Eating Up Easter Event Review

Given the circumstances of the world around us, this summer Project Humanities was faced with a predicament. In the midst of a global pandemic, how are we to hold our educational events and discussions? But not to worry, a solution was found! Tuesday, June 2nd, at 6 pm the online event was filled with 76 views and 5 amazing panelists. As a new intern, I was unsure what to expect. Not only was this my first Project Humanities event, but it was everyone’s first online event. (THIS IS NOT TRUE; WE HAVE HAD THREE OTHER EVENTS BEFORE THIS ONE. This was our first film screening and discussion. However, as the discussion began, it could not have run more smoothly and I could not have been more engaged.

Prior to the discussion, participant/attendees watched Eating Up Easter, a film by Sergio Rapu and Elena Rapu about the challenges their people are facing on the island of Rapa Nui (more commonly known to us as Easter Island) and the constant battle to preserve culture while also becoming a “developed” society. My initial thoughts on the film were how thoughtfully they addressed the crisis on the island.

Dr. Lester began the online event by addressing that though the week’s discussion is about the cultural and environmental struggles and expectations of Rapa Nui, in no way is Project Humanities ignoring the racial crisis occurring in our nation, and the world, right now. With that being said, the discussion began. However, as I listened, I noticed a lot of statements said by the panelists that I think can be drawn to the Black Lives Matter movement going on all around us. To begin with, our very own Rachel Sondergeroth quoted the definition of development: “Development” attempts to describe qualitative changes in the structure and framework of society that help the society to better realize aims and objectives. This caused the panelists, and myself, to question what strides to development the people of Rapa Nui are taking, and why?

Brenda Mora-Castillo, who studied anthropology, education and critical perspectives of western conceptualization of change and development, posed the question “Does development work? And whose intentions are really being preserved by this?” My first thought was the scene from the film in which the mayor is explaining to the cameras about how he is planning on building the first mall in Rapa Nui. Instilling a mall in a society can give the impression of “development,” I thought understandingly, but then, brought to my attention by the panelists, I began to ponder why our first response to development is, admittedly, western ideals. On one hand, we can perceive building of a mall on the island as a step towards “development,” or we can step back and ask ourselves the question: Development into what? It is clear that the mayor of Rapa Nui feels that development translates into westernization, which is a common theme in the world around us, but is not always accurate. Kelly Baur, graduate student in linguistics and award-winning documentarian, says Rapa Nui is “trying to appeal to the tourists/the oppressors,” calling tourists the oppressors because they have heavily contributed to the environmental crisis on the island. Kelly also quotes author Assata Shakur, “Nobody in the world, nobody in history,
has ever gotten their freedom by appealing to the moral sense of the people who were oppressing them.” I found this quote particularly interesting, especially in relation to the current climate of the United States in the midst of the protests and riots; it made me think about the hypothetically “correct” or more effective ways of handling large issues versus how they are truly handled for a more superficial, materialistic agenda.

A few quotes by panelists regarding development that really stuck with me:
Anais Delilah Roque, graduate student at Arizona State University, working on water sharing experiences in the wake of Hurricane Maria and Puerto Rico Rico, “Their ideals of what to develop are different from US, Europe, even Chile…” It is clear that technologies are imposed on them and they feel that in order to not feel “left behind,” they must develop in this sense. She also posed the good point that “What is development for an island vs. what is development for a continent (like the US)?”
Robert Charles-Capistrano, joined from the Philippines, a lecturer at the School of Community resources and development and Arizona State University international tourism college based in China, said that “development can only be achieved if people confront the fundamental reasons of poverty.” This idea of development that many of us have in our minds is utterly flawed because we perceive development as making things, superficially, more “like us.” When, in reality, it runs far deeper than that.
Kelly also mentioned that the “documentary didn’t give too many examples of what Rapa Nui development would look like.” This was a great point, especially in relation to Anais’s comment on how development should mean different things to different places.
By the end of the discussion, I felt that I had a new perspective not only to the film, but the world around us. Thousands of questions ran through my mind: Why does everyone try and make things more European? Why is it that westernizing areas is so much more valuable than preserving culture? Though I may not have been able to find all of the answers to my questions, I was able to talk to my family afterward and explain to them this new perspective I had gained. I was also able to listen, first to the stories of people from Rapa Nui in the film, and then to the esteemed panelists that we had the pleasure of learning from. And lastly, I was able to draw connections from this film to many issues all over the world.