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Anthropology Book Forum

Open Access Book Reviews

ANA RAMOS-ZAYAS, 2020, *Parenting Empires: Class, Whiteness, and the Moral Economy of Privilege in Latin America*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 296pp., ISBN: 978-1-4780-0821-7

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Ramos-Zayas' (2020) ethnography *Parenting Empires* examines upper class parenting practices in Brazil and Puerto Rico. She argues that US forms of hemispheric control are entrenched in everyday parental routines and aspirations. These include parents' affective and aesthetic practices, as well as moral understandings of anti-consumption and anti-materialism. As agents of empire, upper class parents reinforce and replicate US projects of austerity, as well as ideas about crisis and corruption, throughout Latin America. This ethnography adds to scholarship addressing the rise of right-wing authoritarian governments in Brazil as well as the expansion of neoliberal austerity projects in Puerto Rico.

One of the interesting aspects of Ramos-Zayas' work concerns her quite unconventional methodology. The ethnography compares two very different political and geographic spaces, though Ramos-Zayas draws interesting connections between both. The author situates Puerto Rico geographically as a state that is part of the Caribbean, and consciously inserts this territory into Latin America theory more broadly, rather than the US-based literature. As such, this becomes a South-South comparative study that nevertheless maintains the issue of US hemispheric control in the Americas as a backdrop for its argument.

Thinking more on the methodology used by the author, this book is both a case of the anthropologist studying "at home" and studying "the other," in terms of place and positionality. Though Ramos-Zayas grew up in a neighborhood of Puerto Rico that was not surrounded by the

affluent people she studies, her degree and appointment as professor at an acclaimed university in the US moved her close to the elite status of her interlocutors. On the other hand, Ramos-Zayas had little previous experience living in Rio de Janeiro or familiarity with wealthy parents of the city. The author's experience of "studying up" (Nader 1974) is not only marked by a simultaneous sense of ease and aversion, but also leads to some choices Ramos-Zayas labels as "un/ethical" (Gaztambide-Fernández 2015). Ramos-Zayas navigates the contradictions and challenges of writing critically about a group that can easily be identified. Though she utilizes pseudonyms in an attempt to guarantee the anonymity of her subjects, she does not change the names of the neighborhoods of her research. Despite acknowledging that "everyone knows everyone" in these urban centers, and the fact that it is likely that her interlocutors will read this ethnography, Ramos-Zayas argues that the choice to be un/ethical helps one to articulate structural critique, rather than focus on individual choices. She thus moves away from trying to evaluate behaviors that might nevertheless be quite charitable or nice.

A few of the key concepts put forth by the author includes one contained in the title of the book, parenting empires, as well child-centered nodules of urbanism, and interiority currency. I spell these out as they also inform the structure of the book. Ramos-Zayas theorizes that practices by elite parents in Latin America intersect with "national and hemispheric ideas of empire and sovereignty" (4). The author is careful not to solely implicate parents and their children in this project. Rather, by utilizing theories from the field of moral economy, Ramos-Zayas demonstrates how personal moral values of the elite, which are expressed in anxieties around parenting, intersect with political, economic, and historic practices. These moral understandings align with draconian austerity measures and create the conditions for socioeconomic inequality in both Puerto Rico and Brazil. For example, a critique of welfare practices is justified through discourse regarding responsible citizenship, and manifest in ideas of proper parenting. She names this phenomenon parenting empires in the Introduction (Chapter One) and discusses it further in the Epilogue.

The first section of the ethnography, which includes Chapter Two and Three, focuses on situating child-centered nodules of urbanism historically and geographically in both Ipanema and El Condado. These are affluent beachfront neighborhoods in the city of Rio de Janeiro and San Juan, respectively. She then positions these spaces politically and economically in Brazil and Puerto

Rico. Child-centered nodules of urbanism refers to the neighborhood-based social locations where Ramos-Zayas conducted a significant portion of her research. These are sites where adults come together and socialize over caring for children, and thus spaces where Ramos-Zayas could observe parents discuss their affective dispositions, such as those concerning safety, distinction, work, or language. These are also spaces where elite ideologies acquire materiality, further legitimizing, and even providing moral grounding for, segregationist practices. Some of these public spaces became privatized, or were heavily surveilled and policed, thus generating the conditions of exclusion that mark upper class sociability and subjectivities. The author ultimately analyzes how ideas about healthy living, for example, are associated to particular geographies and produced in the landscape in similar ways in both Puerto Rico and Brazil.

Interior currency is a theoretical framework that organizes the second section of Ramos-Zayas' ethnography (Chapters Four and Five). Unlike the author's original expectations, the parents she studied frowned upon superfluous displays of wealth and did not associate affluence with the cultivation of a certain body type, consumption habit, or even aesthetic. It was quite the opposite, and the parents often worried about their children's excessive consumption of material goods. The parents nevertheless maintained a concern with cultivating their inner worlds, a shift that made class privilege even more conspicuous. The author analyzes various forms of neoliberal personhood cultivated by her interlocutors to justify and sustain their white privilege. In this sense, Ramos-Zayas argues that structures of power become legible and codified in the realm of affects and sentiments and expressed particularly around parenting. According to the parents, the cultivation of inner currency requires constant work on the self but is attainable to anyone willing to invest in its practice. These include religious and psychological practices, decisions about schooling, choices regarding the languages spoken at home, ideas that link masculinity and parenting, or even existentialist journeys with therapists, gurus, life coaches or in meditation centers. Ramos-Zayas demonstrates that personal fulfillment is entangled with expectations about forms of neighborhood governance and dictates how relationships across class and race should be conducted.

The third and final portion of the book focuses on extended family and domestic workers (Chapter Six and Seven, respectively) enlisted in child-centered care. Ramos-Zayas argues that it is in these

relationships that one can see a focus on austerity and rhetoric of corruption in the everyday. For example, it is in criticizing and reflecting on relationships with extended family, particularly grandparents and their consumption and materialist practices, that the parents in Ramos-Zayas' ethnography forge austerity subjectivities. Such subjectivities also obscure relationships of oppression and inequality. This could be seen in ideas around domestic work and the role domestic workers play in child rearing, expressed, for example, as rules about intimacy.

Overall, this is an ethnography that adds to current literature on Latin America analyzing the rise of the far right by turning to the ways in which the elite justify white privilege and the implementation of austerity measures in the continent through ideas around parenting. It also provides a critical analysis of upper-class parents and their everyday lives, demonstrating how moral ideas about child-rearing and consumption are utilized to justify and solidify deep seeded racial, gendered, and class inequality in both Puerto Rico and Brazil.

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