Manilatown: Global Exclusion and Global Margins

Like other Asian-American ethnic groups in San Francisco, Filipino immigrants once had their own ethnopolis – Manilatown, a ten-block area located in the vicinity of Chinatown. Filipinos, unlike the Japanese and Chinese, who initially immigrated into the United States in the nineteenth century, began arriving in California in large numbers only in the 1920s. Starting in 1898, the US occupation of the Philippines resulted in the end of Spanish colonization of the islands and the beginning of American hegemonic domination of the territory. This new but imposed partnership between the two countries led to the immigration of Filipino students to the United States during the first quarter of the twentieth century to attend American universities for graduate and postgraduate training. These pensionados, mostly children of the elite, were supposed to return to the Philippines to build a new Western-trained professional cadre that would develop their country. In the United States, these young professionals lived in cities and university towns for the most part and were not the contract laborers who later constituted the bulk of the residents of San Francisco’s Manilatown.

Several factors contributed to the development of Manilatown as an ethnopolis: the occupation of the Philippines by the United States, the recruitment of Filipinos to work in the agricultural fields of Hawaii and California and the fish canneries of Seattle and Alaska, the enlistment or conscription of Filipinos in the military and their drafting for military services during the two world wars, and the practice of housing discrimination by mainstream American society, which prevented them from living in white neighborhoods. However, the location of Manilatown in San Francisco was influenced by the existence of Chinatown, which served as a magnet because it offered affordable
housing and social services. Additionally, Filipino immigrants – some of whom were of Chinese descent – felt more at home and free to mingle with their Chinese neighbors. Thus, three factors were at work in the making of this global ethnopole: global (homeland and diasporic sites), local (constraints, resistance, and adaptation or simply diasporic status), and transnational (border-crossing relations) aspects.

In Chapters 2 and 3, I analyzed some aspects of the process by which globality becomes localized, or the implosion of the global into the local, and the deglobalization and collapse of an ethnopole. In this chapter I will reanalyze the globalization process from a different angle, that of exclusion and marginalization. While Chapter 2 addressed the successful outcome of a localized globality and Chapter 3 addressed the collapse of an ethnopole that brought about the condition of its deglobalization, this chapter focuses on the making of a marginalized global ethnopole and how it collapsed without being deglobalized, in contrast to the case of Japantown.

Marginality and exclusion have been so far theorized in the context of locality rather than globality, that is, within the framework of the nation-state. However, to explain the process of diasporic exclusion and marginality, one must go beyond the realm of the nation-state to place the phenomenon in a transnational context. One may then speak of a global mode of production of exclusion and marginality and seek to explain its modalities.

It was the exclusion and marginalization of the poor Filipinos in the homeland that placed them in a destitute situation and made them willing to seek work elsewhere. However, global capital mediated their migration, displacement, and reinsertion in the margins of US society. The US–Spanish war that led to the US occupation of the Philippines was undertaken as a way of providing direction to global capitalism as a system of accumulation and social control. Thus, global capitalism extracted the workers from their homeland, provided the context for their emigration, and exploited them in the United States as a racialized reserve force that, in general, compressed working-class wages.

The American occupation of the Philippines developed the conditions for Filipino immigration to the United States, and influenced its flow, rhythms, and direction. The ideology and practice of the colonizing power racially redefined these colonial subjects, caused their migration via the contract labor system, and inserted them in the marginal social space of the nation. The traveling ideology of the hegemonic colonizing power transformed them into traveling subjects and reracialized them in a different hierarchical color code, so as to reposition