

Proposal Type: Paper Presentation

Title: *The Gospel of Colonization: The U.S. Colonization of Puerto Rico as a Protestant Missionary Project*

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One year after the Spanish-American War, representatives from nine major Protestant denominations* met in New York City to discuss the “new mission field” of Puerto Rico. While they were eager to “evangelize” these “un-churched” Puerto Ricans, Protestant leaders shared concern about “stepping on each-others toes” in this new religious marketplace. As a result, representatives established a *Committee Agreement* that carved the island and set parameters on where each particular denomination could evangelize and establish institutions. Presbyterians took the West, Disciples the Mid-North, Baptists parts of the island’s center, etc. Their mission was clear: “to inaugurate a work that assures the Americanization of the island” (translated from the United Brethren Church of Christ’s Official Report, found in Samuel Cruz, *Masked Africanisms*, 23).

Through “spreading the gospel” these missionaries pushed dominant U.S. American (read: white, Anglo, Protestant) values unto Puerto Ricans. Schools that demanded English-only of Spanish-speaking students, hospitals that would later become sites for eugenic testing of Puerto Rican women, and other social services were wielded for this religio-ideological end that sought to replace Puerto Rican ideals with “U.S. American” values and standards. Ramón Grosfoguel argues that in spreading dominant U.S. American values using religion Protestant missionaries ideologically quelled nationalist sentiment and uprising while masking the U.S.’s economic and political colonial agenda (55).

With the exception of brief examinations by Grosfoguel and Samuel Cruz, the only substantive exploration of Protestant missionary activity in Puerto Rico and its connection to U.S. colonization has been Samuel Silva-Gotay’s 1997 work *Protestantismo y Política en Puerto Rico: 1898-1930*. Twenty years later re-examination of the topic is necessary—especially as Puerto Ricans on the island and in the U.S. diaspora resist the neo-colonial policy insidiously called PROMESA.

Advancing the work of Silva-Gotay this paper contests that U.S. colonization in Puerto Rico during the late 19th and early 20th century *cannot* be understood outside of U.S. Protestant missionary zeal at the time. Specifically this work advances two central claims. First it follows Grosfoguel, Cruz, and Silva-Gotay to demonstrate how Protestant institutions imposed ideologies and infrastructure on Puerto Rico that advanced the U.S. colonial project after the Spanish-American War. Second, pushing Silva-Gotay, this work argues that the colonization of Puerto Rico by the U.S. federal government *was in and of itself a Protestant missionary project*. It does so by contextualizing the Spanish-American War within a moment of U.S. Protestant missionary zeal that began during Reconstruction and infiltrated the federal government by the late 19th century through figures like President William McKinley and Senator Albert J. Beveridge of Indiana. The paper concludes by suggesting that PROMESA is a new iteration of Protestant missionary zeal secularized by the federal government in the guise of “economic reform.” Such an analysis hopes to contribute to present dialogues about resisting U.S. colonialism in Puerto Rico.

*The denominations represented were: Presbyterian, Methodist, Baptist, Congregational, United Brethren, Christian Church, Lutheran, Missionary Alliance, and Disciples of Christ.