

*Colonial Subjects: Puerto Ricans
in a Global Perspective*

Ramón Grosfoguel
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Belinda I. Reyes
University of California, Merced

In *Colonial Subjects*, Ramón Grosfoguel looks at the ways geopolitics, world systems, and postcolonialism have affected Caribbean nations. He reviews the history of these nations—and the role they have played within the world system—in order to elucidate urban development, immigration patterns, and the social and economic progress of Caribbean immigrants in the United States and Europe.

The book consists of an introductory chapter and three sections: one looks at the effect of the world system on Puerto Rico's political economy; another looks at the condition of Caribbean immigrants in the United States; and a final section looks at colonial Caribbean immigrants in European countries.

Grosfoguel argues that we now live in a "modern colonial world system." In his view, even though countries are independent nation-states, they are still under "global coloniality." In this new form of coloniality, core nations exploit and dominate the periphery without the need, or the expense, of colonial administrators. He maintains that the formation of

the nation-state has not saved Latin American countries from this exploitation because, within the new global economy, nation-states have no power over their location in the international division of labor. Autonomous nations cannot develop alone and are tied to global systems that are a continuation of the European colonial systems, with the cultural prejudices and gender/sexual/racial hierarchies that existed in the earlier form of colonization. Within this context, "no radical project in Latin America can be successful without the dismantling of these colonial/racial hierarchies."

He also argues that the global symbolic/ideological strategies, such as the one now being waged in the Middle East, are an important part of the capitalist world system. These strategies are critical for the structuring of the core-periphery relationship and the preservation of the system. They show the supremacy of the capitalist world system over other systems and provide the roadmap for the nations of the periphery to follow to become more like the "West."

Global symbolic/ideological strategies were especially important during the Cold War, when the socialist and the capitalist models battled for control.

In the next chapter, Grosfoguel discusses the political and economic history of Puerto Rico. He argues that Puerto Rico is a modern colony, suffering from exploitation and domination by the United States. However, unlike the independent Caribbean nations, Puerto Ricans are U.S. citizens and have access to the welfare state. He argues that the United States granted this status to Puerto Rico because of U.S. military interest in the island and also because of the importance of Puerto Rico as a global symbolic/ideological symbol for other periphery nations. Puerto Rico served as a showcase for the successes of U.S. capitalist world system, in contrast to the Soviet model. Grosfoguel argues that this role provided Puerto Rico with significant benefits, including sizeable U.S. foreign aid, favorable economic and trade arrangements, and U.S. citizenship and welfare benefits for Puerto Rican residents. However, with the end of the Cold War, the United States no longer confronts a serious challenge to its supremacy and has become more focused on domestic priorities. Thus, the strategic interest it once had in the island is gone. Today, policy makers face the expense of maintaining the colony and the potential threat that Puerto Rico will win statehood and become a "Latino state." In that context, Grosfoguel argues that state-

hood, rather than independence, is the solution for the Island's political situation. Statehood is "the new subversive" since it will provide full incorporation and equal rights to an Afro-Latino Caribbean state. He goes further to argue that Puerto Rico's situation dramatizes the need for the global world system to create a way to redistribute wealth from core to periphery, in ways similar to what now takes place between Puerto Rico and the United States.

Grosfoguel goes on to apply world-system and postcolonial approaches to diverse issues. Although these issues are ostensibly connected through his use of world-system and postcolonial analyses, these chapters seem disconnected, repetitive, and sometimes contradictory, as if each had been developed in isolation from the others. Nevertheless, Grosfoguel's overarching point about the significance of new colonial world structures and geopolitics is clear and well reasoned. The peoples and conditions in these nations are still being influenced by their colonial condition and the geopolitical conflicts that have shaped the process of that colonization. For instance, Grosfoguel argues that the Cold War shaped U.S. policies on Puerto Rico and Cuba. As a showcase for capitalism vis-à-vis the competing Soviet model, Puerto Rico and the Cuban exile community played roles that shaped conditions on both islands, immigration patterns, U.S. immigration and immigrant policy, and the perception in the United States about Puerto Rican and Cuban Americans. These are

critical issues often ignored in the ethnic and immigration literatures.

Although the author presents an appealing argument, he recognizes no agency to the Puerto Rican people or the people of the Caribbean. From his perspective, nations in the periphery are powerless. Grosfoguel ignores the struggles waged by the Puerto Rican people to win many of the benefits granted by the United States. He seems to view the United States as a benign empire, which because of self-interest, has "extended labor and democratic rights" to Puerto Ricans. He fails to acknowledge the political struggles and strong democratic history of the island, which predates U.S. occupation. He seems to forget about the struggles in Vieques, Los Mocheros, La Matanza de Ponce, and that until recently, there were Puerto Rican political prisoners in American jails. He mistakenly argues that there has never been a strong independence movement on the Island, and he fails to acknowledge that the Island's first governor came into power with a promise of independence and just before the United States invaded the Island, Spain was in the process of granting independence to Puerto Rico in response to political pressure the Puerto Rican leadership was exerting on the Spanish empire.

Grosfoguel emphasizes the interdependence of nations in the new glo-

bal system and the continuation of colonial structures. This is clearly visible in many parts of the world. What he fails to address is why core nations prefer to keep poor nations poor. New trade agreements may suggest that core nations are beginning to recognize that interdependence is a two-way street. Having wealthier neighbors in Latin America might help the United States to remain a wealthy nation. Furthermore, nations of the periphery have some power, and global interdependence could help their cause. Just as world powers can collude, so can the nations of the periphery. They followed this approach in recent international forums when they pressured core nations to end agricultural subsidies and allow poor countries to defend their own farmers' interests. This tactic appears to be paying off. The strength of periphery nations and the potential power of interdependence are missing from Grosfoguel's argument. He sees periphery nations as powerless, and based on the Puerto Rican example, the only solution he sees for Caribbean nation-states and for other poor countries is to get subsidies from a core country or to relinquish their sovereignty in exchange for the benefits of belonging to a core country. Even though the world colonial system may still exist, the act of relinquishing sovereignty by a periphery nation may be too high of a price to pay for "progress."