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Abstract

This essay explores the symbiotic relationship between animal welfare and ideologies of nation building and exceptionalism during a series of struggles over cockfighting in the new US Empire in the early twentieth century. Born out of the shared experience of American overseas expansionism, these clashes erupted in the American Occupied Philippines, Cuba, and Puerto Rico, where the battle lines pitting American-sponsored animal protectionists against indigenous cockfight enthusiasts were drawn along competing charges of cruelty and claims of self-determination. I argue that battles over the cockfight were a form of animal nationalism—that is to say, cockfight nationalism. Cockfight enthusiasts and opponents alike

mapped gendered, raced, and classed ideologies of nation and sovereignty onto the bodies of fighting cocks to stake their divergent political and cultural claims regarding the rights and responsibilities of citizenship, moral uplift, benevolence, and national belonging.

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On January 12, 1899, the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) held its annual meeting at its headquarters in New York City. President John P. Haines announced that in the coming year, the ASPCA planned to spread its humane work to the “new possessions of the United States,” the territorial spoils of victory after the Spanish-American War (1898): “In Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines, no such work as ours has ever yet been established. The duty of kindness to animals has hardly been thought of. . . . It will be our duty doubtless to endeavor to promote a better state of things wherever the authority of the Nation is established.”¹ Haines noted that a ban on blood sports, specifically cockfighting and bullfighting, would be essential to achieve the ASPCA’s goals, as similar legislation had done at home. Haines’s invocation of “duty,” “the state of things,” the “Nation,” and the timing of his announcement in the aftershocks of war highlighted the mutually constitutive relationship between animal advocacy, benevolence, and American identity formation, an ideological nexus, which had been central to the organized animal welfare movement in the United States since its genesis in 1866, less than a year after the Civil War.

This essay explores the symbiotic relationship between animal welfare and ideologies of American nation building during a series of struggles over cockfighting in the new US Empire in the early twentieth century. Specifically, these clashes erupted in the US Occupied Philippines, Cuba, and Puerto Rico, where the battle lines pitting American-sponsored animal protectionists against indigenous cockfight enthusiasts were drawn along competing charges of cruelty and claims of self-determination. American leaders unilaterally banned cockfighting in the new territories and enacted stiff fines as high as \$500 and prison terms from one to six months.² Specific political and cultural conditions catalyzed the cockfight conflicts in each country: in the Philippines, cockfighting disputes were tied to conflicts between Filipino businessmen, American



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