



CSLS SPEAKER SERIES

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MICHAEL MCCANN

Gordon Hirabayashi Professor for the Advancement of Citizenship
University of Washington

Union by Law: Filipino Labor Activists, Rights Radicalism, and Racial Capitalist Empire 1900-2000

The presentation explores how two generations of Filipino labor activists developed a host of rights-based campaigns challenging exploitive plantation-style labor systems in the U.S. colony and metropole, during both the 1920s-50s and the 1970s-80s. We employ the analytical framework of “racial capitalism” to trace the historical interdependence between capitalist and racial modes of violent domination over migrant low-wage laborers in multiple sites of the global empire. Among other insights, the racial capitalist framework challenges familiar assumptions about governance by a unitary liberal legal tradition in the United States. We argue instead that a patchwork of liberal and “repressive” legal forms has been the norm from the start. Moreover, we trace various forms of resistance and contestation developed by labor activists to challenge these differentiated modes of legal subject construction and violent rule. Overall, we show how a coherent “third world legal consciousness” was forged among Filipino workers out of experiences with U.S. colonial rule, corporate exploitation of their labor, and changing modes of white racial subjugation. The rights campaigns in the two eras reflected differences in the larger legal, geopolitical, and social contexts, to be sure. But both generations of activists clearly embraced a radical rights discourse that eschewed the individualizing inclinations of liberal rights talk and instead trumpeted worker solidarity, socialist economic redistribution, anti-racist visions of social equality, and anti-imperialism. Our study exhorts sociolegal scholars to take seriously alternative visions of social justice voiced by subaltern populations as well as the forms of violence that official law routinely authorizes to silence them.

The Introduction of *Union by Law: Filipino Labor Activists, Rights Radicalism, and Racial Capitalist Empire 1900-2000* by Michael McCann and George Lovell (Forthcoming, University of Chicago Press) is available on our website and in hard copy at the Center.

PLACE Selznick Seminar Room, 2240 Piedmont Avenue
TIME **12:45 – 2:00pm.** Coffee and water provided. Bag lunches welcome.
INFO <https://www.law.berkeley.edu/centers/center-for-the-study-of-law-society/>
EMAIL csls@law.berkeley.edu

Jonathan Simon, FACULTY DIRECTOR | Rosann Greenspan, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR