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Race Over Empire: Racism & U.S. Imperialism, 1865-1900 (review)

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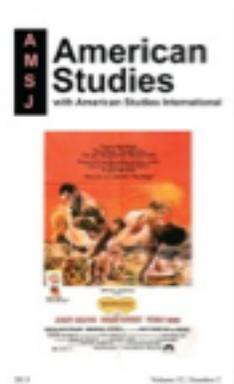
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Reviews

RACE OVER EMPIRE: Racism & U.S. Imperialism, 1865-1900. By Eric T. L. Love. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. 2004. Pp. xx, 245. Paper \$28.35

“Take up the White Man’s burden—
Ye dare not stoop to less—
Nor call too loud to Freedom
To cloak your weariness.
But all ye will or whisper,
By all ye leave or do,
The silent sullen peoples
Shall weigh your God and you.”

— Rudyard Kipling, *excerpt from “The White Man’s Burden”*

Eric T. L. Love’s *Race Over Empire: Racism & U.S. Imperialism, 1865–1900* works as a powerful corrective to what Love describes as a serious academic interpretive error about the role of race and racism in America’s late nineteenth century imperialist expansion—citing specifically a “remarkable level of consensus among historians, who assert that racial ideologies rooted in white supremacy gave expansionists a grand and compelling rationale for empire” (1). According to this historical “standard narrative,” the Gilded Era’s prevailing racial ideologies—social Darwinism, Anglo-Saxonism, white supremacy, Manifest Destiny, and the “white man’s burden”—served as central rationales and support for advancing the American empire and imposing American rule on millions of nonwhite peoples. However, Love contends, given their occurrence at roughly the same times, historians have often erroneously connected expansion and these racial ideologies. In reality, he argues, “race was an imperfect crusading ideology” (xviii), more often hindering expansionist goals than aiding in them. Instead, Love asserts, race “serve[d] the imperialists well after annexation was a fact” as an “ex post facto rationalization,” but “in the course of policy formation,” this politically volatile subject was, quite simply, “bad politics” (xviii). Analyzing the history of annexation attempts from 1865 to 1900, Love works to demonstrate that by the end of the nineteenth century, “policy makers had learned to accommodate and compromise with the demands of the domestic racial social order” by finding ways to minimize or avoid racial factors, rather than placing race at the center of their “furiously contested campaign[s]” (xviii) for empire and imperial expansion.

Intentionally situating race at the center of his analysis, Love organizes his book around four attempts made by American policy makers, between 1865 and 1900, to annex territories occupied by largely nonwhite peoples: Santo Domingo in 1870, Hawaii in 1893 and again in 1897-1898, as well as the Philippines in the immediate aftermath of the Spanish-American War. Considering these expansion cases to be representative, Love focuses his analysis on the leading policymakers of these times by examining a wealth of resources including government documents, diplomatic correspondences, speeches, lectures, editorials in newspapers, magazines, manuscript collections, memoirs, autobiographies, diaries, and even private letters. Combining the insights gleaned from these sources, Love concludes that for imperialists, racism was considered a hindrance to

their imperial agenda, with anti-imperialists consistently using race as a positive barrier against American expansion. As Love states, public and private sources “reveal that most policymakers confronted the demands of the racial social order not with a sense of celebration or liberation but with resignation, often with regret and frustration, and acceptance of the limits they imposed” (xvi). Creatively illustrating the convergence of “top” (official policymakers/politicians) and “bottom-down” (voters) power, as well as making a strong case in favor of the now unpopular scholarly practice of placing leading policy officials at the center of analysis, Love demonstrates how while “[m]en make their own history... they do not make it as they please... under circumstances chosen by themselves,” (xvi) but instead “with material they find on hand, the ideas that they and other have confidence in, their notions of what is possible, and what is impossible—in short, within conditions set by circumstances and the past” (xv).

In this way, Love compellingly demonstrates that while imperialists consciously and intentionally remained silent, made disingenuous evasions, and denied race as part of their projects whilst pitching annexation, ultimately, these politicians were guided by “racist prejudice and sentiments, by precedents and expectations forged in the past” (xv). Key among these prejudices was the “unquestionable conviction that the United States was a white nation and that every advance, domestic and foreign, should be pursued for the exclusive benefit of white citizens and all constituted formations of a racial--and racist--social order” (p. xiii). Accordingly, Love determines, the racisms stemming from public leaders and the white labor class, ie voters, had much greater influence over imperial policy formation than the diminutive number of social Darwinist propagandists and intellectuals—a fact Love consistently demonstrates throughout his book. The annexation of Hawaii, for example, Love argues was only successful (in the imperialists’ second attempt in 1898) not because of any desire toward benevolent assimilation, racial uplift or obligation to the “white man’s burden,” but rather because they rejected these ideals, instead calling on notions of “white racial brotherhood,” rhetorically (re)conceptualizing Hawaii in the political and social imaginary as a fundamentally *white* nation (xvii) despite its demographic realities.

Ultimately, Love illustrates race as fundamentally a problem of power, supporting his premise that within the history of the United States, racism, for all involved, “has always been destructive toward innovation and progressive change” (xix). As such, Love provides a much-needed intervention in the understanding and study of American imperialism and most importantly, its continuing legacy—even, perhaps, shedding new light on the meaning behind Rudyard Kipling’s so-called “white man’s burden.”

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