



**Dennis Merrill, “Negotiating Cold War Paradise: U.S. Tourism, Economic Planning, and Cultural Modernity in Twentieth-Century Puerto Rico, *Diplomatic History*, Volume 25, Issue 2 (Spring 2001): 179-214.**

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Despite being the world’s biggest industry, tourism has often been ignored in the study of foreign relations. A growing body of literature now addresses the impact of travel in fostering economic development, cultural interaction, and political change. Dennis Merrill’s article on U.S. tourism in Puerto Rico is a fine addition to this work. Joining scholars like David Engerman, Frank Costigliola, and Christopher Endy, Merrill explores how “travel redefined international economic and cultural interaction” and demonstrates “how cultural constructions of class, race, gender, and national identity shape perceptions of overseas societies.” (p. 180). Employing sources such as tour guides, advertisements, and government documents, Merrill argues that private citizens and public officials linked tourism to the modernization of Puerto Rico. Through a successful travel industry, these individuals hoped to make Puerto Rico “a Cold War paradise, an outpost of liberal capitalism in a world seemingly tempted by the promises of communism.” (p. 181). Merrill views travel as a subtle process that transforms hosts and visitors alike. “Tourism,” he argues, “became a principle battleground on which both Americans and Puerto Ricans contested and negotiated their modern identities.” (p. 184) Merrill draws on postcolonial and postmodern theory without employing impenetrable jargon. He brings the same sensitivity characterizing his work on India to this study of tourism in Puerto Rico. In the hope of fostering a dialogue on the merits - and perils - of the cultural approach to foreign relations, I offer the following criticisms and suggestions.

Although he recognizes the nuances of cultural transmission and receptivity, Merrill’s evidence is rather lopsided. While Puerto Rican officials like Luis Muñoz Marín were manipulating the international image of Puerto Rico to appeal to U.S. business leaders, American tourists were demanding English menus in San Juan restaurants. Such contrasts suggest a reified - not “renegotiated”- American national identity. Merrill proves that Puerto Ricans maintained a great deal of control over their tourism industry and yielded tremendous economic benefits from travel. Yet he does not square Puerto Ricans’ repeated efforts to accommodate Americans with Americans’ expectation that Puerto Rico should be just like the United States. One is left with the impression that American tourists left Puerto Rico with their stereotypes of Puerto Ricans intact.

In an illuminating passage, Merrill discusses American opinions of Puerto Ricans. During the 1940s and 1950s when thousands of Puerto Ricans arrived in the United States, accounts of the unemployment, illness, and poverty in immigrant neighborhoods solidified long-held perceptions that Latin Americans were weak and dependent. Merrill argues that *West Side Story* also reinforced stereotypes. The enormously popular Broadway musical and subsequent film portrayed Puerto Ricans as violent and Puerto Rico itself as impoverished.

## H-Diplo Article Commentary: Belmonte on Merrill

This excerpt raises several questions. Why would thousands of Americans visit Puerto if they believed Puerto Ricans were despicable? Why, despite campaigns promoting the culture and beauty of Puerto Rico, did *West Side Story* resonate so deeply among American audiences? The inconsistencies between Americans' simultaneous attraction to Puerto Rico and disdain for Puerto Rican immigrants merit further exploration.

Such contradictions did not elude Stephen Sondheim, the lyricist for *West Side Story*. In his song "America," a group of Puerto Rican immigrants decry discrimination in the United States, but also express conflicted views of their homeland. Sondheim writes:

Puerto Rico, you lovely island  
Island of tropical breezes  
Always the pineapples growing  
Always the coffee blossoms blowing

Puerto Rico, you ugly island  
Island of tropic diseases  
Always the hurricanes blowing  
Always the population growing

Sondheim's contrast between flourishing pineapple crops and exploding population is ironic given that American scientists were in Puerto Rico conducting the first field trials for the Pill as he wrote these lines. Clearly, the American view of Puerto Rico as a tropical paradise coexisted with less flattering images. Puerto Rico avoided becoming a pit of lust and corruption like Cuba, but did not escape Americans' racist views of unbridled Latin American passion and squalid living conditions. Many Americans flocked to the beaches of San Juan, but did not want Puerto Ricans migrating to the United States. Additional examination of these contradictions would strengthen Merrill's arguments about the intricacies of cultural interchanges. \*American\* attempts to manipulate tourism offer another possible avenue of exploration. In 1959, Hawaii became the 50th state after a concerted effort to use tourism to secure statehood - why did Puerto Rico not adopt a similar strategy? Like Puerto Rico, many U.S. citizens viewed tourism as a way to spread modernization. Businessmen and government officials promoted tourism as a means of subsidizing international economic development and spreading the American way of life.

Through "trade, not aid," these public and private individuals hoped to thwart communism. It was no accident that the State Department and the United States Information Agency (USIA) included prominent figures from the tourist industry on advisory boards for U.S. propaganda activities. Two who come immediately to mind are American Express President Ralph Reed and hotelier Conrad Hilton. Both men offered Dwight Eisenhower frequent advice on how best to combat communism while expanding American tourism abroad.

This was serious business. Hoping to debunk unflattering stereotypes about Americans, U.S. agencies and businesses offered detailed instructions to potential tourists. For example, throughout the 1950s, all American Express customers received a pamphlet called "Ambassadors of Good Will." In 1959, a USIA pamphlet called "Communicating with the Soviet People" told

U.S. tourists how to present “a realistic portrait of America.” Although they were urged to be friendly, tourists were also cautioned: “Don't bring up controversial political issues. If they do, fine; it means they are really puzzled or curious about something.” The 34-page guide prompted tourists to answer these questions as long as they placed “American life into a realistic perspective.” USIA recommended that tourists use “personal examples” to illustrate their pride in the United States including “The Negro you sat next to in school, how you got the money for college, your cousin’s unemployment compensation, how much your own suit cost, how much you paid for your car.” Most importantly, Americans should offer a “calm, non-boastful description of American freedom, political participation, and high living standards.” (RG 306, USIA, Office of Research and Special Reports, 1953-1963, Box 19, National Archives II.) The addition of such material would strengthen Merrill’s connections between tourism and U.S. foreign policy in the Cold War. It would also show that Puerto Ricans were not alone in consciously packaging their national identity for international consumption.

It may also be useful to incorporate material on agents of cultural transfer. Were soldiers, journalists, missionaries, U.S. government officials, and others further complicating the U.S.-Puerto Rican relationship? If so, how? It would be fascinating to examine some of the tourists’ motives for traveling to Puerto Rico. Granted, Puerto Rico was never the sexual playground that Batista’s Cuba was. But it was still much more open than much of the United States at the time. For example, many American women traveled to Puerto Rico to obtain legal abortions during the 1960s. One would hardly consider such a voyage a vacation.

In conclusion, I reiterate my admiration for the ambitious project Professor Merrill has undertaken. His elegant piece is thought-provoking and innovative. I look forward to his book - and will gladly serve as a research assistant on his next trip to the Caribe Hilton.

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