

## E. San Juan Jr.'s New Book

Reviewed by Michael Pozo

*Working Through the Contradictions:*

*From Cultural Theory to Critical Practice*

By E. San Juan Jr.

Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 2004

Hardcover: \$24.95

In *Working through the Contradictions: From Cultural Theory to Critical Practice*, E. San Juan Jr. returns to champion the re-examination of the emancipatory and anti-Imperialist goals behind cultural and social theories that initially helped to form the discipline of Cultural Studies upon a foundation of social justice. *Working through the Contradictions*, makes the case for the ongoing necessity for critical interventions of mind and body. In this case, we may learn from the study of social and cultural theories and their various adaptive qualities. Such skills are demonstrated as viable if not essential to deciphering the inconsistencies in the social and political morass of U.S. hegemony and locating its world-wide resisters, both past and present.

San Juan again re-engages the works of Antonio Gramsci, Frantz Fanon, Friedrich Engels, Karl Marx, Sun-Yat Sen, Aime Cesaire, Walter Benjamin, Mikhail Bakhtin and Mumia Abu Jamal, among others. Social theories are posited alongside social outcomes like the “war” on terrorism, the historical reality of racism in social and political institutions and the recent rise of domestic and sexual slavery under banners of freedom, democracy and free-markets.

Via the academic fields of Cultural and American studies, San Juan offers social and academic critiques that disentangle, reveal and clarify even the

subtletest of compromises towards authentic justice. Picking up from his last book, *Racism and Cultural Studies*, San Juan stresses the central agreement needed for any serious critique of social/political injustices and discrepancies. San Juan argues that social and academic attempts at multicultural reform or anti-racist or anti-imperialist struggles inevitably falter without connecting their relation to capitalism's ability to appease such demands (via free-markets, material goods etc.) while maintaining the same debilitating system of power and exploitation. At the academic level, such reforms often become the stuff of incomprehensible linguistic "play" and the seduction of cynicism or the appeasement that comes by declaring all things "problematic", indefinable or joyfully hybrid. San Juan asserts that these attempts, "through postal therapy (postnation, postcolonial, postmodern) fail to comprehend the dynamics of pluralist Capitalism in its 'flexible' phase as a mode of U.S. hegemonic rule presiding over the redivision of the world market and the control of international labor-power"(19).

Understanding the centrality of Capitalism's detrimental role upon the "subject matter" (i.e. the human beings and nations) of post colonial theory and ethnic studies allows for a greater critique and refinement of anti-racist, sexist and imperialist motivations, as well as actions. To begin our critical interventions, *Working through the Contradictions* leads us through this contentious academic and social terrain known as Cultural Studies. As is evident throughout San Juan's work, he argues that one of the casualties of a free-market and consumerist driven society is the supposed "end" of class and race issues as real determining social factors today. Indeed, San Juan reiterates the "disappearance" of race and racism alongside class issues as perhaps the most damaging trend of multiculturalist projects inside and out of academics. He reminds us that , "questions of institutional racism, gender inequality, social justice and hierarchal power relations in a pluralist or multicultural society should be addressed conscientiously in the study of literary texts and popular cultural expression"(19).

What is hoped to be gained is San Juan's "searching critique" that allows a continuous re-examination of reformist and revolutionary agendas as much as the exploitive forms of power trying to be subverted. Affirming the reality of uneven development under current Capitalist policies as well as the need to *re-affirm* "the centrality of racial and ethnic problems"(19), San Juan offers textual and social evidence that one may very well work through conservative as well as liberal contradictions at this stage of the Capitalist project.

By beginning with a contemporary analysis of the Philippines, San Juan asks the reader to reassess how far progressive intellectualism and reformist agendas have moved us towards a “post”-ism world. Throughout the book, San Juan refers back to the Philippines and Filipinos as telltale “signifiers” that inequality and social struggles persist. Later, San Juan describes the epidemic of millions of emigrating Filipino women and men converting into Overseas Contract Workers (OCW). The economic desperation of OCW’s to flee is eclipsed only by their physical and sexual abuse and even death by racist and brutally violent and unjust working conditions overseas. San Juan counter-argues against the immigrant story of undying gratitude and adopted patriotism or even rags-to-riches stories by saying, “Since the seventies Filipino bodies have been the number one export, and their corpses (about five or six return in coffins daily) are becoming a serious item in the import ledger”(260).

Citing the colonial history of the Philippines along with the continual struggle today of local insurgents against U.S. military/economic influence, San Juan points out to us that the islands are one instance in which post-colonial enthusiasm has over-stepped current historical reality. Aided by the legacy of corrupt comprador governments, the Philippines has yet to rid themselves of the shadow of the Philippine-American War (1899-1903) and their fate as a U.S. colony from 1898-1946. A clear contradiction, the Philippines remains a disenfranchised member of the global market along with the rest of the developing world. In light of this example the argument, then, against certain liberal social and textual efforts at reform is that they tend to replace collective effort with individualistic triumphalism (usually meaning material gain or *cosmetic* victories). Larger narratives of national struggles against a singular economic and cultural aggression are too dangerous to handle or approach. The popularity of a reductionist individualism omits class and racial elements into “hybrid” characters (both in the literary and non-literary sense), promotes singular scenarios of “success” as the collective norm and follows the impotent stance of distrusting any or all ideology.

