizing the second-hand wolf in shiny new wolf’s clothing explains an overpowering and nauseating sense of déjà vu that I cannot seem to shake off as I write this column. I blame those imperial blues that force this constant revisiting of why these “debt relief” bills are such insults to the very idea of democracy. It is a draining experience that always leaves me feeling as if I were standing in the middle of a field of manure. We have inherited and maintained a neoliberal political class that seems hell-bent on shoveling an ever-expanding pile of feces as a main course all the while the corporate media presents it all tied up in a neat little bow. It is exhausting and demoralizing to the extreme. And yet here we are once more, pushed face-first into the open-air sewer of empire under the cover of “relief”. The rancid stench of waste is what passes for the political system of this here United States in its entire late neoliberal splendor. It is the excrement of a system bought and paid for by vulture capitalists that is being shoveled down the throats of over three million of its citizens, some of whom welcome such a contemptuous feast with rapturous fervor. Any scraps from our masters are, certainly, always welcome are they not?

Before I continue I do believe that some clarification is in order. While my political character is heavily indebted to anti-nationalism and anarchism, my cultural identity as an individual is first and foremost as a Puerto Rican. Our American citizenship was only granted to my forefathers and mothers in 1917, nearly twenty years after the United States invaded the island. I’ve always seen this move as conveniently expedited on the eve of the United State’s entry into the First

World War, so that Puerto Ricans could swell the number of troops being massacred in the European killing fields. That citizenship has been paid in blood time and time again. And make no mistake that it's a second-class citizenship built on a colonial lie that claims that my people have self-determination. Bills like "Promesa", resurrected in any shape or form from the dead and pushed back into abhorrent life, thoroughly destroys any notion of self-rule.

The annihilation of Puerto Rico's status quo does, however, bring with it a silver lining. Besides for the festive air of watching local politicians running around like freshly decapitated poultry it also severely damages the standing fiction of a bilateral agreement between colony and colonizer. If anything this situation has served to underscore the complete disconnect between reality and most political factions on the island, a disconnect that can at times provide for darkly humorous undertones. At this point I feel the need to engage in a quick-and-dirty primer on the political culture on the island of Puerto Rico in order to draw a clearer picture for the non-Puerto Rican reader. Bear with me, please; it's a somewhat Byzantine picture.

The biggest alienated group seems to be the Popular Democratic Party, historically tied to the birth and eventual decomposition of the Commonwealth status quo. Having the current governor, one of the most underwhelming governors in Puerto Rican history, as the party head has terribly weakened the *populares*, and the ever-present specter of the economic junta only seems to reaffirm the argument that the present political arrangement is done for. The party has also gradually but steadily shifted to the right, becoming more and more conservative as time passes by. This conservative drift is also apparent in the Democratic Party, and many parallels can be drawn between both political groups.

The pro-statehood New Progressive Party, meanwhile, seems to have jettisoned both progressiveness and common sense simultaneously. In the midst of running a contentious primary between the current resident commissioner in Washington Pedro Pieruissi, a voiceless "representative" of the colony with the political relevance of your common variety garden gnome statue, and Ricardo Rosselló, the son of former governor Pedro Rosselló and heir apparent to the governorship. Rosselló Sr.'s eight years in power were marked by controversy and corruption scandals, a reputation that plagues his son who is also followed by allegations of academic plagiarism.

Last and certainly least is the pro-independence Puerto Rican Independence Party. If there ever was a party in need of self-discovery this one is most certainly it. While the PDP is unashamedly pro-colonial, or rather "pro-Commonwealth" and the NPP is also similarly subservient to the whims of the United States while wildly gesturing for attention, the *pipiolos* (as they are commonly known on the island) claim to represent the independence-centric vote. The truth of the matter is that a large percentage of Puerto Rican *independentistas* do not vote at all in the general elections as they follow a strategy of electoral non-participation. As a result the PIP is lucky to draw 3% of the electorate in general elections. The PIP is also notoriously male-dominated, with only one female senator currently seated in the island's legislature.

These three parties represent the mainstream apparatus of colonial administration on the island. They are set up by their respective allegiances to a specific formulation for the island's political status, but in reality they are set up to administer the island itself. Both the NPP and the PDP

share the booty of a two-party monopoly on power while the PIP is there as a symbolic outlier of resistance that has never really had any political weight on the island's political landscape other than, perhaps, the effective resistance to the U.S. Navy's occupation of Vieques Island.

In recent years there has been an attempt by non-traditional groups to break this stranglehold on electoral politics. The most important of these is the Puerto Rican Worker's Party, an attempt at establishing a more inclusive third way approach to Puerto Rican politics that is not implicitly tied to the status question, although there has been a noticeable level of tension between the pro-statehood and nationalist factions within the party as of late. While this movement is generally viewed positively by many it is still a victim of traditional Puerto Rican political sectarianism.

Finally there is the question of the traditional left on the island. I have previously mentioned my misgivings on the state of the left on Puerto Rico, and I will not dwell too long on this subject, but it must be mentioned for completion's sake. The traditional Puerto Rican left suffers from severe obsolescence brought by a blind obedience to orthodox statism and a problematic lack of self-criticism. In a way the Puerto Rican left is frozen in time: a fossilized cult of personality based on Fidel Castro's revolutionary Cuba (and later Chavez's "Bolivarian Revolution") that demands absolute obedience to discipline. It is almost a Leninist understanding of socialism devoid of critiques from the likes of Rosa Luxemburg and the Continental and British Left. Finally there is also a virulent strand of nationalism that often combines itself with this interpretation of the left and would feel more at home in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century than the early 21<sup>st</sup>.

This is of course, a picture painted with wide brush strokes and the Devil is always in the details, but this overview is as possible as a brief primer can be. The real issue, however, is where does this political maelstrom leave Puerto Rican reactions to this new assault on its sovereignty? Not surprisingly in a divided, dysfunctional mess. The two major parties have been caught in the raging (un)civil war taking place within the Democratic Party and severely weakened by the more aggressive strain of U.S. colonialism severely eroding their reasons for existing in the first place. Independentistas and the left have also been divided between those that demand ideological purity and abstention and those that see a chance at serious decolonization efforts with Bernie Sanders. Meanwhile a large number of Puerto Ricans themselves claim to support the imposition of the junta, to the anger of many local public intellectuals. However I believe that this apparent support for the junta is in itself deceptive. After decades of political erosion caused by the local political class's slow suicide the island's citizens are feeling a great deal of disenfranchisement. This is probably manifested in open contempt for existing politicians and the belief that the oversight committee will eventually punish those that are perceived as responsible for the crisis in the first place. I do believe that there will be a sharp reversal of this support once the repercussions of this bill become more evident.

Imperial blues are problematic because they affect many across nationalities. Establishing this economic junta, I have stated before, is simply a whitewashed implementation of empire. The media has made a commendable effort at selling this move as economic relief to an American audience that by and large do not even know that Puerto Ricans are American citizens themselves. With its severe divisions and complete lack of communication between fractious factions Puerto Rico is at a severe disadvantage to resisting the imposition of this project and

forfeiting its limited democracy under the American empire. The situation looks grim, and a Trump or Clinton presidency will all but guarantee that this project will come to pass.