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# Ronald Fernández, *The Disenchanted Island: Puerto Rico and the United States in the Twentieth Century*

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*The Disenchanted Island: Puerto Rico and the United States in the Twentieth Century.* By Ronald Fernández. Second Edition. (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1996. xvi + 278 pp. Notes, bibliography, index. \$65.00 cloth, \$19.95 paper.)

The legacy of hypocrisy and neglect inflicted by U.S. policymakers upon the island of Puerto Rico and its people has created what Ronald Fernández terms a "terrible contradiction: The United States of America, the oldest representative democracy on earth, owns Puerto Rico, the oldest colony on earth" (p. 262). Fernández's extensive research into presidential, congressional, and media records allows him to reveal how, over the course of one hundred years, U.S. policymakers repeatedly damn Puerto Ricans for their "docility"—that is, rational efforts to negotiate a democratic and just political and economic relationship—as they also punish them for any serious efforts to achieve self-determination—that is, a closer union between the stated political philosophy of the United States on the one hand and the actions of its representatives on the other.

In his chronological narrative, Fernández goes to great, and essentially successful, lengths to demonstrate a consistently rapacious attitude on the part of U.S. politicians and businessmen towards the island and its people. Despite dissenting views like that of Senator Millard Tydings, who stated that "'the arrangement between the United States and Puerto Rico was one of the most unsatisfactory relationships between two governments that I have ever encountered on the face of the earth'" (p. 148), the attitude which has prevailed up to the present day can be represented by the judgement of Chief Justice William Howard Taft: "It is locality that is determinative of the application of the Constitution, in such matters as judicial procedure, and not the status of the people who live in it" (p. 93). Such theories have proved extremely destructive once translated into practices that have sacrificed the well-being of Puerto Rico for the well-being of U.S. military and business interests. As a result, today the island has

a per capita income of one-half that of Mississippi, [and is] the poorest state in the United States. Its rates of suicide, mental illness, drug addiction, crime, alcoholism, and sterilization of women are among the highest in the world. The land, water, and air are polluted by multinational corporations to which U.S. environmental and labor laws frequently do not apply. U.S. military bases occupy 13 percent of Puerto Rico's land.... (p. xi)

In this tragic story of economic mismanagement and political strangulation, Fernández also implicates Luis Muñoz Marín, the political figure

who dominated Puerto Rican politics for much of this century. Muñoz Marín's successful introduction in 1948 of "La Mordaza," or gag law, which made it a felony to encourage the abolishing of the insular (colonial) government, effectively curtailed freedom of speech. Furthermore, according to Fernández, Muñoz Marín's plan for the economic development of the island only revealed the leader's lack of faith in his people's ability to achieve autonomy:

Muñoz can and should be faulted for failing to heed the warnings of his many *contemporary* critics. Judged on the basis of its ability to provide long-term self-sustaining growth, Operation Bootstrap assured only one thing: continued dependence on mainland economic and political resources. (p. 173)

Fernández also details the career of renowned *independentista* Pedro Albizu Campos, Muñoz Marín's political opponent, who was jailed in the U.S. for many years for his efforts to free Puerto Rico from neocolonialism.

This economic, political, and military narrative analysis makes trenchant use of historical events and original material from archival sources. Unfortunately, its wealth of detail also creates one of its flaws—in his zeal Fernández often fails to take the time to offer the kind of summary overviews which could aid the reader in forming a synthetic understanding of the complexity of U.S.-Puerto Rican relations. The book would have been better served by superior, rather than mediocre, copyeditors and fact-checkers as well.

It should additionally be noted that Fernández's analysis focuses on U.S. policies and actions, ultimately holding the U.S. primarily responsible for the plight of Puerto Rico. Fernández could have consulted more island records in order to offer deeper insight into insular politics and the role they may have played in determining the island's history; such lopsided research implies that Puerto Ricans are in fact as powerless as Fernández makes them out to be. Finally, the book as a whole suffers from a common disease: we are left with only a negative critique which lacks any positive suggestions for change. Perhaps Fernández's own sentiment indicates some of the difficulties awaiting anyone who undertakes this task: "analyzing the island's economy is like reading in a moving car; you can get sick doing it" (p. 254).

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