With the aftermath of 9-11 weighing heavily upon all national resistance groups in the Philippines (and elsewhere), San Juan sees the Abu Sayyaf as yet another contradiction of modern Capitalism. Secretary of State Colin Powell has labeled the Abu Sayyaf a terrorist group because it was suspected that they had received donations (along with other militant Islamic groups) via Afghanistan from Al Qa’ida. However, San Juan equates the status of the Abu Sayyaf to that of a “criminal gang” that was “born out of the U.S. war

against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan and subsequently used by the Philippine government to sow discord among the more militant Islamic organizations”(43). The Abu Sayyaf becomes living evidence of the dangers and the result of a new *Pax Americana*, a “terrorist” group nurtured by the leading democratic state.

Meanwhile the Philippines and its local and diasporic citizens challenge theories that too often work in favor of a debilitating economic, neo-colonialism. The now-common tentativeness to re-engage in polemical social critique and ideological struggles has left us bewildered as the oppressive past, heralded as a thing of a by gone era, returns in the form of the Patriot Act, preemptive strikes, racial profiling and right-wing Christian fundamentalism.

In his comparative theoretical analysis, San Juan stays true to a historical/materialist approach towards aesthetic, cultural and political issues and debates. Throughout he looks to develop a politics committed to the cultural and social struggles of class, race and gender. But it is through his presenting of the works and ideas of social and cultural critics that we see the connection between such works and the continuous efforts needed for protecting and enhancing social change. San Juan cites examples such as Engel’s attitude towards aesthetics, Cesaire’s re-appropriation of Surrealism’s subversive goals and Fanon’s revolutionary influence as being against contemporary Post Colonial theory via his writings on the National-liberation agenda of colonial resistance.

What makes San Juan’s analysis beneficial and insightful is his tact in negotiating effectively between dense academic expectations and addressing urgent social conflicts. The relevance of his critical interludes into theory is demonstrated by his contextualizing of each writer within their own larger social roles and involvement. For instance, recognizing and enhancing Gramsci’s notion of the “organic intellectual” we read and appreciate how Engel’s aesthetics are invested in an accountability of the discrepancies between intellectual and material production and advancing a Communist end goal of human emancipation through a utopian vision defying class-limited ideology. Cesaire’s poetics re-appropriates European Surrealist aesthetics to present the “unreal” history of colonialism and racism through a powerfully new language based on the *Negritude* movement. While Fanon, perhaps most explicitly, echoes the tradition of “third world” physical and

intellectual struggles as unceasing in its critiques and warnings *towards* Imperial and Capitalist exploitation through a constant dialogue with culture.

The final chapter, “Spinoza and the War of Racial Terrorism”, is an attempt to recover the beneficial aspects of Benedict de Spinoza’s *philosophy of freedom* during an era of pivotal global consequences. He writes, “Spinoza’s principle of the inalienability of human rights can renew the impulse for reaffirming the ideal of radical, popular democracy and the self-determination of communities and nations”(345). San Juan offers up the seventeenth century dissenter’s life *and* work as an example of hope to those now demonized as racial/ethnic “aliens” and suspicious foreigners by practioners of free-market based morality and stale jingoisms.

*Working through the Contradictions* offers powerful anti-Capitalist critiques that utilize contemporary struggles for equality the world over as evidence of Socialism’s necessary role for many trying to survive against economic, cultural and military repression today. The collection of radical thinkers San Juan gathers offers a possible theoretical groundwork to maintain a Socialist vision of future liberation. *Working through the Contradictions* is yet another of San Juan’s unabashed academic contributions to the greater Socialist program. It is evidence of the exciting possibilities still being produced in Marxist critical theory.

At the academic level, his critiques are especially biting towards those who align themselves with the historical battles for democracy and equal rights. He argues that without recognition of the larger forces affecting various marginalized communities and groups, their so-called progressive academic exercises become complicit in the systematic scheme that favors individual identities to collective possibilities for hope. For those of us who *are* in academics, San Juan reminds us that, “it is one thing to demystify the language of domination, another to eliminate the entrenched structures and *habitus* whereby such language produces effects in the lived experience of humans” (377). If one only takes a moment to consider how U.S. institutions of higher education have complied and aided some of the most corrupt and worst abusers of power, one understands the urgency of academic reformists who forward a Socialist end-goal. That a revolution was once described as, “a struggle to the death between the future and the past” is all the more fitting to understand such efforts.