Curry-Machado, Jonathan
Reseña de “The Conquest of History: Spanish Colonialism and National Histories in the Nineteenth Century” de Christopher Schmidt-Nowara
Instituto de Estudios del Caribe
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Jonathan Curry-Machado
Institute for the Study of the Americas, London
jon.curry-machado@sas.ac.uk

In 1508, Juan Ponce de León conquered the island of Puerto Rico. Whereas the island’s ‘discoverer’ Christopher Columbus could be cast in a universally significant light, Ponce de León much more uncompro

promisingly represented imperial chauvinism and the shadow of Spanish domination from which the Puerto Rican nation (as with Spain’s other remaining colonies) was striving to emerge during the nineteenth century. Yet in the years immediately following liberation from Spain (but occupation by the United States), Ponce de León was rehabilitated as a symbol of Puerto Rican national identity, built no longer in opposition to Spain but upon the foundation of its Spanish roots.

In *The Conquest of History*, Christopher Schmidt-Nowara explores how different elements from the history of Spain’s imperial involvement in Cuba, Puerto Rico and the Philippines (the three colonies remaining to her at the end of the nineteenth century) became symbolic of the struggle between two definitions of nation: that of Spanish overseas empire; and that of the colonies seeking to define themselves on their own terms. This is a book that deals with the “crafting of national histories in an age of empire” (p. 12), but an age in which Spanish empire was in terminal decline and entering its death throes. It therefore becomes the story of two competing tendencies (Spain striving to keep a grip on the remnants of its colonies, while the colonies strove to assert their independent national identities), and their competing use and iconic interpretation of key symbols of Spain’s imperial history.

Schmidt-Nowara starts by exploring how the Spanish themselves “understood the relation between empire and nation” (p. 19). In the nineteenth century, following the loss of her mainland American colonies, Spain had to deal with the ongoing tension between treating the remaining colonies as subordinate, or else as equal members of a greater Spanish nation state. This difference was played out throughout the century in the peninsula’s internal conflicts, but in part became resolved by stressing how different the Spanish concept of empire was to that of her rivals. Whereas the English were seen as being obsessed with economic exploitation, Spain was portrayed as employing a more civilized approach, seeking “to incorporate colonial subjects into the march of
European civilization” (p. 34). There was an attempt on the part of the Spanish simply to ignore the “division between colonizer and colonized” (p. 41), defining colonial history as a necessary part of the nation’s history: neither colony nor metropolis could exist without the other. Thus following the final loss of the colonies in 1898, Spain continued to look to the Americas as a source of national identity even in their absence; and this was simply a continuation of the process following the Spanish-American revolutions, by which the remaining colonies proved central to the Spanish patriotic imagination.

In the second chapter, that most iconic of Spanish-American symbols—Christopher Columbus—is studied. Through the battles for ownership of Columbus’s memory, he came to embody both sides of the contest for national identity in Spain’s colonies. For the Spanish, Columbus was of great ideological importance both as the “starting point of Spain’s narration of modernity” (p. 55), and as a representation of the “fraternal harmony between Spain and the Americas” (p. 57). Clearly this latter had become something of a forlorn hope, desperately clung on to against all evidence to the contrary, by the nineteenth century; and when in 1877 the Dominican Republic claimed that Columbus was in fact still buried in Santo Domingo, and had not, as claimed by the Spanish, been transferred in 1795 to Havana, the ensuing argument unleashed a fierce debate on “how best to represent the nation’s imperial history” (p. 75).

On the one hand Spain became very defensive concerning the “charges that the nation failed to commemorate Columbus properly”; while on the other there could be seen “increasing disillusion with Columbus as the figurehead of la España ultramarina” (p. 75). The discomfort caused by the arguments over his true resting place were compounded by the increasing use in the colonies of the image of Columbus not as a symbol of unity with Spain, but of fundamental inequality. Commenting on the 1892 commemorations of Columbus’s “discovery” of the Americas, the Cuban writer Juan Gualberto Gómez (1892) wrote: “Since the first moment that Columbus discovered these lands, it was so the dominators would come and the dominated would be born here.” Against the image of Columbus joining the two hemispheres, could be put that of Columbus in chains, in which his imprisonment by Francisco de Bobadilla became symbolic of the continuing enslavement of Cuba and Puerto Rico.

Of course, though Europeans might celebrate Columbus as the discoverer of the Americas, the continent and its islands were already inhabited when he arrived. In the nineteenth century, as Puerto Rican and Cuban patriots sought to articulate national identities that were distinct from that of Spain, “prehistory became a time and space of national peculiarity and authenticity” (p. 97). It is this that Schmidt-Nowara explores in Chapter 3. While the Spanish “viewed the conquest
as the decisive moment in American history” (p. 121), by defining their national histories as predating Columbus, “Antilleans sought continuity and community between prehistory and the present” (p. 120). By so doing they could “identify and isolate what was native and authentic from what was alien and artificial” (p. 102). The history of Puerto Rico and Cuba could be seen as a counterpoint between the two, along the lines of the counterpoint of sugar and tobacco described by Fernando Ortiz (1963). However, positive though this may have been in establishing an independent identity, white creole elites made use of prehistory not just as a rejection of Columbus, but also to marginalise the “efforts of subaltern groups to stake their claim to membership in the nation and the making of its history” (p. 99). At the same time as rejecting Spain, they could reject freedom for slaves and equality for their black compatriots. But by attempting to assert their authority to define the nation’s past, many white creoles found themselves in a position “curiously parallel to the peninsular historians they sought to refute,” in that “they could not indefinitely monopolize the uses of those symbols and their meanings” (p. 129).

It is to this that Schmidt-Nowara turns in the following chapter. Here the symbolic figure examined in both the Antillean and Spanish contexts is that of Bartolomé de las Casas. Not only was Las Casas a key figure in the articulation of Spanish national identity vis-à-vis the colonies, his name continued to be at the heart of the crucial debate around slavery. Because of his role as the “Protector of the Indians” in the sixteenth century, for having drawn Spanish attention to the mistreatment of the native populations of the islands, by the nineteenth century (in the midst of the rediscovery of the pre-Columbian past) Las Casas became seen in the Antilles as a symbol of fraternity and harmony, while for many in Spain he was a reminder “of the forces that threatened to rent colony and metropolis” (p. 158). Las Casas also became symbolic of the start of African slavery in the Spanish Antilles, and this loomed large in the debate over the future of Cuba in particular. Schmidt-Nowara discusses how one of Cuba’s leading scholars of the time, José Antonio Saco— unlike those in Spain who combined defence of Las Casas with an abolitionist stance—in fact made use of Las Casas in order to defend slavery. For all that Saco considered slavery to be fundamentally evil, he argued it was a necessary evil in nineteenth century Cuba (for the protection of white interests) just as it had been in the sixteenth century (saving the Indians from mistreatment). Thus there was a complexity in Saco’s appropriation of Las Casas, combining both Antillean defiance of metropolitan demands while at the same time imagining “nation and empire in uneasy but necessary equipoise” (p. 160).

While concentrating throughout most of the book on the relations-
hip between Spain and the Antilles, in the final chapter, Schmidt-Nowara turns to the Philippines. Here there was a fundamental difference in the discourse, since whereas to the Antilles the question of African slavery was central in the Philippines the primary concern was with the assertion of clerical power in the colony. Although by the nineteenth century Spain had controlled the archipelago for three centuries, there was a sense in which colonisation there was still “a work in progress” (p. 164); and while Spain treated her Caribbean colonies “as extensions” of the metropolis, the Philippines were portrayed by Spanish political and intellectual elites as “theaters of the primitive, foils for metropolitan claims to modernity” (p. 167). However, there were important parallels between the discourse of patriots in both groups of islands, with both seeking out “an autonomous national history and culture” to that imposed by the Spanish conquest and colonisation that, it was argued, had brought decline and decadence (p. 165). Schmidt-Nowara centres his argument on the polemic between the two leading voices on either side of this debate: José Rizal, the Filipino patriot who he compares to Saco; and the Spanish intellectual, W. E. Retana, who argued that the “Philippines had no history separate from Spanish history” (p. 179). By widening his analysis to include the Philippines alongside the Caribbean colonies, Schmidt-Nowara is able to achieve a more global perspective to that more usually obtained by hemispherically specific analyses. The comparison between these two parallel cases of Spanish colonialism enables him to draw some more general conclusions. He demonstrates the ongoing counterpoint between Spanish nation builders and colonial patriots in the employment of symbols and historical sources for their respective national projects—a counterpoint that was exclusionary yet at the same time mutually dependent for the development of both metropolitan and post-colonial identities.

It may be considered a weakness of this study that it concentrates so heavily on the appropriation of key symbolic figures by metropolitan and colonial intellectual and political elites, to the exclusion of subaltern voices and experiences. This seems to lead Schmidt-Nowara into a partial portrayal of how national identities and histories were constructed. Nevertheless, as with his previous work on empire and anti-slavery, Schmidt-Nowara succeeds in approaching history from both a metropolitan and a colonial perspective, not privileging either (Schmidt-Nowara 1999). The result is a rich analysis that demonstrates the centrality of the colonial experience to the development of national identities in both metropolis and colony. There has been a tendency in the historiography to treat the Antillean colonies as distinct to the Philippines, with a regionalisation of research that looks either east or west. Schmidt-Nowara makes an important contribution to bringing these two
halves of the Spanish imperial experience together, and as a result—for all that it remains enclosed by the boundaries of Spanish empire—this study succeeds in achieving a more global perspective.

References

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Valentina Peguero
Department of History
University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point
vpeguero@uwsp.edu

A skillful blending of analysis of socioeconomic developments and cultural dynamics, La Otra Historia Dominicana is a collection of articles originally published in Rumbo, between January 1994 and October 2000. The text presents an innovative and refreshing historical perspective from precolonial time up to 2000.

A well-known scholar, Moya Pons has published twenty books and hundreds of articles, edited forty other texts, and directed the publication of EME-EME, a journal published by the Pontificia Universidad Católica Madre y Maestra (known then as Universidad Católica Madre y Maestra or UCMM), in Santiago, the Dominican Republic. As mentioned on the back cover of La Otra Historia Dominicana, the articles published in Rumbo, under the subtitle “La Historia tiene otra Historia.” responded to Moya Pons’ desire to bring attention to people who have been active agents of historical development, but have not been appropriately recognized.

The author’s approach matches the new trend of historical research, which places less emphasis on political ideologies, political parties, and political leaders, and more emphasis on common people and ordinary